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**Transforming Learning Spaces:
Decentering Whiteness to Dream of a Liberatory Education**

Kimberly Booker

A dissertation in practice submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of the

Doctorate of Education

In Educational Leadership

University of Washington, Tacoma

2023

Supervisory Committee:

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Abstract

The educational system in the United States claims to be a neutral system in which each child has equal opportunity to learn. Rather, it is a system that is constructed from a white epistemology (Ladson-Billings, 1998) that teaches a white worldview (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005) while simultaneously disregarding epistemologies, including knowledge bases, from Communities of Color. This dissonance creates dehumanizing and harmful experiences for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who are made to participate in an educational system that denies their worldview and way of being. The study is grounded in Critical Race Theory to acknowledge the permanence of racism in society, the valuing of white epistemology as whiteness as property, the claim of neutrality under colorblindness and counter storytelling to recognize the importance of uplifting the voices of those negatively impacted. Engaged Pedagogy is included to provide a lens that views human beings holistically, necessitating the inclusion of elements of self-care and healing into the learning and educational processes.

The purpose of this study is to dream of a liberatory education by uplifting the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who attended middle school in Oakland, California. Relational methodology, including group interviews, was used to learn from collective experiences. The research findings of the study identified three themes including the dream for learning to be driven by self, the dream for learning to support the betterment of self, and the dream for learning to support the betterment of society. When looked at through the lens of the current educational system, the three themes call for a shift in learning standards from one set of common standards for all students to personalized learning goals driven by each student.

Key Words: educational transformation, liberation, dreams, critical race theory, engaged pedagogy, counter storytelling, Oakland

Acknowledgements

Image 1

Image of “Agape Love” Painting



I am thankful for my committee members who have each impacted my life and learning.

Thank you, Mr. Jerome Gourdine, for modeling Agape love and for teaching and showing me that transformational change is possible.

Thank you, Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters, for sharing your stories and knowledge with me and for creating human-centered spaces in which I have been able to learn and grow.

Thank you, Dr. Wayne Au, for helping me to learn about my family's history and experiences through your research and writing and how the past connects to the current.

I am thankful to UWT professors who have challenged me, guided me and supported my learning throughout my liberation journey from Oakland back to Seattle.

Thank you, Dr. Chris Knaus, for pushing my thinking to recognize what is and what could be. I appreciate your encouragement that prompted me to enter into this program.

Thank you, Dr. Rachelle Rogers-Ard, for shifting my mindset to believe in dreaming and that dreams can be a part of a scholarly framework.

Thank you to my cohort. It has been an honor and privilege to learn alongside each of you.

Dedication

Image 2

Image of “My Journey” Painting



To my ancestors, to my late grandparents, Kiyo & Kazuo Ono and Dorothy & Eugene Wittman,
you are the light shining down on me, nourishing me with wisdom and strength

To my family, my mother Leslie Wittman, my late father William Wittman, my sister and
brother Krista and Sean Moore, my nephew Braylon, my uncles Stuart Ono and Kevin Ono, you
are the roots who ground me, stabilize me, and provide me with the love and support to grow.

To my family, my husband Justin Booker, my children Jamal, Kiyomi and Tahrir, my
grandchildren Ayla and Amari, you are the branches, leaves, and buds, growing along with me,
blooming and blossoming together in our journey.

To my family, my mother-in-law Toni Booker, my father-in-law Michael Booker and the Booker
family, you are the water flowing with me providing support and nourishment along the way.

To the research participants who opened up their hearts, stories, and dreams to me.
To Antione, Shawn'te, Pop, Ericka, Eric and Mikayla, each of you are amazing and brilliant
human beings. Your stories and dreams are an inspiration to me and I am confident in your
ability to make the impact that you desire within your communities.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In the United States of America, schools and the educational spaces within them, are idealized as neutral places where all students have equal opportunity to learn. In 1848, Horace Mann wrote in his annual report for the Massachusetts School Board that, “education is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” This notion of education as an institution of equality was also portrayed in the Supreme Court’s decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1953) when the justices wrote:

In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms (p. 493).

However, the idea that education is available to all children on equal terms is flawed because education, as a component of society, centers whiteness (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In 1998 Ladson-Billings wrote, “In a racialized society where whiteness is positioned as normative, everyone is ranked and categorized in relation to these points of opposition” (p. 9). Schools as educational spaces that center whiteness also legitimize and center a white epistemology. By centering and valuing a white epistemology, educational systems are not neutral as they claim to be and reinforce whiteness.

Leonardo (2002) makes a distinction between the term whiteness and white people when he stated, “‘Whiteness’ is a racial discourse, whereas the category ‘white people’ represents a socially constructed identity” (p. 31). In addition, whiteness can be thought of as a racial perspective or a worldview (Leonardo, 2002). Throughout this proposal, my reference to the

term whiteness will include the meaning of racial perspective and worldview. Epistemology is defined as ways of knowing which includes systems of knowing such as, “How knowledge is constructed, whose knowledge counts, what knowledge is valued, how knowledge is shared and acquired, how we assess what someone knows, and how we know what we know” (Zamudio, et al., pp. 98, 99). Ladson-Billings (2000) extends this definition by naming the connectedness between one’s worldview and their epistemology. The relationship between worldview and epistemology are connected symbiotically (Shujaa, 1997) which Ladson-Billings describes as, “How one views the world is influenced by what knowledge one possesses, and what knowledge one is capable of possessing is influenced deeply by one’s worldview” (p. 258). My references to epistemology acknowledges the interconnectedness between knowledge and worldview, including racial perspective. Therefore, a white-centric epistemology is one that centers a white worldview that creates the system of knowing in American educational institutions.

The white-centric epistemology in American education is carried out through systems and policies, including learning standards, curriculum, pedagogy and assessments, which are also labeled as neutral while silencing all other ways of knowing (Au et al., 2016). Learning standards are created based on the knowledge deemed important to the white worldview (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). All students are then expected to learn these standards and their perceived educational success is measured against them. In a study of standards in the State of California, Sleeter and Stillman (2005) found that:

California's curriculum standards fit within a political movement to reconfigure power relations among racial, ethnic, language, and social class groupings. This is not simply about trying to improve student learning, but more important, about reasserting who has a

right to define what schools are for, whose knowledge has most legitimacy, and how the next generation should think about the social order and their place within it. (p. 44)

While claiming that the standards are neutral and that they represent essential learning for all students, the purpose is to maintain the current power structure that centers whiteness. Learning standards are then carried out in schools and classrooms through a curriculum that is created to intentionally transfer the white worldview to all students. In researching curriculum in American schools, Au, Brown and Calderon (2016) found, “The story of curriculum is not explicitly a story of White American curriculum but is instead posed as a story of American curriculum that happens to be White and erases previous colonial histories.” Through policies and laws, communities of color are intentionally excluded from contributing or presenting a different worldview.

Moving beyond a white-centric epistemology, Scheurich and Young (1997) state, “different social groups, races, cultures, societies, or civilizations evolve different epistemologies, each of which reflects the social history of that group, race, culture, society, or civilization” (p. 8). Of all the different epistemologies in existence, schools only value the epistemological viewpoint of the white dominant race (Scheurich & Young, 1997). When a system claims neutrality while simultaneously accepting only the white worldview, people with different worldviews are then oppressed by the system that denies the existence of their way of thinking, knowing and being. In an article published in 2000, Ladson-Billings stated:

The process of developing a worldview that differs from the dominant worldview requires active intellectual work on the part of the knower, because schools, society, and the structure and production of knowledge are designed to create individuals who

internalize the dominant worldview and knowledge production and acquisition process.
(p. 258)

It is dehumanizing and harmful for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to participate in an educational system in which their thoughts and ideas are not validated. The term Black, Indigenous, and People of Color is used in this proposal to include all people who do not identify as white. The specific naming of Black and Indigenous People acknowledges the anti-Blackness prevalent in American educational systems (Love, 2019; Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2021) as well as the intentional erasure of Black and Indigenous knowledge systems that stem from slavery and genocide. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are part of communities that possess vast amounts of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) that are silenced and devalued by the historical and current conditions of the educational system. Yosso (2005) identifies six types of cultural capital that Communities of Color possess including aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic capital. Transforming educational systems into learning spaces that honor and cultivate ways of knowing within Communities of Color is progress towards creating a more just and humane world.

Purpose of the Study

In response to the false notion that education in the United States is neutral and provides equal opportunity for all, this proposed research project aims to provide a counternarrative to the idealized views of equality by uplifting the voices and experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who attended public schools in Oakland, California. To transform educational systems into spaces that affirm multiple ways of knowing, the voices of those who have been silenced must be centered. When the white-centric epistemology of the educational system is acknowledged “students of color can be seen as holders and creators of knowledge who have the

potential to transform schools into places where the experiences of all individuals are acknowledged, taught, and cherished” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 121). Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, and their communities, possess cultural knowledge and wealth that has been suppressed by the educational system (Yosso, 2005). Bringing this knowledge forward is essential to visioning a liberatory education in which the cultural wealth of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color is valued and cultivated.

The experience of attending public school in the United States for those who identify as Black, Indigenous, or Person of Color comes with the internalization of what Ladson-Billings (2000) describes as the “dominant world view and knowledge production and acquisition process” (p. 200). The disconnect between the system of education claiming to be equal while simultaneously centering one epistemology defined by the white worldview leads me to question how this cognitive dissonance impacts Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. In examining the cultural capital that exists in Communities of Color, Tara Yosso (2005) writes:

When the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can often find their voice. Those injured by racism and other forms of oppression discover that they are not alone and moreover are part of a legacy of resistance to racism and the layers of racialized oppression. They become empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against them are framed and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves (pp. 74 & 75).

In my proposed research, through relational interviews and group talking circles (Chilisa, 2020), I plan to name the dissonance between the neutral and equal system that education claims to be and the centering of a white-only epistemology in its creation and function. Acknowledging and

reflecting on their experiences in this harmful system and then moving towards visions and dreams of a liberatory education, is a process that I plan to facilitate with participants.

The research question that I am interested in learning about is, “What is a liberatory educational experience for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in Oakland, California?” Acknowledging the constraints of a white supremacist educational system, I am curious to learn from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who I taught while they were middle school students, their vision of a liberatory education.

Significance and Context

From 2004 to 2009 I taught middle school math in Oakland, California. For the first two years I taught math at a middle school in West Oakland until the school was shut down by the school district and then I transferred to a middle school in East Oakland where I taught for the next three years. From the outside, West and East Oakland hold negative labels such as violent and unsafe (Rodriguez, 2020) and the schools in the communities hold similar labels. In addition, the schools are viewed negatively because of the low percentage of students who pass the state standardized assessment (California Department of Education, 2017). However, I observed that the students whom I taught, who almost all identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, exhibited community and cultural wealth including a wide variety of skills and strengths such as creativity, bilingualism, resilience, orality, empathy and lovingness. At the end of each school year when the scores for the California Standards Test (CST) were released, the majority of the students who I taught were labeled Basic, Below Basic or Far Below Basic which was in alignment with the negative labels placed on the schools and communities.

For my research, I would like to learn from the voices and experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who I taught while they were middle school students. The

proposed participants have experienced schooling in educational systems created for a white-only epistemology and were subjected to the narrow definition of learning that was defined by the state standards. This situation makes each participant an expert in their own experience of an educational system that is harmful to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Building off of the relationships that we have built, I see my potential research as a reciprocal process in which the young people and I learn and grow together towards visioning a liberatory education. To authentically uplift the stories of each former student that participates in my research, I would like to take a liberatory approach that does not confine the participants to the narrow view of success rooted in a white epistemology that defines the current educational system. With its building blocks created to maintain white supremacy, the current system does not hold the capacity to educate Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in a way that recognizes their full humanity. By rejecting the current educational system including the structure, standards, and standardized assessments, my research proposal moves into envisioning and designing educational spaces of liberation that frees people from the confines of whiteness to construct their own knowledge.

Positionality

As a qualitative researcher, thinking deeply about my past and current experiences in educational systems is important to understanding how I view and interpret education. As a human being, I am not able to separate my identity from my research because it is through my identity that I view the world (Zamudio, et al., 2011). As a multi-racial, Japanese American and white female who identifies as *Yonsei* (fourth-generation Japanese American) I recognize that I came into this research, not as a neutral being, but one with a unique lens of the world. This recognition counters white epistemology that strives for neutrality. In 2018, Gerlach stated in a

rejection of neutrality that, “The researcher is not viewed as a neutral instrument but as someone who brings his or her own social identities and locations, including his or her cultural, social, historical, political, theoretical, and personal self into the research process” (p. 4). Considering my unique self, I can identify ways in which I can connect to the participants in my research and ways in which I cannot connect.

I was raised primarily by my Japanese American mother in a primarily English-speaking, middle class neighborhood in Seattle, Washington. Seattle’s tightly knit Japanese American community was a sense of connectedness for myself as a child. Church, festivals, community halls, and sports leagues were all places that supported a positive self-image and nurtured my Japanese-American culture. These were all spaces that operated with systems rooted in Japanese-American culture and our shared values of *enryo* (I interpret to mean as showing self-restraint) and *giri* (I interpret to mean as showing honor and respect to your ancestors). Showing self-restraint was a way to care for others and considered the well-being of the collective group rather than a focus on individual need. To show honor and respect to my ancestors is a value that was demonstrated by my family's sharing of history and experiences, such as photos, memories, and documents, particularly from my grandparents who were imprisoned in World War II in the Japanese Incarceration Camps. When I was in spaces that operated from Japanese American cultural norms, I could learn and grow because I felt understood and affirmed; I felt like I belonged.

The spaces that I describe from my childhood, rooted in Japanese American culture and care, represent a resistance to spaces that center whiteness. The concept of space can be interpreted differently based on one’s world view. Space through a Western worldview is concrete or absolute while space considered through an Indigenous worldview is relational,

dynamic and interactive (Tuck and McKenzie, 2015). In my naming of space, I refer to the Indigenous worldview which connects to the communal and relationship-based spaces in which I felt like I belonged as a child. At the same time, the numerous years that I spent in educational systems based on a white worldview has impacted my lens of the world. Connected to the centering of whiteness in educational systems and the impact on spaces within the systems, Lipsitz (2011) stated:

Because of practices that racialize space and spatialize race, whiteness is learned and legitimized, perceived as natural, necessary and inevitable. Racialized spaces gives whites privileged access to opportunities for social inclusion and upward mobility. At the same time, it imposes unfair and unjust forms of exploitation and exclusion on aggrieved communities of color (p. 6).

Educational spaces as racialized spaces that privilege some while harming others has been important for me to consider throughout the research process and the design of the spaces that I created with research participants.

Reflecting on my own educational experiences, the feelings of belonging and affirmation that I felt in spaces based on Japanese American culture did not transfer to the spaces I encountered in the educational system. I attended public schools in Seattle from kindergarten through high school. I realized as a young child in elementary school that school was a place with different cultural norms than what I learned at home. At school, there was a focus on the well-being and success of the individual self without regard to the collective whole. Though I would not have been able to name it at the time, I was aware of the centering of whiteness even through the claim of neutrality. The impact on myself is that I did not feel as if my identity was valued in educational spaces and over time, my feelings about my cultural values shifted from

pride to survival. The shift to survival resulted in my choice, though not conscious at the time, to leave behind parts of my Japanese-American culture that I valued and found pride in including my cultural norms of *enryo* and *giri*. I achieved the success that the system was designed to produce including graduation from high school and a four-year university which was also in line with common perceptions of Asian Americans as successful in school and overrepresented in colleges and universities (Teranishi, 2002).

To achieve this version of success, I learned to operate in a system of whiteness that kept my mind closed to different worldviews including different ways of knowing and being. I was unaware of the social constructs around me and the systems of racism and oppression that exist. I sat in classes and listened to lectures on how America is the land of the free and I had to wrestle in my mind how that could be possible when my grandparents, along with 120,000 Japanese Americans, were incarcerated as a result of fear fueled by racism towards people of Japanese ancestry during World War II. We didn't learn or talk about racism in class and yet my family has been impacted by redlining in housing, segregation and racial slurs. What I did leave with was the knowledge that was told to me and that I could regurgitate back. I now wonder how I can be educated if I didn't learn about who I am? I navigated school by defining my identity and culture in relation to whiteness. Throughout the research process, it was important for me to continue the unlearning process because the knowledge that I gained through schooling represents colonization and the white worldview which continues to linger within me.

The experiences of racial discrimination experienced by my family coupled with my experience of feeling that my culture was not accepted in school contributed to my self-identification as a Black, Indigenous, Person of Color. In Chapter 1 I define this term to mean anyone who is non-white. There is a belief that those who identify as Asian American are white

because academically they perform at the same rate or higher than white students on standardized assessments (Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2022). School districts have even grouped white and Asian American students together in data with a separate category for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (North Thurston School District, N.D.). However, the grouping of Asian Americans with white students ignores the racism experienced by Asian people, discriminatory laws that the United States has had against Asian Americans, and the exclusion of Asian American culture in educational systems. I connect to the research because I too want to liberate myself from white worldviews that I learned and dream of learning spaces that validate and value my identity and worldview.

As a researcher who plans to focus on healing throughout the research process, the responsibilities of a researcher as a transformative healer described by Bagele Chilisa stood out to me. Chilisa (2020) outlines the following roles and responsibilities that a transformative healer needs to reflect on:

1. Researcher as a colonizer, researched as the colonized
2. Researcher as knower/teacher and researched as an object/subject/known/pupil
3. Researcher as a redeemer, researched as the problem
4. Ethical responsibilities of researchers in the application of theoretical frameworks and literature review to inform the research process

Throughout the research process, it will be imperative that I continually reflect on the four roles and responsibilities. Having been educated in Western educational systems that center whiteness, I had the potential to perpetuate the centering of whiteness. With each component of the research process, I was intentional in the planning so that I challenge and resist Western research methods.

The first point of reflection causes me to reflect on my position as a potential colonizer and the participants as potentially the colonized. Chilisa states, “As producers of knowledge, researchers make assumptions about the power relations between themselves and the researched, and they are consciously or unconsciously guided by these assumptions” (p. 237). As a former teacher of the research participants, our relationship originated in a hierarchical system that situated myself with power over the participants. This imbalance in power relations is important for me to name in throughout the research process. I had to be cognizant that there are thoughts, ideas and experiences that the participants had which they are choosing not to share with me as a result of the imbalance. As a result, intentional planning that positions research participants as knowledge-holders throughout the process was important. The research participants attended school in Oakland, California and I was an outsider in this community. The triangular relationship between researcher, participants and place is impacted by my position as an outsider. Therefore, it was important for me to reflect on additional questions for researchers that Chilisa (2020) shares including; “Whose side am I on? and Who am I writing about? Self or Other/s or both?” (pp. 237, 238). Considering whose worldview I am creating space for and centering was important for me to attend to throughout the research process.

Theoretical Framework

In order to acknowledge the current racially inequitable educational system that centers a white epistemology while simultaneously claiming neutrality, I ground my research in critical race theory. Additionally, I draw on engaged pedagogy. to vision and design learning spaces that decenter whiteness and embrace each person’s full humanity.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory emerged in the 1970's from critical legal studies to address persisting racial inequality after civil rights legislation was enacted. The theory has been described as:

A movement of left scholars, most of them scholars of color, situated in law schools, whose work challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole (Crenshaw et al, 1995, p. xiii).

Early critical race theorists include Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Cheryl Harris, Charles R. Lawrence III, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia J. Williams (Ansell & Solomos, 2013). Primary tenets of the theory defined by early critical race scholars include the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, colorblindness, critique of liberalism, myth of meritocracy, interest convergence and counter storytelling (Crenshaw et al., 1995, Zamudio et al., 2011). Critical race theory and the included tenets serve to challenge the dominant racial discourse of white supremacy in order to identify, analyze and transform the structural systems in society that oppress Black, Indigenous and People of Color (Solórzano, 1997).

Critical Race Theory in Education

Critical race theory branched into education through the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995) as they called for greater attention to the impacts of racism in education. Just as the early writers of critical race theory analyzed how laws are used to uphold the social domination of white, critical race theory in education looks at how policies and practices are used to uphold educational systems that center a white epistemology. In his work to apply critical race theory to education, scholar Daniel Solórzano (1997) identified the critical race theory tenets of challenge to dominant ideology, commitment to social justice and an interdisciplinary perspective in addition to the previously identified tenets of the permanence of

racism and counter storytelling. The challenge to dominant ideology confronts the notion that the educational system is objective and race neutral while the commitment to social justice calls for the elimination of racism as part of the larger goal to abolish all forms of oppression (Solórzano, 1997). The interdisciplinary perspective of critical race theory calls for examining the role of racism in all components of the educational system (Daniel Solórzano, 1997). In the following paragraphs, I will describe how the other two tenets identified by Solórzano, permanence of racism and counter storytelling, along with the earlier identified tenets of whiteness as property and colorblindness inform my research.

Permanence of Racism

The tenet of permanence of racism acknowledges the racism that is present in society and describes how racism exists in mostly unconscious ways. Critical race theorist, Derrick Bell (1992) described this permanence as, “Racism lies at the center, not in the periphery; in the permanent, not in the fleeting; in the real lives of black and white people, not in the sentimental caverns of the mind” (p. 198). Bell (1992) called attention to the presence of invisible racism that is masked by visible statements of neutrality. In 1995, Charles R. Lawrence III added to Bell’s acknowledgement of the invisibility of racism by writing:

Americans share a common historical and cultural heritage in which racism has played and still plays a dominant role... We do not recognize the ways in which our cultural experience has influenced our beliefs about race or the occasions on which those beliefs affect our actions. In other words, a large part of the behavior that produces racial discrimination is influenced by unconscious racial motivation (p. 237).

Citing a 1976 legal decision in *Washington v. Davis* that required plaintiffs challenging laws that claim to be neutral to prove racial discrimination, Lawrence (1995) drew attention to the need to

address unconscious racism. When applied to education, the permanence of racism extends to include epistemological racism which determines whose knowledge is valued and whose is silenced (Zamudio et al., 2011). Intentionally created to center whiteness, educational systems continue to operate with the same outcome that advantages those who are white. However, different from when the systems were created, education in America claims to be neutral and provide an equal opportunity for all while perpetuating a racist, or possibly unconsciously racist, system.

Whiteness as Property

Early critical race theorist, Cheryl Harris (1995), described how the tenet of whiteness as property impacts a racialized society when she stated, “The set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset – one that whites sought to protect” (p. 277). Harris (1995) continued on to state that, “Becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one’s life rather than being the object of others’ domination” (p. 277). When applied to the educational system, whiteness as property gives power and privilege to white people by valuing the white epistemology that is at the center of educational systems while silencing all others while allowing for epistemological violence to be enacted against Black, Brown and Indigenous People of Color. The implementation and protection of this inequitable educational system protects the property of whiteness to maintain white supremacy (Harris, 1995). The implementation includes controlling what knowledge is taught to students which is currently carried out through learning standards that identify and describe the knowledge as “property” that is deemed valid and that all children should learn. The knowledge is then taught to all students which is currently carried out through a “banking” pedagogy that consists of depositing the knowledge into the students (Freire, 1970).

The knowledge is then assessed through standardized assessments which uphold the high value in whiteness as property by labeling those who show competency of a white centric knowledge as successful and those who do not as failures. The educational system and its policies and practices of standards, pedagogy and standardized assessments are used as tools to uphold the property value in whiteness and therefore maintain white supremacy (Dixson and Rousseau, 2006).

Colorblindness

The critical race theory tenet of colorblindness acknowledges how laws, policies and practices claim equality and neutrality while advantaging whites over all others (Gotanda, 1995). This notion of colorblindness allows whiteness to remain the standard norm of society. In 2009 after Barack Obama was elected the first African American president, Roy L. Brooks (2009) wrote, “When society proceeds in a color-blind fashion, it does not see monochrome: it sees white. Whiteness is the default cultural standard” (p. xviii). When applied to the educational system, colorblindness is used as an active form of racism that maintains the current inequitable educational system while simultaneously hiding that the system is inequitable by preserving its purpose of white supremacy (Zamudio et al. 2011).

Counter Storytelling

Acknowledging that the current educational system is not neutral and advantages those who are white, it is also important to acknowledge that the system is harmful to those who are not white and silences them. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) spoke to the importance of hearing from those who have been oppressed by the system when they stated, “The ‘voice’ component of critical race theory provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step on the road to justice” (p. 58). Counter storytelling is a way for People of Color who

have been harmed by the educational system to tell their own stories from their own perspective and worldview. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) describe counter storytelling as “a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege. Counter-stories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform” (p. 32). Counter stories transcend the white epistemology of educational systems by providing a means for people to define for themselves what counts as knowledge, what knowledge is valuable and how the knowledge will be communicated. As Zamudio, et al (20011), stated, “We create our reality by describing it” (p. 124).

Engaged Pedagogy

In order to envision an educational system that allows for one to create and define their own knowledge, I turn to bell hooks’ engaged pedagogy as a transformative approach to education. Based on the work of Paulo Freire (1970) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, critical pedagogy views education as learning about the systems that oppress in order to raise one’s critical consciousness. The goal of critical pedagogy is then put into action what one has learned about freeing oneself from oppression by creating change in the world. The theory situates education as a continual process of learning in which one must unlearn the knowledge learned within the system to then be able to construct one’s own knowledge that is relevant to their worldview. Freire described ‘problem-posing education’ as a process of becoming on one’s journey of liberation to become fully human (Freire, 1970). Influenced by critical theory and the work of Freire, bell hooks’ (1994) engaged pedagogy extends Freire’s model to the whole self including mind, body and spirit. Engaged pedagogy acknowledges the human need for mindfulness, wholeness and healing in the educational process. I find this to be important in my

research because healing from past harms inflicted by an inequitable educational system is important to the process of liberation.

For my research, engaged pedagogy is an important complement to critical race theory because of its attention to the whole self. For Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, the silencing of their voices, histories and experiences in an educational system that devalues non-white epistemologies is harmful. An approach to education that acknowledges this harm and tends to the whole person, including the healing of their mind and spirit, is important to one's learning journey. Both Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) viewed education as a practice of freedom and hooks included healing as a part of the liberatory process. Engaged pedagogy also calls attention to the interconnectedness of student and teacher. hooks (1994) writes, "Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow and are empowered by the process" (p. 21). This description of a collective process of learning counters the current 'banking' system of education that places the teacher as the knowledge holder. The interconnectedness represents a vision of education as a practice of freedom that applies to everyone involved, both student and teacher.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color cannot be expected to learn freely in a system that does not acknowledge or accept their worldview (Freire, 1970). Therefore, learning about educational possibilities that de-center the dominant white epistemology has been a focus of my learning. I group these possibilities into three areas; Education as Liberation, Education as Healing and Education as Indigenization. I view Education as Liberation as allowing people to name the racism rooted in the current educational system so that we can acknowledge the harm

caused to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who experience the system. Education as Healing I see as a way for those harmed by the system to begin a process that moves towards becoming more fully human. I view Education as Indigenization as unlearning worldviews defined by white supremacy and colonization to make space for other ways of knowing influenced by Indigenous worldviews.

Education as Liberation

In a country that suggests all are free, how can we dream and design educational spaces that welcome, value, nurture and embrace infinite epistemologies? How do we free ourselves from the false narrative of neutrality to learn in ways that accept our worldview? Listening to Scholars of Color in their own dreams of transformed educational spaces guides us towards liberation. In *Sista Talk Too*, Rochelle Brock (2019) described education as self-centered learning including how we learn about our multiple identities and how our identities connect to the larger society and world. Brock shares how teaching that allows students to name their world, to reflect critically on self and society, and have the agency to act for change shifts the learner from, as she states, “An object to be constructed to a subject in the construction of their own knowledge,” (2019). Brock joins other scholars, such as Paulo Freire (1970) and bell hooks (1994) who describe visions of education that are centered on one’s identity and learning as acts of freedom.

To become free from an educational system that dehumanizes people by posing as neutral and then turning a blind eye to each person’s unique identity and worldview requires action outside of the current system. It requires the acknowledgement and acceptance that the current educational system and its policies center whiteness and are therefore racist and discriminatory

in the fight for the humanity of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (Love, 2019). In 1933 Carter G. Woodson wrote:

To educate the Negro we must find out exactly what his background is, what he is today, what his possibilities are, and how to begin with him as he is. Instead of cramming the Negro's mind with what others have shown that they can do, we should develop his latent powers that he may perform in society a part of which others are not capable of. (p. 151)

Woodson called for an end to what Freire (1970) called the 'banking method' in which a teacher 'deposits' knowledge into a student. In the current educational system, learning standards adopted by government institutions represent the knowledge that teachers are expected to 'deposit' into students. This process of learning through depositing represents a white epistemology that places the teacher as the knower and the student as the consumer. Instead, education for liberation requires an abolitionist pedagogy that positions the student as an active constructor of their own knowledge (Brock, 2019).

Abolitionist pedagogy puts out the call to end educational practices that are harmful for Black students in order to move into spaces of dreaming and creating new possibilities (Love, 2019). In their analysis of abolition and fugitivity in educational research and practice, Coles, Ohito, Green, and Lyiscott (2021) share:

To be about the work of abolition is to be about the work of disruption, a disruption that seeks to stop the operations of all systems and structures that work to create and sustain violence, with the primary driving force being the desire to completely dismantle such violent institutions (p. 105)

If we are to end these practices that are rooted in whiteness and promote a white epistemology, space must be made for learning that allows the student to be the constructor of their own

knowledge (Brock, 2019). Education as liberation frees students from the confines of a white world view. It frees students from the boundaries of learning defined by government adopted standards and the knowledge of the teacher. This freedom allows students to become fully human by engaging in authentic learning that centers their identity and worldview (Freire, 1970) and creates the opportunity for people to dream of learning spaces that sees everyone's full humanity.

Fugitive pedagogy also rejects the need to accept whiteness as the dominant epistemology of educational systems. Grounded in the work of Carter G. Woodson, who provided spaces of learning for Black teachers of Black students, fugitive pedagogy defies the white-normative educational system and its teachings to center Black experiences and voices (Givens, 2021). Fugitive pedagogy asks the questions, "What has been the nature of black people's relationship to the American School? And how have they worked to enact their own visions of teaching and learning within this structural context?" (Givens, 2021). The importance of this pedagogy lies in its rejection of a harmful educational system in order to create learning spaces that are humanizing and affirming to Black people (Givens, 2021). Fugitive pedagogy explicitly calls out the systems of oppression that dehumanize people and allow people to name the oppression that they experience. This naming represents a shift from the neutrality that is claimed, but not enacted, by educational systems for the purpose of maintaining a hierarchical social order based on race.

Abolitionist and fugitive pedagogy are significant to my research because they explicitly reject the belief that human beings are to be ranked and ordered in a hierarchy. Living our entire lives in a society in which each person is ranked, ordered and then labeled by their race, along with other characteristics, we have never had the opportunity to live in a world in which each

human being is treated equally as their unique self. We are therefore called upon to vision and work towards creating a society that we have never experienced. This work includes capturing our collective dreams and visions for a new way of being and then working together to make change towards the vision. Abolitionist and fugitive pedagogy requires us to be dreamers and doers (Coles et al., 2021) . Coles, Ohito, Green, and Lyiscott (2021) share how the two pedagogies work together:

We recognize discussions of fugitivity and abolition as two separate processes and standpoints, we note that the two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, fugitivity and abolition are often employed in tandem in efforts to dismantle and free oneself from systems of negligence, here the system of schooling (p. 105).

Freeing oneself from the belief that the educational system is neutral, creates space to dream.

Eliciting the dreams of a liberatory education from people who identify as Black, Indigenous and People of Color will continue to move the work towards transformation forward.

Education as Healing

The journey for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color to become more fully human includes gaining consciousness of the system that silences their worldview. In writing about the importance of consciousness of the current system, Swartz (1992) wrote, “As students think critically and interrogate knowledge, they come to understand more fully whose interests are served by the gaps and insufficiencies in Eurocentric presentations; further, they begin to understand in what ways their own (past and present) voices have been and are significant in the production of knowledge,” (p. 353). This claiming of voice is important in regaining one’s full humanity and necessary to heal and dream forward. In 2010, Shawn Ginwright wrote about radical healing which he describes as:

Healing involves reconciling the past to change the present while imagining a new future. The concept focuses on how hope, imagination and care transform the capacity of communities to confront community problems. For young people, healing fosters a collective optimism and a transformation of spirit that over time, contributes to healthy vibrant community life. (p. 86)

Learning that the educational system was not designed to serve Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, provides the impetus to transform oneself in the pursuit of collective transformation. Freedom from the white worldview and the systems that perpetuate it can be a healing experience. James Baldwin (1962) spoke to this rejection of whiteness when he stated, “There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatsoever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept you,” (p. 8). To gain consciousness of the educational system’s inequitable structure can free one’s mind in order to recognize the knowledge that one holds within.

Moving beyond a white epistemology, education as healing focuses on both the body and the mind (hooks, 1994). In her description of engaged pedagogy, bell hooks spoke to the importance of care for the soul. Her influence from peace activist and Buddhist Monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who offers a pedagogy that tends to one’s full self including body, mind and spirit. His teachings include a focus on mindfulness which he describes as a practice that leads to concentration that then leads to insight (Nhat Hanh, 2005). Self-reflection is important to the process of healing from the internal violence caused by white supremacy (Haga, 2020). Through a process of caring for our full selves, we are able to construct our own knowledge and liberate ourselves from fear, anxiety and anger. Education for healing is a journey that allows each person to become more fully human.

Education as Indigenization

The current educational system that claims neutrality while positioning the white world view as normative requires one to understand how this hypocritical system has impacted one's understanding of self. Indigenous scholar, Marie Battiste (2005) stated that, "Cognitive imperialism is a form of cognitive manipulation used to disclaim other knowledge bases and values...Cognitive imperialism denies people their language and cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture, one frame of reference," (p. 9). This cognitive manipulation that Battiste describes is of interest to me in understanding the impacts of educational systems centering the white dominant worldview. Education as Indigenization shifts learning towards Indigenous epistemologies that center Indigenous pedagogies.

Indigenous pedagogies allow for students to be active participants in their own knowledge construction including their own positionalities and how colonialism has impacted their lives (Tuhiwai Smith, Tuck, & Yang, p. 33). Learning about positionality and identity through an Indigenous lens, Indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson writes:

Identity for Indigenous peoples is grounded in their relationships with the land, with their ancestors who have returned to the land and with future generations who will come into being on the land. Rather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationship that we hold and are part of. (p. 80)

For instance, Indigenous scholar Naadli Todd Lee Ormiston (2019) shared their paddling pedagogy in which the teaching and learning was a collaborative and reciprocal process on a 55-day canoe journey. Over the course of the journey, they describe how they constructed

knowledge through reciprocal relationships formed along the way and the accountability that humans have to the land which is used for our survival.

The notion that learning is relational and personally constructed represents a counterview to the current educational system based on learning pre-determined knowledge that are defined by standards. In an Indigenous learning environment, knowledge can be shared orally through storytelling (Archibald, 2008). However, the sharing of stories occurs when there is an established relationship and a sense of connection (Holmes, 2000). Through the stories heard intertwined with one's life experiences, learning is constructed by each individual. This requires oneself to open their heart and mind to seek meaning. As Archibald states (2008), "The story does not give them all the answers. It shows them the way." When each person is able to construct their own knowledge based on stories that are shared, knowledge becomes fluid and ever changing rather than static and finite.

When viewed together, Education as Liberation, Education as Healing, and Education as Indigenization represent a rejection of the current educational system that silences ways of knowing within Communities of Color and that is harmful to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Learning from the voices, experiences and research of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color guides the research and work forward to vision a liberatory education that honors and cultivates the knowledge of Communities of Color. This learning journey provides space to heal from the wounds of a harmful educational system while providing opportunities for people to construct their own knowledge on their journey to becoming more fully human.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Research Question

The purpose of my research is to center the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and their dreams of a liberatory education by asking the question, “What is a liberatory educational experience for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in Oakland, California?” The lens through which the research will occur is grounded in my belief that all people are brilliant and worthy and that the brilliance and worthiness of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color has been denied by the educational system that they experienced as students. For my research, I will learn with the voices, experiences and stories of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who I previously taught secondary math to while I was a teacher in Oakland, California. To authentically uplift the stories of each former student that participates in my research, I will take a liberatory approach that does not confine the young people to the narrow view of success rooted in a white epistemology that defines the current educational system. By visioning beyond the current educational system including the structure, standards, and standardized assessments, my research moves into envisioning and designing educational spaces of liberation that frees people from the confines of whiteness to allow people the freedom to construct their own knowledge and describe a liberatory educational experience.

Research Design

My research design draws from my theoretical framework which includes critical race theory and engaged pedagogy. Through the lens of critical race theory, the tenet of the permanence of racism calls to attention the centering of a white epistemology by the university through which my research will occur. In order to counteract this racist structure of the educational system, my research methodology draws from research methods based in non-white epistemologies. Counter storytelling is another critical race theory tenet that is included in my research plan. Building off of relationships that I currently have with the participants, the

research elicited the stories of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color that are counter to the narrative that educational systems are neutral and provide equal opportunity for all people. Critical race scholar, Mari Matsuda (1987), states “Those who have experienced discrimination speak with a special voice to which we should listen” (p. 324). Through this research project, I centered the stories and voices of the participants as a way to counter the dominant discourse of educational systems in order to define a liberatory educational experience.

Drawing from the current relationships that the participants and I have built, I connect my research plan to engaged pedagogy. An engaged pedagogy pays attention to not only the learning of the student but also the learning of the teacher and how they connect with one another. hooks (1994) describes the relationship between teachers and students when she states, “Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students. Any classroom that employs a holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process” (p. 21). This interconnectedness represents a reciprocal relationship between teacher and student. The growth of a reciprocal relationship required my vulnerability throughout the process including my willingness to tell my own stories and experiences in the educational system, both as a student and as a teacher. Fast and Kovach (2019) speak to this vulnerability by stating:

Sharing our story offers the possibility of integrity, accountability as it were, in that, as researchers, we are putting forth as fully as possible our biases, assumptions, and theoretical proclivities. Through the expression of sharing our personal story, researchers learn more of the interpersonal self while simultaneously unraveling a false consciousness (p. 25).

Viewing myself, the researcher, as non-neutral and having biases is in direct opposition to Western research methods that view research and the researcher as neutral. Windchief and San

Pedro (2019) state that a “Pursuit of ‘objectivity’ whereby researchers exclude themselves from participants is the antithesis of IRMs (Indigenous Research Methods) and is dehumanizing for all involved” (preface xvii). The research process was continually be shaped by my unique positionality and the acknowledgement of my non-neutrality and biases will make the process a more humanizing experience for the participants and myself.

The specific IRMs that I used include individual relational interviews and group talking circles. The individual relational interviews provided me and the participants the opportunity to acknowledge and grow our connection to one another. To conduct the individual relational interviews, I used unstructured methods focused on general questions that allowed for flexibility and the option for me to follow the thoughts of the participants (Chilisa, 2020). “The talking circle symbolizes and encourages sharing of ideas, respect of each other’s ideas, togetherness, and a continuous and unending compassion and love for one another” (Chilisa, p. 320). A talking piece is commonly used in talking circles (Wilson & Wilson, 2000) and will be used to allow the holder of the talking piece to speak uninterrupted while the group listens. The group talking circles are important to my research plan because “from an Indigenous perspective, we do not think alone...the valuing of many truths cannot be divorced from collective knowledge” (Fast & Kovach, p. 25, 2019). The participants attended school together and grew up in the same communities and the group talking circles allowed me to capture their collective thoughts. Additionally, as a former teacher of the participants our relationship has been based on the hierarchical power dynamics of educational systems that places teachers above students. Therefore, relational power (Chilisa, 2020) is something that I was aware of and constantly reflected on throughout the process.

Justification

Tuhiwai Smith, Tuck and Yang (2019) argue that “Decolonization is not obliged to answer questions concerned with settler futures” (p. 15) and so to transcend the current educational system that centers a white epistemology, my research draws from Indigenous research methodology. My methodology centers Indigenous knowledge systems throughout the research process as a rejection of educational systems and practices based in white supremacy and provides the space for Black, Brown and Indigenous people to define the futures that they want to see. As a path forward to create these spaces, I have connected with the healing methodologies shared by Cynthia Dillard (2014). Dillard (2014) describes the methodology as a noun and a verb which as a noun will “engage and enact the cultural knowledge, historical and traditional wisdom, politics, and every present spiritualities of African and her diaspora” (p. 9) and as a verb will “engage and change that which it encounters: *It must involve action*” (p. 10). Dillard (2014) outlines the following five principles:

- 1) Love - The will to nurture one’s personal growth and that of others. Embracing and being responsible for our interconnectedness.
- 2) Compassion - The desire to relieve and transform suffering through our research in the face of oppressive and dehumanizing conditions.
- 3) Reciprocity - The world view that as human beings we are all equal and that the research should be mutually beneficial to both researcher and participants.
- 4) Ritual - The continual remembrance of our ancestors and the honoring of the knowledge that they have passed down.
- 5) Gratitude - The acknowledgement that our research is for a greater purpose than ourselves and the importance of feeling grateful to the spirits.

My research draws from the principles of love, compassion and reciprocity that Dillard has included in her healing methodology.

Coming into the research with already established relationships between the participants and myself, the principle of love is important to my research. The interconnectedness of the participants and myself is described by Dillard's (2014) healing methodology as "To embrace love as methodology in the spirit, we must also embrace the intimate nature of research, which ultimately forces us to surrender our sense of separateness, to see ourselves in the lives of another" (p. 11). Describing a world view of an Indigenous research methodology, Chilisa (2020) shares the *Ubuntu* worldview as the following:

Ubuntu and the African adage, "I am we; I am because we are; we are because I am," explains the web of connection of people with each other and with the living and the nonliving (Goduka, 2000). The principle is in direct contrast to the Eurocentric view of humanity, "I think, therefore, I am," which was expressed by Rene Descartes (p. 99).

This worldview is counter to Western research that sees relational research as creating bias and jeopardizing the validity of the research (Windchief & San Pedro, 2019). However, applying a relational worldview to my research placed the well-being of the group as a whole above my own individual needs as a researcher.

The principle of compassion is important to my proposed research by describing a liberatory educational experience for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Dillard describes compassion as "the intention and capacity to relieve and transform suffering through our research work, a form of struggle against dehumanizing contexts and conditions" (p. 11). Through the research process, the racially unjust structure of the current educational system that is based on a white epistemology was acknowledged and participants had the opportunity to

share their stories of how the system impacted their sense of self. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) describe this acknowledgement as:

Those injured by racism and other forms of oppression discover they are not alone in their marginality. They become empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against them are framed, and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves (p. 27).

Through the individual relational interviews and group talking circles, participants shared their stories of how they experienced the educational system as a frame of reference for describing a liberatory education.

Interview Design

I designed the series of research interviews to follow my personal collective healing map that I created for a course titled, “Leadership for Healing.” The healing map that I created began with self-reflection and identifying the worldview that I was taught in school based on colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism and white supremacy. Understanding how these oppressive systems impacted my learning and the dissonance between what I learned in school and what I learned at home from my Japanese American family allowed me to release harmful beliefs and values that I was holding onto to make space for new ways of viewing myself and the world. Modeling after my healing map, I began the research with an individual interview composed of myself and the participant. Questions that I posed to participants were focused on self and experiences of learning from family, community and school. The questions included how they felt in the different spaces, what made them feel that way and how they learned about their identity. During this first interview, I also shared with each participant a portion of my self-healing journey and how I have come to better understand the educational system, my feelings of

my culture not being validated, and my role in perpetuating an unjust educational system as a classroom teacher.

The journey I outline in the healing map then broadens to include the intentional work needed to relearn a worldview that centers collectivity. Unlearning the harmful ways we have been socialized to be in relation to one another, such as the idea that we have to be ‘better’ than another human being to move up the hierarchy or that we need to ‘power hoard’ to show that we are strong people and leaders, is essential to collective healing. I based the second interview, which was a group interview on the notion that healing includes collectivity, listening to others’ stories and relearning how we are in relation to others. Due to the availability of participants, I conducted two group interviews, each with three participants. During this stage of the research process, I posed questions to elicit participants’ experiences of school and community, their perspectives and experiences of justice and equality, social issues that are important to them and how they would like to make an impact on their community. The group portion of the interview also provided participants with the opportunity to tell their story to others as well as listen to and connect with others’ stories.

On my own self-healing journey, I have learned that I am the center of my transformation, and I incorporated this learning into my collective healing map. I now see liberation as a place in my heart and soul that accepts me for me and others for who they are. This shift in thinking allows me to dream a world beyond what I have experienced. In the healing map that I created I include the transformation of self as a movement towards collective transformation. Ginwright (2022) writes:

External work is necessary but still insufficient because we also need a process of healing our inner world that has been damaged, harmed, and injured by social inequality. Social

transformation is also an inside job, and there is a relationship between our individual healing and social transformation, and the two cannot be separated (p. 59).

Connecting Ginwright's explanation of individual healing and social transformation as interwoven to adrienne maree brown's comparison of a fractal to social transformation, I see collective healing as living in the heart of each of us that scales out to the collective community. To incorporate the notion of self-transformation as the movement towards collective transformation, in the third and final interview I met with each participant individually and posed questions that focused on dreams for the future, for their children and for generations to come. This included questions about what they want their children and future generations to feel, experience and learn through education as well as what they dream for their ancestors to come.

Reciprocity Statement

Reciprocity is a principle of Dillard's healing methodology (2014) that is included in many Indigenous Research Methodologies (Archibald, 2008, Windchief & San Pedro, 2019, Chilisa, 2020). Fast and Kovach (2019) describe reciprocity as occurring when "Each individual in the group (including self) has a responsibility to act as a catalyst for others to find and reveal their truth" (p. 26). An additional description of reciprocity provided by Archibald (2008) states that reciprocity is practiced "So that we each gave to the other, thereby continuing the cycle of knowledge from generation to generation" (p. 55). My research design was based in a reciprocal process in which the participants and I gave to one another (Archibald, 2008). We engaged in learning from one another's knowledge and experiences of schooling in educational systems that center a white epistemology through the interviews and group circle discussions. In addition, when sharing our stories in the interview process, the participants and I both learned about how we made an impact on one another's lives.

Participants

In this research project, I included six research participants who identify as Black, Indigenous, People of Color who I taught while they were middle school students in Oakland, California. Based on the years that I taught in Oakland, the age range of the participants is between 25 and 33. This age range allows for participants to have completed their journey through the K - 12 educational system as well as experienced life outside of the K – 12 educational system. The experiences within and outside of the educational system allows for participants to be able to reflect on how their learning within the system translated to life outside of the system.

Sampling Procedures

I have maintained relationships with many of the students that I taught in California through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Social media has allowed me to stay connected and to see moments of joy in their life such as graduations, new jobs, becoming parents, and traveling to new places. I also have read their stories of struggle including loss of friends or family members, challenges with work, financial struggles and difficulties in their relationships with others. Additionally, the young people have had the opportunity to witness some of my life experiences including my move from California, motherhood and the growth of my children, and my travels around the community and beyond. Currently, I reside in Seattle, Washington and though we are separated geographically social media platforms have allowed us to remain connected to one another. To determine which students to include in the research process, I selected those who I was connected with on social media, beginning with those who I maintained two-way communication with. This could include writing comments to one another on social media platforms, visiting in person, or talking on the phone.

Research Setting

Video conferencing on Zoom was used to conduct all interviews due to the geographical distance between the participants, who are all located in California and my location in Seattle, Washington. All of the interviews in this research project occurred between January 17, 2023 and March 29, 2023.

Ethical Considerations

In order to protect the identity of research participants in written work, I asked participants which fictitious name that they would like to be called as I had intended on using pseudonyms to protect their identity. However, each participant who participated in the final interview when the question was asked, stated that they preferred to be called by their first name. Therefore, the first name of each participant is used in this research paper except for Mikayla who I was not able to ask the question to.

Each interview was recorded using the record feature of Zoom and each interview was initially transcribed by the Zoom platform. To protect the identity of participants, I did not share the video recordings of the interviews with other people and I used the transcripts provided by the Zoom platform as a base to create my own written transcripts. The written transcripts were also not shared with any other people.

Data Collection and Analysis

To support the data analysis, I kept a reflexivity journal throughout the research process. The reflexivity journal included notes, some verbatim scripting, highlights of key points, and my reflections from the conclusion of the interview. I then listened to each of the interviews while reading through the transcripts to make edits and ensure accuracy so that the transcripts matched what the participants said. In addition to editing the transcripts, while watching and listening to

each interview I recorded the different themes and ideas that each participant shared. After completing this process for all of the 13 interviews that I held, including both individual and group interviews, I analyzed the list of themes and ideas that were shared to derive the themes in the findings. In addition to these generalizations, I included quotations of each participant's voice so that it is heard in a way that they intended. In describing ways to analyze interviews through an Indigenous lens, Chilisa (2020) states, "The voices of the researched cease to exist except when cited to illustrate a theme or pattern" (p. 257). I do not want the individual voice and experiences of each participant to be lost in the analysis process, but to be present in order to represent their unique self. Therefore, the data that is shared to describe their dreams of a liberatory education are verbatim responses from the transcripts.

Chapter 4: Participant Portraits

The data collected in this study is a result of a series of three interviews for each research participant. The series of interviews began with an individual interview followed by a group interview and concluded with a final individual interview. This chapter presents a portrait of each participant that describes components of their life and learning journey that are significant to themselves. After a narrative introduction of each participant's story, the portrait then shares their collective experience during the group interview in their own words and concludes with the sharing of their dreams for the future which is also written in their own words.

Antione's Journey

"Those early situations help me within those later situations. Being able to put myself in the best position to, I guess shine."

Antione's Story

Antione identifies as a Black, African-American male who is 30 years old. He was a 7th grade student in an Algebra 1 class that I taught at a middle school in West Oakland. Antione and I have stayed connected through social media and through his posts I have had the ability to see his transition into fatherhood. Currently, Antione is employed as a production worker in a car manufacturing plant in the Bay Area. He is the loving father of a ten-year old son, a four-year old daughter and a three-year old daughter. In the summer of 2021 Antione, his son, and his son's mother come to Seattle for vacation and they visited my home. We enjoyed a meal on my deck as he and I were able to reconnect and I had the opportunity to meet his son. He takes pride in being a consistent part of his children's lives and his face lights up when he speaks of special moments in their lives, such as his son's first basket made or their birthday parties. Antione enjoys learning about history and appreciates the resources that are available to learn about the past in order to gain a better understanding of the world. In the first interview on Zoom, Antione spoke about his developing self awareness and the importance of vulnerability in relationships. He modeled vulnerability throughout the interview by opening up to me about his journey through life describing moments in his life that resulted in feelings of shame, depression, and joy. The interview lasted 70 minutes as he described his journey through education, relationships, and housing in detail.

During the elementary years of his schooling, Antione experienced immense challenges due to his father not being present and his mother dealing with sickness and drug use. During his 5th grade year, he went into a foster home and did not have support from his brothers or cousins leaving him to feel as if he was on his own. Antione described middle school as a pivotal time in his life when he felt like he had a village to support him. He identified the history teacher, language arts teacher and myself as his village and described us as role models for him who

closed the gap of getting through life. He shared, “It truly does take a village... the combination of both of you helping me get through that critical stage of my life because I felt like I was on my own.” In middle school Antione began playing organized football for a local Pop Warner team. Playing football added to Antione’s village of support, which he described as finding an anchor and providing the centering that he needed to focus on school and football.

The high school years brought the beginning of housing insecurity for Antione which continued into junior college. During his freshman year of high school, Antione’s foster dad kicked him out of his foster home and so he moved to a suburb about 20 minutes south of Oakland to live with his uncle. The relationship with his uncle was centered in conflict due to Antione’s focus on football and his uncle’s desire for him to work at a local flea market. His uncle eventually kicked him out of the home before his junior year and for his last two years of high school Antione stayed with the families of two different friends, one from school and one from his childhood football team. After graduating from high school, Antione attended a junior college about 30 minutes north of Oakland and joined the football team. During this time he lived with a friend’s family, a friend from the college, and then teammates from his football team until they were evicted causing Antione to experience homelessness.

Antione described the transition from high school to junior college as a point in his life when his mental health took a turn. He shared that towards the end of his high school career, he experienced feelings of not being good enough, not having enough, and not worthy enough to have what everyone else is having while in high school. Antione explained:

I think the biggest thing is you gotta not beat yourself up for needing help and I think a lot of the times I was torturing myself for needing help because I felt like I was less than. Everybody else is doing better than and I felt like I was doing less than, so I felt like I

needed the help and I think that that played a big role in self-esteem like self-awareness.

Feeling like you're not good enough..Feeling like you wasn't worthy enough to have what everyone else is having. And so I think, you know, all those experiences getting K through 12 helped me, pushed me forward when I felt like everybody was against me...So I think those things force you to find something deeper inside you and that helped shape me into who I am.

Once enrolled in junior college, he felt as if he didn't have the support that he needed to be successful and he became academically ineligible and wasn't able to play football. He transferred to another junior college in San Francisco to get a fresh start. Soon after, Antione's son was born marking a new stage in his journey that included being a father. At the new college, Antione was again academically ineligible but he was able to bounce back and was eligible to play football the following year. However, at the beginning of the season Antione was injured and unable to play. The injury, combined with the financial pressures of being a parent, resulted in Antione deciding to quit football. This decision and the loss of such an important part of his life put Antione in a depression that Antione described as, "I felt like I was so close, I was right there, but no support...that drove me into a crazy depression...I felt like I failed my mom, my kid." Antione shared that he has been hard on himself and watching his son learn and grow has helped him to be a little less hard on himself. Experiencing the joys of being a dad including being present at all of the special moments in his son's life helped to relieve the depression.

Antione's Collective Experience

I think it was a pretty good experience. It's been a while since all of us from the same, I guess, like time and class, have been able to interact with one another. It's been over 10 years, 10 plus years since I ended up and talked to him. So you know it's good for us to be able to get

back together and be able to hear how life has shaped our perspective as well when it comes to education and how certain experiences has shaped our perspective when it comes to education, and how we've had our own personal experiences, and how that shaped our perception of the world once we were able to enter into the world. And you know it says a lot about the experiences that each individual goes through cause that...hugely impact how they view education, like go about trying to obtain education. And when you experience a multitude of experiences in life the normal way of garnering an education might not be the way for you. And so that's why I like in that last conversation we talked a lot about like financial literacy, like construction, like trade work, vocational stuff, because all that stuff is, it's lifelong stuff that you can pass on down to the next generation.

Antione's Dreams

Dreams for How People Feel in Educational Spaces

I want my children to feel welcome, to feel heard, to feel comfortable. I think the reason why I say those things is because I remember just coming into middle school... you deal with the bullies and you deal with the other people from other neighborhoods, and you know sometimes it doesn't make it comfortable to come to school, right? So it doesn't make it feel safe to come to school also, because you don't really get anybody there to protect you. So I think, you know, those are kind of the I always say the top three things And then because that helps generate like focus, right, you're not worried about oh, somebody trying to beat me up...you could really just focus on school work.

Continuity right between all students, but also between the staff as well. I mean, I understand that there's a line that needs to be had between staff and students. But you know there's an unspoken truth about it, right as far as the bonds that are created between students

and teachers. And you know that's a personal testament that I could speak to, you know, with you and Mr. Taylor, and how you guys, you know, help me kind of stay locked in, and continue to want to strive for more, because you guys saw something in me that I didn't necessarily see it myself, not because you know I was blind to it, but more so for the fact that I was dealing with too much other things outside of that I couldn't really see that and I think that speaks volumes because we live in a country where you know a lot of these parents are working hard, like working really hard 10 or 12-hour days working one or two jobs. So you know it takes a village and I feel like, you know, if you, if you have that comradery on the outside, but also on the inside. The sky is the limit. The sky is the limit not just for the students but for the institution as a whole, because the community will begin to buy into that. And when you got a community that buys into that, the only thing I could stop you is you. So I think that's a good stepping point into the new future... That's a lot for the kids to know that they have somebody that's willing to be there to support them that's not family right.

You know school's a place where you can find life long connections... Relationships that you create assuming that the environment allows that to happen. So yeah, I think all that goes hand in hand when it comes to that as far as what I would want for my youth growing up. I mean my son is 10, so he's about to be in middle school now so he's kind of like, in between the gap, so to speak. So to see how he deals with it over the next 3 years will say a lot about the kind of parent that I've been, but also we'll say a lot about the village that we're trying to create, not just our family, but also with the school it is going to... So these next 3 years, I think, will be critical for him because you begin to culminate some of those friendships, those lifelong friendships in middle school, and not just with your students, but also you begin to create those lifelong connections with teachers right like my example for you. I know from Mr. Taylor, you know, and

I'm almost 30 now, right like I was 12, 13 when I first met y'all. So that speaks volumes, right, to the kind of village that we were able to create within our environment with the limited resources that we had. So imagine what could be done with more resources and more people behind it, you know, to push.

Dreams for What People Learn in Educational Spaces

Of course, English, math, science, you know, physical education, things like that. But on the outside of that, like we talked about, to understand financial literacy...learning how to educate the youth on how to utilize money and understanding the power of the dollar, and understanding the power of credit. Right? I think if we're able to introduce those concepts at a early age, it'll open up that door to understand it...I think learning how to set yourself up for the future is something that needs to be taught in school as well learning frugality, right learning not to spend so much, learn how to do more with less. I think it's something that definitely needs to be honed in on at school...and I think the reason why I harp on that so much is because that's a personal experience for me. not just not having a financial resource to do what I felt I was able to do...You have these dreams, you have these aspirations, you're trying to put yourself in a financial position to do it but you don't have the financial needs to do it and that could crush anybody's dream...and so I think, understanding it financially, how to bring more in. I think it's something that we should be teaching to the youth as well.

I think another thing also is...like cultural understanding. But I think there needs to be a more in-depth teaching of cultural understanding, and not just black and white cultures. I mean there's millions of cultures all over the world, right, and even as of now, especially within the last 10 years you'd be surprised how the cultures that run into now you might not have run into 15 years ago right? So it's like I went to high school with a bunch of Polynesians like Samoans

and Fijians, and Tongans...once you get around it, you realize, these people are totally different. Right? They do things different, their values and morals are different and sometimes it could be a culture shock... And so I think being able to understand other cultures will help us understand who we are. I think those would be the two biggest things just having financial literacy, and having cultural understanding.

The biggest thing I want the youth to know about our generation, we come a long way from the bottom and it's different I think vantage points about how to speak to that. But I think the most critical and most heart-wrenching is let them understand that at one point we weren't considered humans, right? So I think. to speak from that point and then to kind of bring it full circle to show like, yeah, at one point we weren't considered humans. And now we've had a black President. Right? We've had a black man create the super soaker right? There's so many different things that we've done from point A to point Z. To realize that greatness is in you right. However, you decide to dig that greatness out of you is responsibility of your own. But to know and to understand that you have greatness within you It's something that I will want the younger generation to know... And if you lack confidence, you are not even gonna give what you thought is your dream, even a shot, a lot of people miss out on their calling in that way, because they don't have the confidence to give it a shot, they don't have the confidence to be able to fail.

It's a duty to educate on what us, as a collective entity have been through on us with the collective entity what we endure. How do we stand in a fire? How do we get through it to get to the sunlight?...I think just being able to explain to the world who we are, where we come from will bode well for the youth in the future, because it gives them something to anchor down on. Once you really realize where you come from or the people who come before you, it gives you a greater sense of pride, it gives you a greater sense of something to hold on to rather than if you

don't really know where you come from you'll let anybody's words distract you. You'll let anybody's words throw you off your path...If we're if we're gonna be in school for a 8 months throughout the year we should talk about Black history for 8 months throughout the year, because it's been critical to the development of this country...if you put yourself in a position to know where you come from and understand where you come from the sky's the limit...I think just understanding confidence and understanding where you come from, I think it'll be the biggest proponents to drive you forward.

Dreams for Creating Educational Spaces

I've seen society kind of change as far as like when it comes to education, and how things are taught and the expectations that's needed from what's being taught in school. I think those expectations are being placed upon without understanding the environment...And when I say that I mean like conditions that people might be dealing with. ADHD. Some people might be dyslexic, you know. Some people can't sit still in the class. You know, whatever the case may be, and some of these kids get punished for that. I think the conversation that we're creating. It's showing ways to make everything a level playing field for everybody across the spectrum and within that we're giving everybody the opportunity to walk through a series of doors that they see fit for them rather than everybody trying to jump through this one door. But if we create more doors for people to walk through, then everybody won't feel so outnumbered for trying to get through this one door, right? And if you can change the thought process from somebody feeling outnumbered, so now, like they got a chance, it changes everything. If they feel like they got a chance they'll give more effort. They feel like they got a chance they'll put more into it. They feel like they got a chance they'll speak more because they feel heard. But if you try to force everybody through this one door. some people don't want to go to that door. Some people don't

want to fight to try to get through that door. I think the conversation that we're having, it's creating the space for those doors to be built for the ones after us to be able to walk through confidently. Knowing that me walking through this door is gonna not only satisfy me as far as my goals but it will satisfy me as a human because at the end of the day we're put here to do things that satisfy our soul and make us happy and that make our life worth living, right?

It's something that we as a unit could work towards. And it's something that benefits not just us as a unit now, but it benefits the generations going forward and then within that, it makes the world a better place, because now you're dealing with people who don't come from just the standard educational system, and they don't understand that. You know there's different cultures in the world. But now you're dealing with people who understand that it's a whole mixing pot of cultures out there....I think being able to understand those concepts as well, it's rooted within this as well because we're not seeing things through just one lens. We're not seeing things from just one view. There's multiple vantage points as to how we can view this thing. But the thing that we have to do is create those doors for people to walk through to see it from A, B, C, D, E, F, G vantage points.

Dreams for a Liberatory Education

When asked to find an object in his home that represents a liberatory education, Antione almost immediately identified a cube that his girlfriend had given him for Christmas. He quickly retrieved the cube and showed it to me on the Zoom screen. He then opened the cube up to show me the many configurations that the cube could make. To describe how the cube represents a liberatory education, he shared:

It's a little box. But this box opens up...basically with this box it gives you the opportunity once you open it up you could try to figure out a way to get it back to its

normal box shape. And so I think with this, it will be a good tool to kind of explain that because once you open it it's all these different pods to it, all these different layers to it, and you can design it into different shapes...And so I think with this, this can kinda demonstrate that everybody is going in their own direction. Everybody has a skill or a base of knowledge that they're, you know, willing to expand on, or willing to dive deep into in order for us to be able to make it all whole, it takes work. You gotta be able to move one piece at a time, right? You gotta be able to figure out what fits, what doesn't. You got to figure out what makes it look pretty, and what doesn't. And I think once you work on it long enough at whatever skill it is then you can bring it home, and you can make it be what it is that you want it to be, right? Whether you are an astrophysicist, you want to be a rocket scientist, an astronaut, a CIA agent, whatever the case may be. There's multiple steps to being able to get there. Some steps are easier than others, some steps are harder. Some steps you won't really understand, some steps of being there, and they don't fit right, remove certain things right. And so I think with this it'll be able to give a visual interpretation as to you know, just understanding that it'll take time to get to where, anywhere that you're trying to get to. But if you focus long enough and if you move some things around and if you just patient long enough, it'll come to fruition.

Image 3

Image of a cube



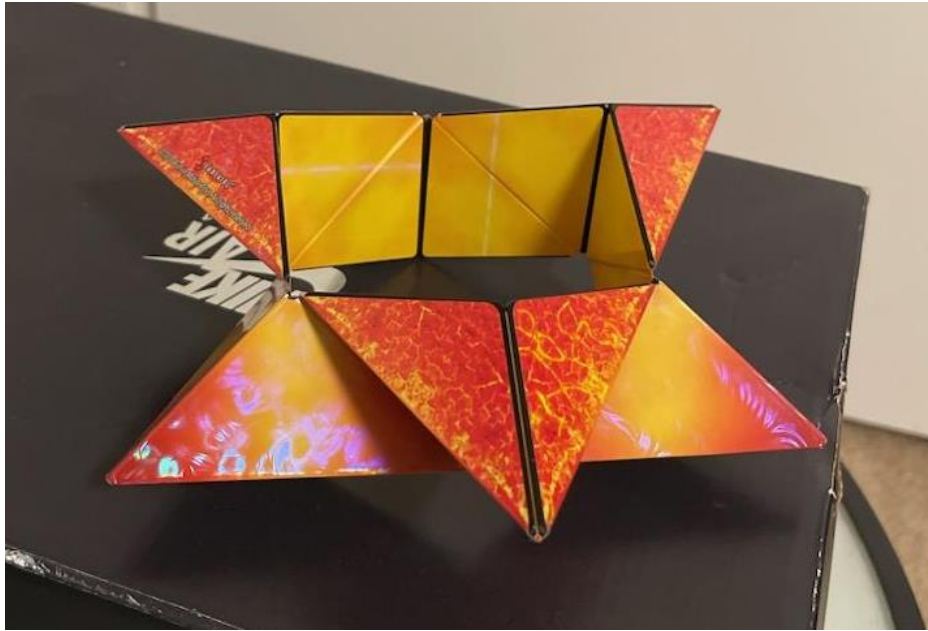
Image 4

Image of the cube opened up into a new shape



Image 5

Image of the cube opened up into a new shape



Shawn'te's Journey

"I like being able to be my...own teacher now, because I teach myself a lot of things like...I learn off experience. I love learning about children, because... being around kids, watching them grow...seeing them experience different things, you learn."

Shawn'te's Story

Shawn'te currently identifies as a Black and white female who is 27 years old. She shared that she previously identified as Black until recently when she learned that her mother was adopted and that her mom's biological family is white. Shawn'te was an 8th grade student in an Algebra 1 class that I taught at a middle school in East Oakland. We have stayed connected through social media and through her social media posts I have had the opportunity to follow her journey into motherhood, schooling and her career. She is the loving mother of a 12-year old daughter and a nine-year old son and lives in a suburb about 45 miles from Oakland. When her son was born, I was living in Oakland and I brought her a present to celebrate her son's birth. Shawn'te attended college after high school and earned a degree that allows her to work in early

childhood education. Currently she is a pre-school teacher and enjoys learning about children as well as learning from children. For our first interview, Shawn'te and I met on Zoom during the evening time after we had both engaged in a full day of work.

Early in the interview when describing what she learned from her family, Shawn'te spoke fondly of the female family members in her life including her mom and grandma. She shared how the women in her family pushed her to do well in school while stating that their ancestors did not have the same educational opportunities. Shawn'te shared:

My family, they always pushed on me like education was important, I had family members who didn't, who wasn't able to...go to school, go to college. My grandma always told me that back in the day, slaves and black people couldn't read or couldn't go to school, and if they got caught reading book they will get their hands cut off.

In addition to the women in her life, Shawn'te also shared fond memories of elementary school and having teachers who were Black. She appreciated learning about Black history and the individualized attention and support that she received from the teachers.

Shawn'te felt a shift when transitioning from elementary school to secondary school. In middle and high school, she felt as if the learning had shifted away from Black history and content that was relevant to her life and became based on what the teachers wanted her to know. The individualized attention and support that she received in elementary school were no longer present in her middle and high school years. However, a community organization that Shawn'te participated in from 7th grade until she was 18 years old helped her with meeting her needs that were not fulfilled by the schools. Shawn'te felt as if the community organization was a second home for her and she felt good and supported when with the organization. She described how the organization provided help with their schoolwork as well as experiential activities including

camping, cooking, and surfing. In addition, counseling and therapeutic services were provided to support participants in the organization. Shawn'te reflected on her experience by stating that she learned sisterhood from the organization and that the staff, who had similar life experiences to the participants, created an open and safe space.

During Shawn'te's sophomore year of high school, her journey included motherhood after giving birth to her daughter. During this time she transitioned from a comprehensive high school in Oakland to a continuation high school that was also located in Oakland. With the support from her family to continue her education and pushing her to do her best, Shawn'te graduated from high school a year early. After attending college, she began a career in early childhood education and enjoys teaching and learning from young children as a preschool teacher. She works hard, often taking on additional jobs to be able to support her children and herself financially. Shawn'te takes great pride in her children, often posting on social media pictures of her children during special moments such as their birthdays or when they receive recognition from their schools.

Shawn'te's Collective Experience

It was actually interesting to see time like what we all went through as far as like going to school cause even though we all went to school in the same city it was like different parts, you know. And then hearing about their experience with the police and the gangs and all of that, and like how their school wasn't as supportive like how (my school) was and stuff like that it was interesting to see, like you know, their different stories because I have family that actually lives in West Oakland, and, like my Mom actually went to school in West Oakland. But you know her time, like that's different. You know how when I was in school, so it's good to see other people's input and stuff and their ideas and experience. It was a good experience.

Shawn'te's Dreams**Dreams for How People Feel in Educational Spaces**

I want my kids to like, not feel embarrassed, to ask for help. I know a lot of kids are like they feel like if I ask for help that shows that I'm dumb or you know that they're struggling. But I want them to feel comfortable with talking to their teachers and me, you know, because I know I was embarrassed to ask for help from my mom when I was in school. I didn't want to feel like, you know, have my mom thinking my child has a learning disability, or feel embarrassed, you know. So I want to feel comfortable with reaching out, like getting resources, you know, like it's okay to have a tutor. And if you need a tutor it's okay, to go to a study group, or you know, because even in college, it's not just in elementary, middle school, high school, it's in college, too, because we have study groups in college. I was going to them, too, so I want them to feel comfortable with, like. you know, even a straight A student still needs help, you know, like I want them to feel comfortable in school, like not feel like they don't have no way to get help if they need to help, you know.

Dreams for What People Learn in Educational Spaces

I want them to learn the knowledge and skills of being independent because a lot of things have to get done by yourself, but also knowing how to ask for help, and also like, still know how to be independent. So you know, for example, they don't know how to spell a word, instead of asking the teacher, how do you spell this word? Knowing how to look it up in a dictionary, or if they don't know what a word means figure it out on their own, like dig deep before they ask for help, you know. Kind of like challenge themselves a little bit, you know because I know even in high school, and like college, when I was in college, some things I can say, oh, I need help with this, but then it's like they give me the answer. But then, I still have to

go back and figure out, well, okay, they gave me the answer. But now, how did they get the answer? Because the way they figured it out, I may not understand that way. I may have to use my own brain to figure out how to get the answer, because sometimes they'll have like a formula on the board and I'm like that's not how I normally do it, you know. So it was like it's always different ways, you know. So I try to challenge myself with that.

Dreams for Creating Educational Spaces

I know, for example, my daughter, she gets into trouble a lot and what her problem is like she doesn't want to sit down. She wants to like, do stuff interactive like whenever she has the days when they do interactive activities. or when they have Powerpoints to do, or like posters, she's doing really good, you know. She likes to be talkative, making it more interactive for them. Like making more icebreaker games, like more hands on activities, not just sitting down. Even with the kids at my job I use that as like a stepping stone because they don't want to sit down all day, you know they want to be active. They want to move around. Even us adults, we don't want to sit down all day. It's better to get around, and you know, move your body, so I guess, like making it a more fun environment. Making it where they can still learn, but also understanding it better, because some people are more hands on instead of having them sit down and read and write, quiz them on that. But then make it fun to where they can actually remember, and not just drill it in their heads, or you have to know 6 times 6 is 36, you know. Like? Okay? Well, let's see, like play math games, or something. That's what we do with our kids at my job. We'll teach them stuff like paperwork, but then we'll also have different interactive videos. We show them our different games. We make it funner because I feel like doing it like that, they actually remember it better and find different ways to solve problems. Not just the basic step by step, you know. It's kind of like, you know, a different way of learning.

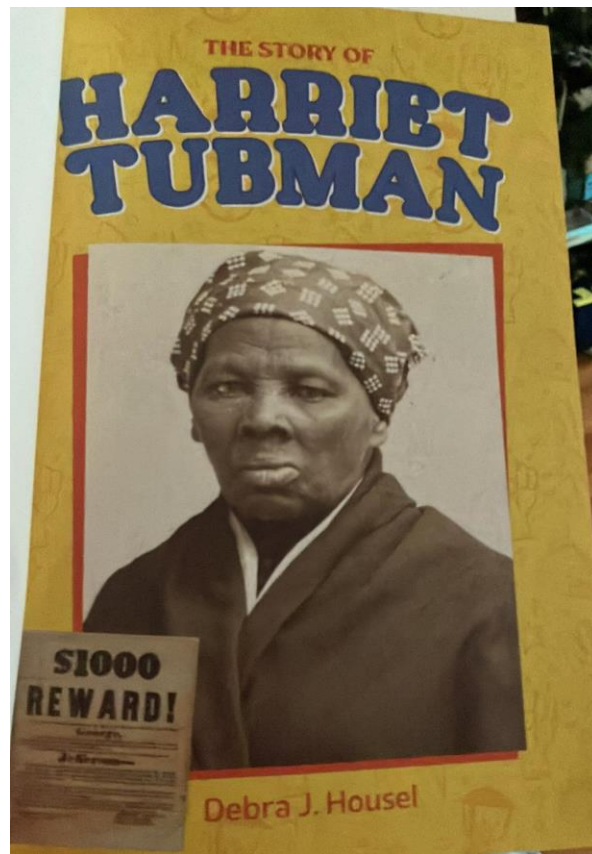
Dreams for a Liberatory Education

When asked to find an object in her home that represents a liberatory education, Shawn'te walked to her child's room and showed me on the camera the book, "The Story of Harriet Tubman," by Debra. J. Housel. She shared:

It's a book that I have that I bought for the kids. It's a book called Harriet Tubman. You know, when I was in school we didn't have books like this so it kind of goes with my vision of them knowing that it's always somebody there to help them, you know, they can still make it. She helped free the slaves. She had to go through some hard times, and you know, so that will kind of like help them, push them, and inspire them to wanna do better.

Image 6

Image of the book, The Story of Harriet Tubman by Debra J. Housel



Pop's (Randolph) Journey

“I want to learn something that actually can have an impact not only on me, but my family and my friends and my community.”

Pop's Story

Randolph identifies as an American male whose ancestors come from Africa and is 33 years old. He does not identify as Black because he sees black as a color that does not describe who he is as a person. Randolph prefers to be called Pop, a name that his friends and family have called him for as long as he can remember. Pop was an 8th grade student in an Algebra 1 class that I taught at a middle school in West Oakland. I have stayed connected to Pop through social media as well as in-person visits. Additionally, I have maintained a relationship with his two brothers and we have visited each other multiple times. He is the loving father of three children, including a daughter who is six and two sons who are eight and ten. I had the privilege of meeting his daughter when my family visited California in the summer of 2022. Currently he is a heat treatment specialist (changes the properties of a metal) and is soon to be a specialist in braising (welding small parts). Previously, he served as a paraeducator and behavior specialist for grades K-12 in a school district just east of Oakland. Pop has a passion for learning, especially history. He shared, “So my great grandparents were slaves...just saying that, it just make me want to know about history. Make me want to know more about myself.” He extends this passion for learning beyond himself by teaching others. This includes teaching children in his community through his previous job with the school district, teaching his younger brothers for as long as long as he can remember, and teaching his own children. He shared:

Even with my daughter, I do the same thing with my daughter. I try to figure out what she's good at and what she's not good at and what she's not good at, I try to make it a fun

way for her to learn it like writing. I taught her how to write her name by me teaching her the alphabet.

Pop's role in his family as a caretaker and teacher of his younger siblings is what led to his name, Pop.

Pop's elementary school years were a time in his life with some consistency. He lived in West Oakland with his dad and two younger biological brothers. He also had two step-brothers who lived in East Oakland. During this time in his life, he saw his family as his community. His dad was the youngest of 14 children and Pop shared fond memories of his entire family experiencing joyful events together such as camping and attending church. His grandma's house was the center of the family where they would meet up and spend time together. Love, accountability, to be self-driven and to be helpful were values and skills that he learned from his family. However, when Pop was ten years old his grandmother passed away. He shared:

So when I was young my community was my family, but as I got older it just seemed like everything crumbled, and everyone went their separate ways. So it just made things a little, a lot different, gave you a different outlook on a lot of stuff because we had our own church, everyone went to the church. Every Sunday my grandmother went to church four days a week, you know. My grandmother passed in 2000. So I was 10 years old when she passed, and that's when everything kinda like went left.

Pop described the time that he spent with his family as just feeling good and after his grandma died he felt as if the strong family connections that he had experienced as a child faded away.

A few years after his grandma died, when Pop was in 8th grade he went into foster care with his two younger brothers. He stayed in a foster home for a brief duration before moving in with his aunt who lived in a city just east of Oakland with his brothers. Pop shared:

Me and my brothers, we used to help our whole family and do a lot of stuff for our family, but when it came to when it came for us no one really helped... We went through helping our family. We went through being there for people, but when it needed to be reciprocated, no one returned the favor like that. So I'm still, even though it went that way, I'm still the same person to say I want to help my family.

Through this time of transition for Pop and his brothers and his feelings of not being supported by his family, as the oldest brother he felt as if he had to set the example for his brothers and cousins as well as look out for them. He shared that seeing his brothers happy made him happy and at the same time, he feels as if he had to grow up too fast.

Pop's passion for learning and teaching was not always cultivated during his middle and high school years. While Pop views himself as a quick learner who loves to help people, always wanting to learn more, he felt as if his educational experience was asking him to conform to a predetermined way of being. He shared:

I feel like I wasn't being heard. When I was in high school it was a lot of favoritism from sports to academics. Middle school, like, let me rephrase that. I was heard but I was heard for the wrong things. Like people had selective hearing type situations. Instead of taking heed to what I'm really saying and what I'm really trying to do, they would flip the narrative in their own way and try to make it make sense based off their understanding. And that's a conflict, that's like a conflict to me, because you're not trying to take and understand what I'm proposing. But you want to just take what I'm saying and recollect it in your own way, re-programming, and then process it your own way, and it's like that's not cool, because I've never done it to other people.

In addition to not feeling heard, Randolph also shared that he feels as if his creativity was not cultivated in school. He enjoys writing poems, creating music, and learning about technology but did not feel as if these passions were supported.

Pop applied his love of learning and teaching to a post-high school career in education. After graduating, he was hired as a paraprofessional in the same district that he attended high school and served as a behavior specialist. Through this experience, he learned how to work with and connect with kids. His approach was to learn their strengths and weaknesses and then connect them to what they are good at or interested in. Pop felt as if he was able to connect to the students in ways that the teachers were not because they shared common experiences that he could relate to. Though Pop was passionate about teaching, his career in education was cut short when he was convicted of a felony. He shared, “(They) put you on paperwork, that’s how they keep you in the system.” After being released from prison, Pop applied again for a job with the school district but was told his background check didn’t clear. He shared how this caused him to lose momentum because before the felony he was highly involved in the school district running an after-school program, working as a paraprofessional during the school day full-time, tutoring after school, and coaching athletics. Pop felt that he had let people down, especially the students that he was working with at the time.

Pop’s Collective Experience

I like the way that people participated, interacted with each other like we was...and the conversation got real. It got real. And just to hear everyone's story in how they got where they are or just their outlook on certain issues was kind of like eye opening for me. It's like a picture. We can all look at the same picture and all have a different outlook on it. So that's what it was...I feel like the group event, like how it was held, I feel like it just touches points and open up other

areas of a certain topic because you get different points of view. You didn't do like I see in different outlooks on particular issues. So I just felt like it was needed, because at the same time you get to speak to your peers, and for me I'm brushing up. Like I know a lot of stuff, but I don't have a lot of people to talk about it with. So it's just in the back of my head in a vault. And then, the conversations that we had comes to the forefront then I'm starting to recollect like, oh...this is what I like talking about. This is something I know.

Pop's Dreams

Dreams for How People Feel in Educational Spaces

I want them to feel safe. First and foremost, a lot of the time when I was growing up it wasn't a safe environment, but we were still eager to want to learn just because it wasn't a safe environment. But just imagine, if it was so, a safe environment is a plus and then on top of that I would want them to just to get a chance to experience different things to see if they like it or don't like it. And what I mean is school used to offer drivers ed classes, so you can go to school and get your ID and get your driver license at school but they don't offer that anymore. So it's a lot of things that I feel like school can actually benefit from, that can help the next generation grow in a much more unique way than what's been going on for the last few decades.

I want my kids to feel like they're heard, you know. Be able to know how to voice their opinion without judging themselves cause some people don't speak in public because they're their own worst critic, you know, and I want them to feel safe, and I want them to know that they have a voice, and they have the power to create their own environment. You know, of an actual learning environment. They have the capacity to create that as well.

Dreams for What People Learn in Educational Spaces

I'm real big on literature, like reading, writing, anything that falls in that nature, reciting

words and stuff like that...I want my child to learn how to be a team builder, team worker and also know how to come up with solutions on their own that actually works. Certain skills, I feel like we need to go back a little like some of the stuff that was being used back then I feel like we can use some of that, you know. We teach kids math, but we don't give them stuff to use the math on anymore...What I'm saying is that the education system teaches math but a lot of districts does not offer curriculums based off what we are picking up. If you're teaching me math, then I should be able to go to a construction class and actually utilize what I learned in my math class. You know what I'm saying, so it's a lot of that that I'm seeing, it's like we're like the kids are being taught something, but they don't ever have a chance to exercise that. They just do work, and I feel like the work is for you to keep up on it, but to have a curriculum outside of that that still uses that type of information. It's beneficial. You know, that'll make the kid want to learn more in, in my opinion. So just being able to harness, just being able to take the basic courses, but being able to use that information, and to go into different industries and utilize what you learn...So if they're learning math then it should be like a construction class, a computer class, a coding class, something like that where they can use the knowledge that they're learning from their math class into a different field...It's stuff that we can actually use from the past, and then there's a lot of stuff that we can change from the past. and actually use that to push forward and create a more mindful and more thought provoking society because a lot of this stuff is being only thought of by a few companies... But everybody has ideas. Everybody can be creative, and things can go so much further.

I want my child to know her history. I want my child to know where her family comes from, and I'm the same way. I want to know where I come from, too. I do want her to understand where she comes from and what it took to get her where she's at. You know, what sacrifices

people had to make and the journey that people had to go on based off those sacrifices and just understanding her light and understanding her creativity, and just being open to experience failure and success. You gotta try, though. If you don't try, then you're just failing without success. But if you try and you try it, success is gonna come because that's just how it works. So I just want her to know how to navigate this life, and how to be a helping hand for others. You know, lift as you climb...A lot of people don't do that, a lot of people climb, climb, climb, and they never look back, and not even knowing that somebody is watching you. So they might be climbing with you. But you don't even know that, you're not even looking back to acknowledge that. You got to have a helping hand. Like a child, a child's not climbing, they don't know where to climb so you have to be that guidance, that focal point in their lives where you can point them in the right direction based off of what they want to do, what fits in their life.

Dreams for Creating Educational Spaces

It will look like traffic. It would look like traffic if traffic was ran in automation. Now to elaborate, we have self-driving cars. So if auto cars on the road were self-driving cars there will be no accidents, the road would be free of accidents. The road will be free of potholes and the car will automatically learn how to adjust to certain weathers. Some people don't know how to drive in every type of weather. The car will automatically do that for you. So what I mean is now is a learning environment where people could just be themselves and just go. That's the ideal for me. Even if there is an accident here or there, it wouldn't be it wouldn't be as bad. Because that's where the lift as you climb comes involved where this person crashed out. But you gotta be if there's something or someone out there that can be that lift as you climb symbol for you where you crash, but this ain't the end. This is not the dead end for you. You could still keep going. And that's really all it is. I just see, like it's just like the flow of traffic. If it was automated, a lot of

things just go. The kids will pick up more so they'll have more opportunities to express themselves. They have more opportunities to use what they learned. So it's just gonna always keep on flowing like red and white blood cells. It's just gonna keep going.

Dreams for a Liberatory Education

When asked to find an object in his home that represents a liberatory education, Pop almost immediately responded, “My microphone.” He then got up to get his microphone and showed it to me on the camera. He shared:

The microphone also resembles freedom. Freedom of speech, all types of freedom and also a symbol of hope, you know. and for me I do music and I do speak to a lot of people and the microphone will, like I said the microphone is a beacon of hope for me. It gets my gears turning, because to stand on stage and just yell, that's one thing. But to stand on stage and actually speak into a mic, and people are attentive to you, that's a whole other thing. I feel like more people should pick up microphones because everyone has a voice. Everyone has experiences. Everyone has been through stuff and that little voice in your head don't have to just be in your head.

Image 7

Image of Pop's microphone



Antione, Shawn'te and Pop's Collective Story

The group interview with Antione, Shawn'te and Pop was the first of two group interviews and lasted around 80 minutes in length. Antione and Pop attended middle school together in West Oakland and were a year apart in school. They knew one another from school and living in the same community. The group interview on Zoom was the first time that they had seen one another since middle school. Shawn'te attended middle school in East Oakland and was a few years younger than Antione and Pop. Though the participants attended different middle schools and were different ages, they were all able to relate to many of the experiences that others shared throughout the interview. They responded to one another, asked one another questions and empathized with each other. Though the interview lasted 80 minutes, it could have gone on for much longer due to the length of their responses and their extensions of the questions.

Topics that the three participants in this group interview connected on were experiences of violence and injustice in their community, the lasting impact of the trauma that was caused by these experiences, and the belief that education can serve as a way to better self and community. Following is an exchange between the three participants in which Antione posed a question to Shawn'te about experiencing an injustice:

Antione: When it comes to justice and equality, how was that viewed for you? Did you ever encounter a situation where you feel like justice for you wasn't served properly, or justice for a friend of yours, or justice for somebody in your family wasn't served properly? And how did that make you feel like internally, but also like, how did that make you mentally like, move forward like knowing that? Okay. I'm not the only person seeing that this ain't getting justice, but why ain't nobody else doing nothing about it.

Shawn'te: Well, that's a good question. The only thing that came to my mind is when me and my mom, my little sister, we had sued the Oakland Police Department when I was 12, so basically, I guess somebody had called the police on my mom and my step-dad. They had raided our house. They tried to say we're selling drugs out of the house and stuff like that...they thought that I was older than what I was and they had me handcuffed and my mamma kept telling them that I was only 12 years old, they need to unhandcuff me, you know. They were just telling her to shut up and stuff like that...this is not just happening now, it's been happening. It hasn't stopped.

Antione: Yeah, but that don't heal your trauma because that was a traumatic experience. It's heavy, it's deeper than that. The cops raided you and they created a traumatic experience and no one tried to alleviate it...and like you said that is something that happens over and over and over again...

Pop: I got raided, too. My family got raided too. I was younger than you. I was like 9 my...You just imagine you're 9 years old, and the police come and bum rush your house. Tear your house up. So they looking for somebody that ain't there...It did traumatize me. It traumatized the shit out of me.

Antione: They busting into her house looking for drugs that aren't there.

Pop: It does traumatize you, but like I said I didn't really see justice as being served to this day. I seen my dad go through the mud...My dad was traumatized in his own way. You get what I'm saying.

Antione: Right, because it happened in front of his kids.

Pop: Exactly...He never had a chance to heal. It's like we never had a chance to heal. We didn't even have a chance to heal with him. It was a matter that never got dealt with.

It never got talked about.

Antione: And in essence it's like I said, it's kind of like the same thing for her, right? I mean, yeah, they pay them, but it took six years. That's six years that she had to deal with it mentally, that's six years that she had to deal with it emotionally...and that's heavy, that's heavy on you that you got to deal with it, the fact that your dad had to deal with it. And now you're still kind of dealing with it, and still trying to unpack it. And then this big of her because that happened years ago, and yet it still bothers her to this day.

Pop: It bothers me to this day. I don't want my daughter to experience that.

The acknowledgement by Antione of the trauma that Shawn'te had experienced warmed my heart as he responded to her empathetically. Additionally, Pop shared his own story of how his home was also raided by police when he was a child, allowing him to connect to Shawn'te's story.

All three of the participants in this first group interview shared stories of traumatic experiences and acknowledged that they were not provided opportunities to heal from these experiences. Yet each of the three participants shared hope and optimism for future generations rooted in education.

Shawn'te: I think the future starts with children. You know, they are the future...I am their teacher, and like, you know, I want to push them to be the best they can be.

Randolph: I feel like we need higher learning. This is something I've been talking about. I feel like we need higher learning. I don't feel like we should have to pay for school, pay for education. I feel like we should be in a position to have the ability to choose what we want to do and go for it, and have all access to it because a lot of people choose stuff that they don't have access to and that's where we left at.

Antione: You gotta be able to put yourself in a position to learn whatever it is that you want to learn and learn it to the best of your ability so that you can do it to the best of your ability. I don't care if that's motivational speaking, construction, engineering, culinary arts, sports, whatever the case may be. But you gotta be the best at it so you could pass it down to the next generation.

The importance of education to all three participants, especially when connected to changing outcomes for their children and future generations, was evident.

Ericka's Journey

"I am always open to learning. I never knew that about myself until people started saying that to me. So then I started believing in it. So now I'm somewhat living in my truth."

Ericka's Story

Ericka identifies as a Black, African-American female who is 31-years old. She is the loving mother of a son who is five and a daughter who is two and is grateful for the joy that they bring to her life. Ericka was an 8th grade student in a Math 8 class that I taught at a middle school in West Oakland. We have been able to stay connected through social media and through her posts I have had the opportunity to see her grow in her career and her joy in becoming a mother. Currently, Ericka is a senior clerk typist in the front office of a high school in Pasadena, California. Previously, she worked at an elementary school for eight years and began her career in the educational sector working in an after-school program. Ericka describes herself as adaptable, patient and always open to new learning. She enjoys learning about different hairstyles and how to create them, such as locks. She also has a passion for learning about and creating crafts and for do-it-yourself projects like creating laundry detergent and liquid soap. For

our first interview, we met on Zoom on a weekday evening after both she and I had completed a full day of work.

In Ericka's childhood years through middle school, she lived in West Oakland with her mother. In elementary school she remembers learning about Black history and math and characterized the experience as "fine." Ericka described her middle school years as, "The worst experience of her life," and shared how she felt like she didn't fit in because of the clothes she wore, feelings of insecurity including her hair, and her living conditions with her mom whom she later found out is bipolar. In addition, Ericka had trouble connecting with the academic content that was taught and therefore struggled academically. She also described her neighborhood in West Oakland as a rough area to live in and did not always feel safe. Ericka commented,

When I was living in West Oakland I kind of felt like I would never get out. It kind of felt like a box that I was in. I describe it as always having a dark cloud over my head and when I look back on it, it was just the environment that...my mom placed us in because she, you know, used to run around the streets a lot when she was younger, and when she got older she was still, like, you know, hanging with drug dealers, and...that's just the situations that we saw. It makes me sad, but it also brings me joy because I went through that and overcame that.

Ericka shared that she didn't understand how to express all that she was going through at home and at school which she now describes as feelings of insecurity, self-doubt and unsafety. Upon reflection, she said that her experiences in West Oakland have taught her how to stand up for herself, speak up for herself, and how to identify and understand her environment.

After her 8th grade year, Ericka moved from West Oakland to Pasadena, California with her dad and stepmom. This move marked a turning point in her life that she described as:

I changed my environment and tried to change who I was, and realizing that I can become this whole new person, because not a lot of people know me or don't know me at all. That's when I started getting my confidence up. And then that's when some grades started changing, and the person who I used to be no longer existed.

About halfway through her high school experience, Ericka felt as if her mindset towards school had changed and she began to gain confidence. She attributes this shift to the support of her stepmom who was connected to the Pasadena School District where she was attending school and to the support of her friends who encouraged her to do well academically and informed her of scholarship opportunities available once she completed high school. Beyond high school, Ericka shared that she felt like the COVID-19 pandemic provided her with the opportunity to learn about herself through meditation, self-reflection and planning ahead. After experiencing feelings of insecurity and self-doubt as a child, Ericka is working to blossom into her true self on her journey.

Ericka's Collective Experience

I honestly loved it. I love feeding off of people getting good ideas, and you know how other people can relate to what the situations of what I was going through and learning about, the situations that other people are going through. So it really gave me like a good inside of others.

Ericka's Dreams

Dreams for How People Feel in Educational Spaces

I would want them to feel accepted. I don't want them to feel, you know, disconnected because in the public system, especially in schools, I've learned that our Black and Brown children, especially in the poorest or low class of residence, or let's say, area codes. We are

being treated differently than other area codes. Let's say, with textbooks, teachers at that, testing. I just don't want them to feel excluded. I want every child, including mine and my kids' kids, and so on and so forth just all get the same level of education, and you know, just equally spread it around. Not just oh, you guys get it here. If you're a bigger donor you get special treatment. But no, at least like cater to the low class or middle class. So equal education for all I know.

Dreams for What People Learn in Educational Spaces

Just knowing that you are capable of doing anything and everything you put your mind to. Don't limit yourself. Always challenge if you feel like you don't know something, or if you feel like you do know something, and you feel like you know the teacher is wrong or there's a question that you know that you've heard are...just challenging skills and knowledge...I just want them to, you know, explore everything at all. Everybody is different. I'm slowly learning and you know, if I put my thoughts and knowledge on to them, they might not take it the same way that I took it. So, just letting them guide themselves, but also me, you know just a little bit giving them some type of insight.

What I want them to learn about it is that there is always light at the end of the rainbow. That what you're going through isn't what identifies you or what makes you. Just learn about your history, your background, where we came from, ancestors. Talk to someone if you, of course, feel uncomfortable about certain situations, of course, with us, Black and Brown, dealing with police, racial issues, all that. Always, you know, speak up, never, you know, keep secrets. Know your laws. That's one thing for sure. There's a lot more that you can do, of course read books. There's always knowledge in our movies back then. that you know, you could really relate to. Hopefully, they will have more in the school, books that talk about that, just not focusing

more on what happened in the past but bringing our current events into books. So we just don't have to rely on the internet because sometimes the internet has false narratives.

Dreams for Creating Educational Spaces

Well, it brings me to what I am doing for summer, which is summer program freedom schools, which is once again focused on literacy but it also focuses on students' needs. So let's say our books are designed to relate more to the students and also open up culturally. So we start off with songs, cheers and chants, announcements, and read alouds. Of course, the next segment is our reading which, of course, is the culturally-related books and then afternoon activities. So our curriculum is only two hours long, not all day, and it's actually fun. And if our schools were designed like that, we wouldn't have, I feel like we wouldn't have so many struggling students, especially with you get to high school. So just making school fun, exciting to go to, not so drawn out and bored. Oh, I also learned that, you know, in other countries they only have certain amount of time for homework and things like that, and the rest of the time is just, you know, learning from home like home schooling. So if we focus more on, you know, the love and the excitement of the kids then we wouldn't always get negative reactions. So that's I guess, leading into the second one how I would dream of my kids' learning system.

Dreams for a Liberatory Education

When asked to find an object in her home that represents a liberatory education, Ericka's first response was, "Not in my room!" She was holding her daughter at the time and asked to skip the question for the time being. Then she said, "If you really want to get into it, I have a Malcolm X picture somewhere around here." She described the picture as representing freedom, being yourself and fighting for the rights of yourself and others. A few days later she sent me through social media a picture of her Malcolm X portrait that is shown in Figure 4.

Image 8

Image of a portrait of Malcolm X

**Eric's Journey**

“It was very important, taking care of others, looking out for each other, being in community...And in those spaces, yeah, I mean, I was raised to be an empathetic person, to look after one another and build that community.”

Eric's Story

Eric identifies as a Salvadorian Latino male who is 27 years old. He is a client services associate at an investment firm. Eric was an 8th grade student in an Algebra 1 class that I taught at a middle school in East Oakland. When in middle school, Eric and his friend often stayed after class or school talking with myself and other staff. At one point, he and his friend wanted to earn money and so they stayed after school and helped my colleague and I in our classrooms and we paid them in return. We have remained connected through social media and I was able to see through his posts some of his college and career experiences. During his interviews, Eric spoke of his family as having a significant influence on his life multiple times. Currently, he does not have children of his own. He is interested in learning about history and enjoys learning about

different cultures, customs and traditions. Eric values the relationships that he has with his family and friends and finds joy in spending time with them. He is curious about what motivates people, what fulfills people and what makes people feel happy. For himself, he shared that the better his relationships are the happier he feels. For the first interview, Eric and I met on Zoom after we both completed a full day of work and Eric joined the Zoom meeting from his place of employment.

Eric speaks fondly of his family and the impact that they have had on his life. He grew up in East Oakland with his dad, mom, two older sisters and one older brother. He spoke about growing up in a Salvadorian Latino immigrant household and that the number one thing his dad would talk about was the importance of education and how he learned to have a strong work ethic from his family. He shared, “We were just building something better for ourselves, a better future.” Eric described a collective family upbringing in which his older siblings, especially his two older sisters, played an important part in raising him. He shared that his sisters were the ones who made it a point to help him and his brother understand their culture. Eric explained:

They're the ones who would highlight to us like, hey, you're not because, you know, we would hear stereotypes about Latinos all being Mexican, for example. They're the ones who would make it a point to understand who and what we are, where we come from, where we came from. You are Central American. You're from El Salvador which is here. It's not the same as Mexico or it's not the same as Honduras, or any of these other countries.

While he attributes much of his cultural learning to his sister, he made the distinction that his older sisters explicitly taught him about his Salvadorian Latino culture while he also learned about his culture from his parents in a different way, through their actions.

In addition to learning about his culture from his family, Eric also describes how his interactions within the community, particularly at the church his family attended, contributed to his sense of self. He shared memories of attending church and helping with his dad at the church's soup kitchen providing meals to people in need. He spoke of waking up early to pick up volunteers and distributing food from the kitchen. Eric explained that he was raised to be an empathetic person, to look after one another and to build community. He shared:

The *el diezmo*, it's like the offering that we would give every Sunday that would go towards..But I always wondered what was this used for. Where does it go to? And as I grew older I saw, so it helps to provide for different services that we commit to the community. And then that's when I started to understand better, like, okay, we're helping others who are less fortunate than us, not just for ourselves, but also for the wellbeing of the community as a whole, helping others helps us, too.

Eric finds personal fulfillment in being able to contribute to the well-being of his community. The strong value placed on community that he learned as a child also contributes to his desire to have good relationships with others in his life.

In his schooling experience, Eric viewed himself as a learner and felt that it was his job to learn the material taught and to ask questions. He felt accomplished in middle school as a result of his academic success. During this time, he strived to obtain the highest grade possible and he was proud of himself when he earned a 4.0 GPA. He also remembers his parents being proud of his academic achievements. Though he experienced success within the classroom, Eric shared different feelings in the other areas of school:

There were often times when I'm in the classroom and we're in instruction. I feel good like I'm here to do what I'm supposed to be doing. Outside of the classroom, you know I

wasn't a very athletic kid. I was a pretty big kid. I was overweight for most of my childhood so outside of the classroom, which is that piece I didn't feel so good. I couldn't participate in sports or in these activities and feel good about it because I don't feel like I'm going to perform. I felt good amongst friends who had, maybe, similar interests.

Eric described how school was a place where he experienced a lot of different feelings as a result of the dissonance he was experiencing between his perception of himself in the classroom and outside of the classroom when in more social settings. After graduating from high school, Eric attended a state university in California about 50 minutes south of Oakland. Wanting to set himself apart from others, he became involved in campus activities including clubs, projects and student government. He graduated and received a Bachelor's of Arts with a political science major and a business minor.

Eric's Collective Experience

It was great. I enjoyed listening to other people's perspectives and I also liked that I felt like I was able to relate to a lot of what they were saying, and a lot of that just really synced with what I wanted to see, or like the things that I have in mind as well. And so it also helped make me think about things that I probably otherwise wouldn't have, just really stirred a lot of ideas that I was able to express. I'm sure maybe it would have surfaced in one point or another, but it was helpful, especially because they, too, went to school in the OUSD public school system, and I think, similar areas. And so a lot of shared experiences and observations. So that was helpful and I enjoyed it.

Eric's Dreams

Dreams for How People Feel in Educational Spaces

Have them feel a sense of belonging, learning. Feel like they're making progress, like

they're developing, like they are being challenged. but at the same time supported to meet that challenge. That each day it's an opportunity to either learn something new, hear something interesting, meet someone who becomes, maybe important later in your life, or then and there. I want them to feel really, I mean a whole spectrum of feelings. I think it's so important to feel them at a young age. Uncomfortable, not too uncomfortable, but you know just enough to nudge them in a certain way that they may not have otherwise for their own learning, you know. I think most of all...There's a couple of negative points, like the uncomfortable would be one of them, and just nervous, it's okay to feel those. But underpinning all of that I do absolutely want them to feel supported along all of those feelings, like regardless of how uncomfortable, like they know they have someone or something to count on or to fall back on.

Dreams for What People Learn in Educational Spaces

I would say first and foremost, the ones that are more practical, in my opinion. So the first things like life skills, things like taxes, investing, I mean, really just social...to be culturally savvy. I think those in my opinion are more important nowadays, too, with the invent of artificial intelligence and all that as well. But on top of that the kinds of skills that will help them, and succeed, and STEM fields as well. And at that point it's really up to them what they want to focus on...So I feel like I'm learning things now that I feel like I should have some level of exposure to as a kid. Things like the legal system, how to navigate to that, or at least, even if it's not in depth, understand where to go to find resources to learn about those things and have a path forward. I think I mentioned it last time I'm pursuing a legal case, and no one in my family has ever pursued or dealt with the legal system here. So it's been having to start from scratch from really no sense of direction to now, having a good one, but it would have been nice to learn a little bit of that in school, at least those resources.

It'd be amazing if there was some kind of program where you could be immersed in your own culture for a month or so, or even longer, whatever's most feasible. For example, I learned it because my parents took me to visit my parents' home country. I was born in the US and was born and raised here but they still made it an important part of my life to make sure to go back there and see the rest of my family, my extended family. See how they live, see how they do things, learn about the food and the customs and traditions. And it was most immersive by actually going there and being there, living there for about a month or two. That would be amazing as well because I want them to be able to pass on the language as well. I feel like the longer an immigrant family has been here, the longer the generations go like the first generation, second generation, you get to third generation. Each time they start to lose the language, recipes, traditions and customs. I want to make sure that we preserve them as much as possible.

Dreams for Creating Educational Spaces

Well, in an ideal world...I think I would say for it to be more immersive and for it to be...I mean, I feel like a lot of it is starting to become a little bit outdated. Some of the content that we get could probably be scrapped. So if it was from scratch I would want it to involve a bit more of traveling. Say, if it was something like arithmetic or technology maybe we go to a state or a country, somewhere where it's known for that sort of thing, innovation. We take them to some of these big companies and see how it's done and learn in those spaces. But I think also the things that I mentioned earlier about the things that I would have wanted to learn are things like how the economy functions, how it relates to your personal investment. how to get into investments, how to do taxes, the legal system. How that functions, even if it's at a basic level, you know that will still be great.

I think I would want them to understand what the current world's problems are a little bit

more in depth because at the end of the day we want them to make an impact in the world. So I want them to really understand what works and what doesn't work in the world and why. We could learn. Of course, I think there should be a general education standard of math, science, history, government, English. There should be a general level, and I think, past that I think it should be more based on what's currently happening in the world or not happening in the world, and why. Maybe how the government functions are why it's able to pass certain bills and not others. At the end of the day I just want him to be able to change the world. So yeah, a lot of like climate change, the scientific evidence behind it...Learn more about artificial intelligence, and maybe different economic systems that are out there that don't create such a vast wealth gap. Learn about worker cooperatives, learn about how we could possibly do things differently. What are the pros and cons of that? How can we test it? How can we see what some of the results could be, or would be?

Dreams for a Liberatory Education

When asked to find an object that represents a liberatory education, Eric's initial response was that he needed a moment to think about it. He was at his place of employment for the interview and did not have access to personal items in his or his family's homes. Eric said that he would look for an item when he went home and send me a picture. I reached out to Eric a second time to see if he was able to identify an object and he has not yet been able to send a picture.

Mikayla's Journey

"So I would like to talk to children to be able to, you know, let them know they have a voice, and you're in control... You don't have to allow people to control you, although they'll try to."

Mikayla's Story

Mikayla identifies as a Black, African American female who is 29 years old. She is the loving mother of a school-age son whom she co-parents with the child's father. She currently works from home for a security alarm company and lives in a city about 35 miles east of Oakland. Mikayla was an 8th grade student in an Algebra 1 class that I taught in East Oakland. I have stayed in contact with Mikayla through social media and have been able to see her transition into adulthood and motherhood through her social media posts. She is passionate about working with kids in order to create a brighter future and would like to go back to school to become a child therapist. At a few different times during the interviews, Mikayla shared that she views children as our future. She is grateful for where she currently is in life including being engaged, planning for a wedding and her living situation in a home that she has the potential to buy. For the first interview, Mikayla and I met on Zoom in the evening after we both had completed a full day of work.

In her elementary school years, Mikayla lived in a city about 12 miles north of Oakland. She shared fond memories of attending a community center that was right next door. She described it as:

It was very friendly, open to the public. I went there to do dance classes. They had a cheerleading team...So I feel like they kinda taught me togetherness, you know, like you can always come here like you know, if you need me, or like, you know, you can reach out. You have support within your community within these different outreach and groups and programs. I felt safe. I felt comfortable. I guess it's because you know it. It was a neighborhood thing. Everybody's kids know everybody. Our parents went to school together at some point, so everybody's parents know each other like, you know. We knew people were always watching us.

However, when Mikayla was in 4th or 5th grade the community center closed down and she lost the support and sense of community that the center brought.

In middle school Mikayla's family moved to Oakland and she attended school in East Oakland from 8th grade through her sophomore year of high school. During this part of her school experience, Mikayla felt that her desire to learn was challenged by the environment that she was in. She views herself as a hands-on learner and an aggressive learner who would ask for extra work or assignments when she completed the required work. She shared:

I did not like school. I like to learn, but the environment that I had to learn in, like the distractions from the other students that were not as willing to take into the lesson as the kids that wanted to learn. So you have that, and then I think just not engaging or not, me not being engaged enough with the actual lesson plan like it was boring to me like I felt like I was advanced on another level to where I already knew this. I could be learning something else like it was kind of a waste of time for me.

During Mikayla's sophomore year, her mother thought it would be best for the family to move to a city about 25 miles north of Oakland because, as she described it, her brother had gotten into trouble. Upon enrolling in a new high school, Mikayla convinced the principal to allow her to enroll in an online learning program because she did not like school. The principal agreed and Mikayla was able to complete her junior and senior years online, graduating early from high school.

After Mikayla graduated from high school, her mom told her that she had to go to school or to work and so she enrolled in a local community college and also started working part time. The combination of work and school became too much for Mikayla and eventually she chose to work full-time. She shared that after about a month of working full-time, she was promoted to a

supervisor position and was able to move into her own place at 19 years of age. This was a proud and joyful moment for Mikayla. However, she experienced challenges with housing in the years after. She felt unsafe in a home that she was living in with her son in East Oakland and so she moved to West Oakland. In the West Oakland neighborhood she moved to she was the only Black family in an area going through gentrification and she experienced conflict with neighbors including racial slurs and bias treatment from the management company. The conflict had to be settled in court which provided Mikayla with the financial means to move. Currently, she lives in a city about 45 minutes east of Oakland.

Mikayla is focused on creating a life for her and her son that is different from her childhood experiences growing up. She is appreciative of the partnership that she has with her fiancé and acknowledges that the appreciation required a shift in her thinking. Mikayla shared:

I feel like I have a partner. He's here to assist me if needed. Like, you know, we try to lean on each other, and that's how it's supposed to be. You know I didn't think about that, though, like that wasn't in my plans. It was never in my plans till I get married, until I drew up my little lifelong book. Now this is the greatest idea. Because why was I thinking it was okay to do this by myself? Because a strong black woman told me that they could do it. I don't want to be like her. Sorry, my mom's strong as hell, my Grandma is strong as hell, but like them I don't want to be that strong. I shouldn't have to be that strong like that.

Mikayla's partnership with her fiance extends to his family. Her fiance's father, who recently passed away, is having a sports complex named after him and she is excited about a foundation that his family is working to establish that would provide athletic training and events for youth. This work connects with Mikayla's passion to help her community. She passionately shared, "I

want better for us, like as a people. But as a people we all have to be there, and I don't feel like the majority of us that need to be there to make the change are there. Like it's a small amount of us, and it's not enough of us.”

Mikayla's Dreams

After the group interview, I reached out to Mikayla through social media messaging and we scheduled the final interview. She was unable to attend the interview and was experiencing some personal challenges so she removed her social media account and shared with me her phone number. I texted her and we rescheduled the final interview. She was unable to attend the rescheduled interview and so I was not able to engage in a final interview with Mikayla.

Ericka, Eric and Mikayla's Collective Story

The group interview with Ericka, Eric and Mikayla was the second of the two group interviews. It lasted around 80 minutes in length. Ericka and Mikayla both joined the interview on Zoom from their homes while Eric joined from his cell phone as he was traveling home from work on public transportation. Eric and Mikayla attended the same middle school in East Oakland but they were not the same year in school and did not know each other prior to the interview. Ericka attended middle school in West Oakland and did not know either of the other two participants. Similar to the first group interview, though the participants attended different middle schools and were different ages, they were able to relate to many of the experiences that others shared throughout the interview. Additionally, topics that the three participants connected on were also similar to the participants in the first group interview including the impact of trauma as a result of injustice in their community, the lasting impact of the trauma that was caused by these experiences, and the belief that education can serve as a way to better self and community.

Following is an exchange between Eric and Mikayla in which they connect on the experience of feeling as if they are being told to leave past injustices in the past and feeling as if the impact of the injustices were never addressed or changed. They shared:

Eric: Redlining is one of those things I get frustrated about when people say it was in the past. Redlining is one of those things that still affect us today...the area where our ancestors, our family was redlined to, those areas were not favorable living conditions, more pollution, less resources, less parks, food deserts and just because it was in the past, doesn't mean it's still not affecting us, those things have long lasting effects.

Mikayla: Agreed. Don't bring up the past, but these are issues that haven't even, weren't resolved then when it was brought up, or when the problem came up. It wasn't solved then so how do you expect us to get over something that is an ongoing issue that was never resolved. We supposed to sweep it under the rug like ya'll do it.

Eric: Exactly.

Mikayla: Oh, because we're living in it. We can't brush it off because we feel. We're human. So that's when we retaliate, or we march, or you know, we do what we do. But some things are becoming less and less effective. It's like a band aid.

Both group interviews spoke about how racial injustice, which causes trauma, continues to persist. Participants in both groups collectively spoke to how they have not received support in healing from the trauma. A difference in the experiences shared within the groups is that participants in the first group spoke of first hand accounts of racialized trauma that they had experienced while participants in the second group shared impacts of past injustices.

Chapter 5: Their Collective Dreams - Finding and Interpretations

Throughout the series of three research interviews, including two individual interviews and one group interview, the six research participants opened up their minds, memories and hearts to me when sharing their stories. The participants shared stories of pride and joy, stories of trauma and heartache, and dreams for what is possible in the future. In the group interviews, the participants listened wholeheartedly, acknowledged and validated one another's stories, and responded to each other with empathy. After analysis of the interviews, three themes emerged as a synthesis of their collective dreams. Their dreams for a liberatory education include the dream for learning to be driven by self, the dream for learning to support the betterment of self, and the dream for learning to support the betterment of society. In the following section, I will share my findings and interpretations related to the three themes based on the participant interviews.

The Dream for Learning to Be Driven by Self

The dream for learning to be driven by self stems from the participants' experiences of schooling in which they felt as if they were forced to learn one way of thinking and knowing, including content that was not relevant. Antione shared, "I think those expectations (of what is being taught) are being placed upon without understanding the environment." Shawn'te contributed to the idea that one way of thinking was taught and she shared, "They gave me the answer. But then, I still have to go back and figure out, how did they get the answer? Because the way they figured it out, I may not understand that way." Antione went on to describe the current educational system as consisting of one door. He explained, "If you try to force everybody through this one door some people don't want to go to that door. Some people don't want to fight to try to get through that door." Eric spoke to the irrelevance of the learning by sharing, "I feel like a lot of it is starting to become a little bit outdated. Some of the content that we get could probably be scrapped." In his description of the education system, Pop shared, "We teach kids

math, but we don't give them stuff to use the math on.” The participants’ experience of school helped to frame their dreams of learning driven by self. They acknowledged that a base of literacy, math, science and history was needed but then quickly moved beyond the base to describe their dreams of learning driven by self which is further explained in this section.

Self-driving cars and doors may seem like very different things, but for two of the research participants they are objects that provide a means for learning to be driven by self. Pops envisions learning with no traffic in which people can be themselves and just go. He shared, “It's just like the flow of traffic. If it was automated, a lot of things just go... They'll have more opportunities to express themselves. They have more opportunities to use what they learned.” Similarly, in Antione’s door analogy he dreams of adding more doors so that people have more choice in their learning. He shared, “(We are) creating the space for those doors to be built for the ones after us to be able to walk through confidently. Walking through this door is gonna not only satisfy...my goals but it will satisfy me as a human.” The dream for learning to be driven by self was echoed by all five research participants who participated in the final interview. Ericka added that she dreams of learning in which people are, “Just letting them guide themselves,” and Eric shared that, “It's really up to them what they want to focus on.” Following the dream that learning is driven by self, the participants shared directions in which the learning would consist of including peoples’ background, history, ancestors, interests, and passions. Additionally, the ability to drive learning in a chosen direction is made possible by people having a voice in their education. In the following paragraphs I will dive deeper into these areas of self-driven learning.

The dream for learning driven by self includes the opportunity to learn about one’s unique background, history and ancestors. Ericka clearly stated this desire for her children by stating, “Just learn about your history, your background, where we came from, ancestors.” Pop

shared similar feelings when he explained, “I want my child to know her history. I want my child to know where her family comes from...what sacrifices people had to make and the journey that people had to go on based off those sacrifices.” Antione, who expressed that he was not able to ask his grandparents questions about his family’s history shared the importance of learning about the journey of Black Americans by sharing, “I think the most critical and most heart-wrenching is letting them understand that at one point we weren't considered humans, right? To speak from that point and then to kind of bring it full circle to...realize that greatness is in you.” In addition to learning about history and from ancestors, Eric shared the importance to him of learning about his background and culture. He shared, “It’d be amazing if...you could be immersed in your own culture...See how they live, see how they do things, learn about the food and the customs and traditions. And it was most immersive by actually going there (El Salvador).” From the participants’ responses, learning driven by self includes moving in a direction towards learning that allows each individual person to learn about their unique background, history and ancestors which necessitates an individualized path.

The desire for learning to be driven by self includes the ability to learn about and explore one’s interests and passions was also evident in the description of the participants’ dreams. Pop shared frustration about the lack of opportunity in school for people to learn about their interests and passions. He shared, “We were going to school with hella people who knew how to draw. Why we didn’t have an art class like that.” Pop added on, “I’ve been doing music my whole life...my senior year we got a music class. Why couldn’t I have this the whole time I was in school? And that was something that I wanted to do!” Antione extended his door analogy to explain how adding more doors creates options for people to choose a pathway that interests them. He shared, “At the end of the day we're put here to do things that satisfy our soul and make

us happy and that make our life worth living, right?” and “How do you expect people to understand what their potential is? If they're not really given the opportunity to experience it or to give it a shot.” Ericka expressed similar sentiment when she expressed how she wants her own children to be able to explore and guide themselves in their learning. The flexibility to follow one’s interests and passions to pursue their dreams was an important part of the participants’ dream for learning to be driven by self.

The ability to drive one’s learning in the direction that they choose is possible when someone has a voice in their education and their voice is heard. This was a desire of all five of the participants who engaged in the final interview. Pop shared, “I want them to know that they have a voice, and they have the power to create their own environment. You know, of an actual learning environment. They have the capacity to create that as well.” Antione stated that he wants his children to feel heard and Shawn’te, connecting to her own experiences in school, expressed that she wanted her children to feel comfortable talking to their teachers and asking for help. The dream for learning to be driven by self is dependent on the ability for people to openly express their thoughts, experiences and feelings to voice their learning needs and desires coupled with an educational system that will follow the unique pathway of each person.

The Dream for Learning to Support the Betterment of Self

Expanding upon the dream of learning to be driven by self, participants also expressed a desire for learning to support the betterment of self. Self-driven learning may include a variety of paths to address self-care needs that arise along a learning journey. In the analysis of participant responses, the theme of betterment of self fell into three sub-themes which include learning to support positive identity development, learning to support improved mental health and learning to support life beyond K-12 schooling.

The dream of learning to support betterment of self includes positive identity development. This sub-theme developed from participants' expression of their own identity and how it was impacted by labeling and stereotyping that they experienced. With the focus of this research project on elevating the voices of those who identify as Black, Indigenous, People of Color each participant was asked to share how they identify racially. Pop expressed that he identified as American which to him, references the country in which he was born and has citizenship. He shared, "I'm not African American. I'm American. My ancestors come from Africa, but I'm not a direct descendant from Africa. I'm a direct descendant of someone that was from Africa...On top of that, black is a color. So I'm really not black." Shawn'te, for most of her life, had identified as Black and African American. After learning additional information about her ancestry she recently shifted her thinking. She shared, "Two years ago, we found out that my mom, her mom was adopted and her mom was adopted from a white woman...So now when I fill out applications I put white and I put African American, I put both." Eric shared, "We would hear stereotypes about Latinos all being Mexican. They're (his sisters) the ones who would make it a point to understand who and what we are, where we come from. You are a Central American. You're from El Salvador." Their responses reflect the complexities they experience with self-identification and developing a positive self-identity. Learning to develop a positive self-identity supports each person's ability to see the worth within themselves rather than be defined by labels and stereotypes within the dream for learning to support betterment of self.

The sub-theme of learning to support improved mental health as a way to support the betterment of self emerged from participants' life experiences during their K-12 education. In the first individual participant interview, participants shared stories of trauma that they were experiencing while they were simultaneously attending school. Antione shared of living in a

foster home and experiencing housing insecurity, Randolph spoke about being removed from his father's home and placed in foster care, Shawn'te explained how her family's home was raided by the police and she was handcuffed, and Ericka spoke of how she felt unsafe in her neighborhood and living with her mom who was experiencing mental health challenges. When Ericka described her experience growing up in West Oakland she shared, "I describe it as always having a dark cloud over my head...I wish I had that mentor person or somebody just pouring into me like hey...You can grow. You can grow out of this. This is not you. This does not have to be you." Shawn'te spoke about a community-based program in which she felt safe that provided mental health support. She shared, "Everybody was welcoming, you know they had that safe place. They also had counseling...If anybody was feeling sad or something they had an actual counseling office there that had licensed therapists."

The sub-theme of learning to support mental health was most prominent in the group interviews. In the first group interview, Shawn'te and Pop empathized with one another over the trauma that they and their families experienced when their homes were raided by the police and Antione acknowledged their trauma and emphasized the mental and emotional toll that they experienced. He shared, "That's heavy on you that you got to deal with it, the fact that your dad had to deal with it. And now you're still kind of dealing with it, and still trying to unpack it." During the second group interview the participants engaged in a conversation about the lasting impacts of the racially unjust practice of redlining had on themselves and their families, including more pollution, less resources, less parks, and food deserts. Mikayla shared, "It wasn't solved then so how do you expect us to get over something that is an ongoing issue that was never resolved...We're living in it. We can't brush it off because we feel. We're human." The participants' stories of pain and sadness provided a glimpse into the issues that impacted their

mental health during their K-12 education and the basis for their dream of learning to support betterment of self, including mental health.

Learning for betterment of self includes a third sub-theme of learning to support life beyond K-12 schooling. Participants spoke about challenges that they faced once they graduated from high school and how those challenges have persisted. Multiple participants spoke of housing insecurity, not having the financial means to attend school beyond high school to pursue their dreams, and not having the tools to navigate the financial and judicial systems in the United States. They also expressed how they did not have the skills to be financially stable upon high school graduation. As a result, their dreams for a liberatory education include learning to support self beyond high school.

Multiple participants spoke to the importance of financial literacy. Antione shared, “Learning how to educate the youth on how to utilize money and understanding the power of the dollar and understanding the power of credit. Right? I think if we're able to introduce those concepts at a early age, it'll open up that door to understand it.” He spoke of how his financial struggles impacted his life by sharing, “You have these dreams, you have these aspirations, you're trying to put yourself in a financial position to do it but you don't have the financial needs to do it and that could crush anybody's dream.” Eric expressed a similar desire for learning to include financial literacy when he responded to a question asking what knowledge and skills he thought future generations should learn. He shared, “I would say the ones that are more practical...like life skills, taxes, investing, how the economy functions, how it relates to your personal investment...I feel like I'm learning things now that I feel like I should have some level of exposure to as a kid.” The dream for learning to support life beyond K-12 schooling also includes learning knowledge and skills that are immediately applicable after high school to earn

money and work towards financial stability and independence. Antione suggested that learning include content such as construction, trade work and vocational work because he shared, “All that stuff is, it's lifelong stuff that you can pass on down to the next generation.” Ericka shared a similar desire when she expressed, “Bring back wood shop, or something like that, to where after they leave school they have the knowledge, and some type of skill to better themselves.”

Reflecting on the challenges of transitioning into adulthood after completing high school, the participants voiced a need for learning that is applicable to generating income and that contributes to their ability to support themselves financially.

The Dream for Learning to Support the Betterment of Society

The third theme that reflects the participants’ dreams of a liberatory education is the dream for learning to support the betterment of society including their community. All six participants spoke of their desires to make societal change that would better the lives of their children and generations to come. During the group interviews, participants spoke about how they and their families experienced trauma as a result of unjust systems, laws, and practices. They expressed frustration that the same systems, laws, and practices continue to be in place which perpetuates the unjust conditions and results in continued trauma. Their dream for learning to support the betterment of society stems from these frustrations as well as the belief that change is needed for their children and children’s children to not experience the same trauma that they did. The participants expressed how societal and community change comes through collectivism and working together with one another across all cultures, differences and perspectives. As a component of learning to support the betterment of society, participants spoke about the importance of learning to include cultural understanding and how people are viewed by others. For the theme of learning to support the betterment of society, sub-themes of change to unjust

laws, systems, and practices, change through collectivism, and change to how people are seen in society are further described in the following paragraphs.

Learning to support change that creates a more just society was identified by the participants who have not yet seen change to unjust systems, laws, and practices. Their dreams of learning to support the betterment of society include learning about the current systems, laws, and practices while also learning about different systems, laws and practices. Eric shared, “I think I would want them to understand what the current world's problems are a little bit more in depth because at the end of the day we want them to make an impact in the world.” Extending beyond the known, the opportunity to create new systems, laws and practices was also important to the participants’ dreams. Eric shared an alternative to the corporate structure common in our capitalistic society by sharing about worker cooperative spaces, “I think you can build wealth by being part of a worker cooperative where every employee shares revenue instead of having a single CEO/ owner funnel up all the profits for themselves.” Pop, who has a passion for learning about history, shared, “There’s a lot of stuff that we can change from the past and actually use that to push forward and create a more mindful and more thought-provoking society...Everybody has ideas. Everybody can be creative, and things can go so much further.” Connected to the first theme of the dream for learning to be driven by self, the flexibility to explore different systems, laws, and practices and to create new ones is dependent on learning to be self-driven with multiple doors rather than the one door that is defined by current systems, laws, and practices.

Learning for betterment of society and community includes collective learning and action to make change. Participants spoke about how their education and learning was impacted by people in their lives who supported and cared for them, both family members and school staff.

Antione spoke of the importance of collectivity when he shared, “It takes a village, if you have comradery on the outside, but also on the inside, the sky is the limit. Not just for students but for the institution as a whole, because the community will begin to buy into that.” Connecting her own experience in school to her current goals, Mikayla shared, “I want to start a community outreach program for the youth...the children that don't have a support system, or someone to talk to, or therapy if they need that. I want to be that voice for the kids because...the children are our future.” Expressing similar sentiment, Shawn'te shared, “Right now I already work with kids. I'm a teacher. I think the future starts with children...I want to push them to be the best they can be.” Of the six participants, three are prior or current educators and one desires to start a youth program. Their dream for learning to support the betterment of society, including collective learning and action, not only represents their dream for future generations but the work that they are currently engaged in to make change. The participants' familial and personal experiences with racial injustice led directly to their desires for more just conditions for future generations in their dream for learning to support the betterment of society.

Extending from the dream of learning to support the betterment of self, including positive identity development, the dream for learning to support the betterment of society includes learning to see others as their unique selves including all components of their identity, their background, their history. their interests and their passions. This aspect of social awareness creates space for people to define their own identity rather than be judged by pre-determined hierarchical order and stereotypes associated with their identity. Antione shared, “I think there needs to be a more in-depth teaching of cultural understanding...I think being able to understand other cultures will help us understand who we are more...and how all that plays a part into society today.” Reflecting on his feelings of being stereotyped as a result of his ethnicity and

when explaining his interest in learning about other cultures, Eric shared, “If I was not familiar with it I'd be very curious about it, and ask more about it... as someone who was usually lumped in with everyone else, I appreciated it when others knew or understood that it was different.” For the participants, learning for the betterment of society includes creating a society in which each person is able to define their own unique identity and see others for their own unique identity disassociated from hierarchical ranks and stereotypes.

Chapter 6: Looking Forward

Recommendations for Transformation

The three themes in this research presentation, the dream for learning to be driven by self, the dream for learning to support the betterment of self, and the dream for learning to support the betterment of society, represent a vision for education that acknowledges the current inequitable realities while providing a path forward that is inclusive of all human beings. The themes presented in this research project uplift the voices, experiences and dreams of people who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. The dreams of the research participants acknowledge the trauma and injustices that they experienced while also uplifting their stories, their brilliance, their passions, and their belief in change towards a more just society. The dreams identified in the three themes create space to vision a liberatory education. Influenced by their dreams, my dream of a liberatory education includes a shift in the content that is taught from a singular set of learning standards for all students to personalized learning goals. Personalized learning goals allow for the three themes of learning driven by self, learning for betterment of self and learning for betterment of society to be incorporated into the educational framework. In the following paragraphs I will share how each of the three themes can be addressed through a personalized learning framework.

In Chapter 1 I spoke to how a white-centric epistemology is carried out through educational systems and policies including learning standards, curriculum, pedagogy and assessments. These systems and policies claim to be neutral while systematically requiring all children to learn knowledge deemed important to a white worldview (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005) and excluding knowledge deemed important to Communities of Color. Shifting from one set of learning standards that all students are required to learn and demonstrate proficiency of would open the door for other knowledge bases and worldviews. I dream of personalized learning goals that would allow each student to drive their own learning on a path that includes learning about their interests, passions, history, ancestors, society and themselves. Children would develop literacy, qualitative, self and social awareness, self and social advocacy knowledge and skills, in addition to others, through the exploration of self-determined content. This process of learning presents a shift from the current belief that the learning standards represent the knowledge and skills that all children are expected to learn and know, signifying a singular outcome of education, to the belief that knowledge and skills are developed through learning along self-determined pathways resulting in a diversity of outcomes. Shifting the outcome of education from a singular outcome to diverse outcomes connects back to Rochelle Brock's view on education as a shift from, "An object to be constructed to a subject in the construction of their own knowledge," (2019). The diversity of outcomes reflects the dreams of the research participants as well as my own dream because it recognizes the unique brilliance that lies within each human being.

A framework of personalized learning would open the door for learning to include betterment of self. In the current educational system, many aspects of self-care, including psychological, emotional, social, physical and environmental care operate separately. Shifting to

personalized learning allows for self-care to be included in the learning process. The elements of self-care cannot be separated from learning. People experience psychological and emotional trauma and have to cope with it simultaneously as they are learning. Acknowledgement of the elements of self-care in the learning process allows for people to be seen for their full humanity. The trauma that the participants experienced would be cared for throughout the learning process and therefore, people could show up as their full selves rather than be forced to leave part of themselves behind. I dream for personalized learning goals to include self-care that would allow for learning to be comprehensive, holistic, and healing, while recognizing the full humanity of each individual.

Additionally, the recommendation for personalized learning includes the incorporation of learning for the betterment of society. Current educational practices, including learning standards, do not address the realities experienced by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Givens (2021) states that progressive educational theories, “were not grounded in the lives of Black people and were insufficient as a resource for interpreting their experiences,” (p. 123). Therefore, It is critical to learn about the current societal structure in which human beings are ranked and ordered in a system of hierarchy defined by whiteness and how this belief that some people are better than others drives current systems, policies and practices. Educational systems based on white epistemology perpetuate human hierarchy. It is my dream that learning for the betterment of society includes learning how to be in relation with one another in a way that resists the hierarchical organization of humans to see each person as equal.

Reflecting on the recommendations and dreams that I identified from my research, I acknowledge that I may never see them implemented by educational systems in my lifetime. I am reminded of wisdom shared with me from one of my committee members and former

principal when I taught in Oakland, Mr. Jerome Gourdine. He compared transformative change to a monarch butterfly which takes seven generations from creation to travel to become the beautiful butterfly that it is. Mr. Gourdine shared that like a monarch butterfly, transformative change is a generational journey and that he will not be alive to see the change he envisions but that he will leave this world knowing that he was part of the journey. I may never see our educational systems transform from a system that aims to produce one outcome with every child learning the same content standards to a system that values and responds to each person's unique identity creating a diversity in outcomes through personalized learning. I may never see our educational system transform from one that resists ranking and ordering people to view all people as equally brilliant. However, I desire to be part of the generational journey in creating transformative change so that each person's full humanity is seen, loved, and valued.

While I may never see the transformative change that is needed for my dreams of a liberatory education to be enacted, I see openings to move forward towards the dream. While the learning standards continue to dictate 'what' students learn, the 'how' is currently left open to teacher, school and/or district practice. In 2021, the Washington State Legislature passed a bill to, "Ensure every educator in our state is prepared, trained, and equipped with the knowledge, skills, and tools necessary to create stronger, more supportive student-centered learning environments," (Professional Educator Standards Board, 2023). As a result of the legislation, members of the Professional Educator Standards Board adopted Cultural Competency, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Standards (CCDEI) for Washington State educators. Additionally, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington State expanded the learning standards by adopting in 2020 social and emotional learning (SEL) standards which are described as, "A process through which individuals build awareness and skills in managing

emotions, setting goals, establishing relationships, and making responsible decisions that support success in school and in life,” (Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2023). These recent additions to educational practice in Washington State represent a change towards creating educational experiences that represent the dreams of the participants. However, the implementation of this type of educator practice is asking for educators to teach in ways that we likely did not experience in our own educational experiences. Therefore, further work is needed to provide a framework, support and a vision that would support educators in this change of practice.

Return to Reflexivity

Reflecting on My Positionality

In my story of my positionality in Chapter 1, I shared how I connected to the research because I too want to liberate myself from the white worldviews that I learned in educational systems in order to dream of learning spaces that validate and value my identity and worldview. Personalized learning goals would allow me to embrace my cultural values of *enryo* (I interpret to mean as showing self-restraint) and *giri* (I interpret to mean as showing honor and respect to your ancestors) and to learn and grow as a fully whole human being. In the second year of my educational doctorate program, I grappled with my positionality as a Japanese American woman with a strong desire for anti-racist work and social justice. During this time, I reflected on my K-12 educational experiences and how I felt that I was deemed successful for getting good grades and high test scores while at the same time feeling as if I wasn’t accepted because I did not understand the white worldview which did not match my own.

With the support of my learning experiences in the doctorate program, I am learning how to free myself from the feeling of being inferior to white people and whiteness. Although I was

considered ‘successful’ for demonstrating mastery of the academic standards, I did not learn who I was or my unique relationship to the world including who others are and their worldviews. I am now relearning my cultural value of *enryo* to mean showing self-restraint by considering the well-being of the collective group rather than a focus on individual need, which is a part of the collective. I am learning that to show *giri* means honor and respect of my ancestors means to carry their stories, strength, love and hope with me at all times and pass them on to my children and future generations. Inspired by the participants, I am learning how to incorporate their dreams of learning to be driven by self, learning for the betterment of self and learning for the betterment of society into my own journey of liberation.

Reflecting on My Family

As I am relearning my own cultural values, I am considering the educational experiences of my own children. Currently I have a 9-year old son in 3rd grade and a 12-year old daughter in 6th grade. During the final individual interview, I asked participants, “If you could design the education that your child would experience, what would it look like?” Reflecting on my response to this question, my current desire is for my children to engage in educational experiences that see their full humanity, are loving, identity affirming, develop social awareness and that allow them to explore their passions and interests. Recently, after picking my 9-year old son up from school he excitedly shared with me that he had finished his writing assignment in class on the rain forest and therefore was allowed to pick a topic to write about with the remaining time. Typically, when I ask him how his day was he replies by saying, “Schoolful,” or “Boring.” He often complains about having to go to school each day which, as a mother, saddens me that at such a young age he has already decided that school is a place where he does not want to be. But on this day he shared proudly that he was writing a story titled, “My Own World.” In the paper,

he said that he was writing about the different cities that he builds outside of our house with rocks, sticks, bricks and anything else he can find and that at the end of each section he ended it with the words, “my own world.”

Image 9

Image of Tahrir’s Rock City



At 9 years old my son already has a strong passion for geography, history and architecture. However at school, he is only allowed to explore these passions when he has completed the required work and learning that is determined by the learning standards, curriculum and the teacher. In addition to not wanting to go to school, at 9-years old he has already learned that his learning is controlled by others and closed to the confines of the learning standards.

I desire for my children to engage in educational experiences that fulfill the dreams of the participants and support my children with learning that is driven by self, learning for the betterment of self, and learning for the betterment of society. A shift towards personalized learning goals would allow my son to learn knowledge and skills through his exploration of geography, history and architecture. It would allow him to create his own unique learning

outcomes based on his passions and interests. Personalized learning goals would give him the freedom to learn and explore in ways that would allow him to create outcomes that may not already exist. These unique outcomes could support the betterment of self and society in our work towards a more just future. I believe that personalized learning goals would shift my son's perception of learning from being "Schoolful" or "Boring" to being purposeful, empowering, transformative and exciting. However, my children are nearing the halfway point through the K-12 educational experience and I acknowledge that my desire will not be fully actualized. The adoption of SEL and CCDEI standards in Washington State provide learning goals that support a focus on acceptance of all people and identity and self-development. While the standards explicitly state the goals, a step that I see moving forward is the identification of educational systems, practices and policies that are implicitly based on a white worldview and that perpetuate hierarchy, privilege and oppression. The identification will then open the doors to creating further change towards a liberatory education. Change that is needed for my son to shift his perspective of learning.

Reflecting on My Profession

Reflecting on how the three themes in my findings connect to my practice as a school administrator within an educational institution I can identify areas of conflict as well as doors of opportunity and hope. As a public school employee in Washington State, I am required to ensure that students are taught the learning standards identified by the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. This requirement results in our work within school to ensure that all students learn the exact same knowledge and skills. At the same time, I am also in a position to facilitate change within a school as we work to implement the newly adopted SEL standards and the CCDEI standards. Thinking through the lenses of incorporating elements of the research themes

and the newly adopted standards into my practice as a school administrator, I see doors of opportunity in my ability to influence school culture and educator practice.

As a school leader, I have learned about the importance of cultivating a school culture based on each person's full humanity. In order for educators to create spaces for students that see their full humanity, we have to do the same for the educators. Acknowledging the system of hierarchy in place in schools and actively working to create a culture in which each person is seen, accepted and valued for who they are is important to this work. In my efforts to influence educator practice, I have connected to the work of Dr. Gholdy Muhammad. Upon learning about her book, *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* (2023), I have begun to incorporate her framework into my own professional practice and actively support teachers with doing the same. She outlines four learning pursuits in her framework including identity, skills, intellect and criticality, later adding the fifth pursuit of joy (Muhammad, 2020). A focus on identity allows for students to learn about self and others as they deepen their self and social awareness and self and social advocacy through the incorporation of social and emotional learning practices. The work that I am able to do with educators and students to cultivate a school culture that sees each person for their full humanity and integrates elements of personalized learning gives me hope that transformation is possible.

Reflecting on My Experience with Participants

Reflecting on my experience in the interviews and reconnecting with the research participants for this study brings up a wide range of feelings for me including love, joy, hope and sadness. I felt the love in their responses and they opened up to me and shared their life experiences as well as their dreams. I felt joy in reconnecting with them and hearing about their current lives and accomplishments. I felt hope from their responses that transformational change

is possible. I felt sadness when they expressed that the education they experienced didn't provide them with the knowledge and skills they needed to be able to support themselves financially and that they are continuing to heal from racialized trauma experienced decades ago. Additionally, I feel saddened that the current educational system fails to see their brilliance and worth in creating change. As their former teacher, this research project has allowed me to learn from each participant through their stories, dreams and perspectives and to be a student open to their teaching. I have been forever changed by their wisdom as they have helped me with identifying a vision of education based on their dreams.

Research Openings

There are several openings for future research in the journey to transform educational systems and create a liberatory education. The findings in this research represent the voices and experiences of six people between the ages of 27 and 33 and who attended middle school in Oakland, California. Geographically and age wise, this represents a small window into learning about the educational dreams of people who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Future research can be built out to a wider scale that would allow people from a broad range of geographical locations and ages to participate. Additionally, five out of the six research participants identified as Black, African American or having ancestors from Africa. Including a more diverse group of research participants by racial and ethnic identification would allow for a wider range of perspectives to be considered. Widening the pool of participants would also allow for the data to be analyzed in different ways which could raise additional questions such as; Are there differences in responses by geographic location, age, and/or how participants identify racially and ethnically? When working towards educational transformation through dreaming of

a liberatory education, each person's liberation journey will be uniquely different and so the inclusion of a broad range of experiences and voices is important to the work.

An additional research opening is learning about how the recommendations can be translated into a curriculum that is based on the dreams of the research participants as well as my dream of a liberatory education. What would it look like to create a curriculum that is personalized to each learner? As I shared earlier, the implementation of this type of curriculum is asking for educators to teach in ways that we likely did not experience in our own educational experiences. Therefore, it is important to provide a curriculum that would support educators with implementing a version of education that they have never seen. Research on this topic could support the transformative change towards a liberatory education.

Dreams

A dream is defined as, "A visionary creation of the imagination," (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In school we are told that something is either realistic or fiction with fiction being defined as, "Something invented by imagination," (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). However, for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, dreaming is necessary until a fictitious society in which each human being is seen equally for their brilliant and unique self becomes reality. Transforming learning spaces to dream of a liberatory education includes learning that is driven by self, learning for the betterment of self, and learning for the betterment of society. A shift in the current educational system from one set of learning standards resulting in one outcome to personalized learning goals and diverse outcomes will move us forward on the pathway to a just society. We will continue dreaming until fiction becomes reality.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Information About A UW Research Study

Transforming Educational Spaces: Decentering Whiteness to Dream of a Liberatory Education

What is this study about?

You are being asked to participate in a research study about centering the voices and experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who attended public schools in Oakland, California to learn about their vision of a liberatory education. It is up to you to decide whether you want to participate. If you decide to enroll, you can stop participation at any time.

We are asking you to be in the study because you were a student of the lead researcher, Kimberly Booker, when you attended middle school in Oakland, California. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in this study.

What will you be asked to do?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in three interviews via Zoom that will occur between January and March, 2023. Below are additional details of the interviews.

- **First interview** – This individual interview will occur between yourself and the lead researcher lasting about one hour in length.
- **Second interview** – This group interview will occur between yourself, the other research participants and the lead research lasting about one and a half hours in length.
- **Third interview** – This individual interview will occur between yourself and the lead researcher lasting about one hour in length.

What will happen to the information you provide?

The information you provide will be kept confidential. We will store the data with a code instead of your name. We will keep a list that links the code to your name and will store it securely and separate from the data.

Other information

You will be compensated for the time you spend in the interviews at the rate of \$35 an hour paid via an electronic gift card. For completing all three interviews, an additional \$60 will be provided.

What can you do if you want more information?

Talk to the study team. Kimberly Booker is the lead researcher at the University of Washington for this study and can be contacted at kimwitt@uw.edu or [REDACTED].

Talk to someone else. If you want to talk with someone who is not part of the study team about the study, your rights as a research subject, or to report problems or complaints about the study, contact the UW Human Subjects Division at hsdinfo@uw.edu or 206-543-0098.

Appendix B: Sample Recruitment Message

Hi Shawn'te! Happy New Year 🎉! I hope that you and your family are well.

I have a question to ask you 😊. I am in my last year of a doctoral program in educational leadership at the University of Washington. I am doing my research on creating a liberatory education and I would love for you to be a participant. It would consist of 3 Zoom interviews. Here is a link to an information letter.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1v503aO6altDnG9mMiooE_4u5ofoXg_Ms/edit?usp=sharing&oid=110339384696863996088&rtpof=true&sd=true

Let me know if you are willing to participate 😊.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

First Individual Interview - Self-awareness

- What are the most important things you learned from your family?
- What are the most important things you learned from your community? (ex. Church, sports, extended family, mentors, etc.)
- How did you feel in these spaces? What made you feel this way?
- What do you remember learning from the classes you took?
 - Content
 - Culture
- How did you view yourself as a learner when you were in school?
- How did you feel at school? What made you feel this way?
- How did you learn about your identity, including all aspects of who you are?
- How do you think your identity impacted your learning experiences at school?
- What do you enjoy learning about? What brings your joy?

Second Group Circle Interview - Social Awareness

- What did you love about your school?
- What do you love about your community?
- How did you learn about justice, fairness and equality?
- What injustices have you seen or experienced in the world?
- What is a social problem or issue that is important to you?
- How would you like to make an impact on your community?

Third Individual Interview - Dreaming

- How was the experience of the group interview for you?
- What pseudonym do you want to use?
- How do you identify, gender, racial, ethnically? Age? Occupation?
- What do you want your child to feel and experience in educational spaces?
- What knowledge and skills do you want your child to learn in educational spaces?
- What do you want your child to learn about their identity?
- If you could design the education that your child would experience, what would it look like?
- What do you dream for your child's future?
- What is an object around you that represents your dream for a liberatory education?