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# Creating and Maintaining High-Quality Educational Spaces for Black Children: Challenges and Strategies

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**Abstract**

Public education in the United States offers disparate outcomes that negatively impact Black children. Leaders who go against the norms and create spaces where Black children thrive face professional and personal challenges. Yet educators still do this work, employing strategies to protect their work and themselves. This study explores how educational leaders describe their experiences in creating and sustaining high-quality educational environments for Black students through the lens of Critical Race Theory. Nine participants, including the author, describe their backgrounds, their entry into the field of education, their professional and personal challenges, and the strategies they have used to persist in their work. Thematic analysis was performed on the resulting data to identify common challenges and strategies.

**Table of Contents**

# 1. Introduction

There was once a time when anyone caught teaching a Black person to read and write would face brutality or death. One could be forgiven for thinking that I am referring only to the days before emancipation. To some extent, Black children are still denied their right to a high-quality education. Those who do manage to educate Black children are often subject to the violence of systems that auto correct in service of white supremacy.

Educational programs that de-center whiteness, challenge or disregard metrics born out of racism - such as IQ and performance on standardized tests - value community cultural contributions as foundations for learning, or hold universally high expectations for the application of learning face systemic challenges in schools that serve Black children. These programs, which I refer to as high-quality, can potentially engage students in ways that prevailing models for teaching and learning do not, as evidenced by data on Black students' reading proficiency, high school completion rates, and the proportion of Black people excluded from mainstream society – be it through incarceration, intractable poverty, and low-wage earning – who possess low or minimal literacy skills (Stevenson & Ross, 2015).

Students learn when they are safe to utilize their prior cultural knowledge to make sense of new concepts and where content is relevant (Hammond, 2014). All students thrive in environments where expectations are high and where there are supports to help students take on the challenges of learning and applying new knowledge. Too often, however, Black students find themselves in classrooms where their cultural capital – the knowledge students carry that helps them navigate their worlds (Szeman & Kaposy, 2010) – is seen as of little or no worth, the expectations are low, and the supports are non-existent. Systems blame Black children placed in these hostile environments for their struggles. But the gardener's question begs to be asked: if the

plant fails to thrive, is it the plant's fault, or do you examine its environment and the care it receives?

**Context and Significance**

High-quality programs do exist in some schools serving Black students. However, their genesis and ongoing survival are rife with struggle against systems committed to grinding them down to fit the expectation of the racially disparate results that have become a hallmark of public education – results that are packaged in catchy names such as the achievement gap and the school-to-prison pipeline. Systemic forces at play here include funding models, accountability structures, collective bargaining labor agreements, and politicization of school governance (Ladson-Billings & Banks, 2021; Zamudio et al., 2010).

The challenge of developing high-quality academic programs for Black students is significant. Left to their own devices, systems will continue perpetuating injustices through lower expectations, inequitable resource allocation, and acceptance of poor outcomes for Black children. Systems that create disparate outcomes for Black students will continue to do so without some kernel of practice that ensures higher levels of teaching and learning (Ladson-Billings & Banks, 2021). Those kernels will be ground into compliance with the system without active maintenance.

Programs intended to improve Black youth outcomes – whether instructional frameworks such as International Baccalaureate and AVID, cultural programming such as *Uhuru Sasa* and *Kingmakers of Oakland*, or entire school models – face severe scrutiny at their formation, especially if they operate counter to established systemic norms. Often, programs allowed to thrive in schools serving Black students, such as magnet schools, are informally set aside for White students, whether they operate as a school within a school or limited access program

(Ladson-Billings & Banks, 2021). Finally, many programs that survive to serve Black students find themselves eroded by systemic pressures into a shape aligned with the status quo. Such schools experience what Stovall (2017) describes as the 3 D's: disinvestment, disenfranchisement, and destabilization. There is a persistent problem in sustaining innovative work that creates learning environments for Black students that are affirming and nurturing.

Efforts to destroy or prevent high-quality education for Black students are actively ongoing in the present day. The name of Critical Race Theory has been appropriated and used to fuel a movement aimed at removing instruction on race from schools, among other things (Pendharkar, 2022). As recently as 2020, the White House issued an executive order banning diversity training for federal employees or contractors (*Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping – the White House*, 2020). This move emboldened conservative interest groups to campaign for banning the teaching of concepts that could bring about discomfort or guilt (*'Moms for Liberty' Mobilize for School Board Races — With DeSantis in Tow*, 2022; *TOOLKIT: Combatting Critical Race Theory in Your Community*, 2021). The campaign has been partially successful, winning legislative actions that impact classroom instruction, from omitting race from historical events to excluding African American history curriculum (*From Legislative Chambers to Schools, Democracy for Black Americans Is Under Attack, Report Finds*, 2023; Hartocollis & Fawcett, 2023). The result is a weakening of culturally responsive education in schools in the interest of white comfort.

**Purpose and Research Question**

Considering the challenges facing educational leaders undertaking the work of designing, building, and maintaining high-quality programs that serve the academic interest of Black students, I pose this questions to be addressed in this research: How do educational leaders

describe their experiences with creating and maintaining high-quality instructional programs in the face of resistance?

This research aims to examine and explore the challenges presented to leaders who dare to create or hold high-quality educational environments for Black students in public education settings and their sustaining strategies. The concept of sustaining is applied to both the leaders and the work, as both are subject to erosion from systemic forces of auto-correction. This research does not intend to be a collection of gripes. Rather, it will be a collection of experiences, reflections, strategies, and connections that will affirm and inform education leaders facing challenges in their work. The intended audience for this research is educators who are now creating or leading high-quality educational environments for Black students, those who aspire to do the same, and leaders who may be recovering from exhaustion related to this work.

**Theoretical Framework**

I use Critical Race Theory to examine this question. Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged from the legal scholarship community in the 1970s as a critique of how the legal system upheld racial injustice (Delgado et al., 2017). Notable legal scholars associated with early CRT work include Derek Bell, regarded as the founder; Alan Freeman; Kimberlé Crenshaw; and Richard Delgado. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate introduced CRT to education scholarship in 1995 to examine how public education's structures and practices perpetuated racialized student outcomes. Ladson-Billings' 1998 article, entitled 'Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?', bridged the gap between what had previously been a legal school of thought and the realm of schooling focused on race and citizenship. Ladson-Billings drew connections between CRT and education in curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation.

There is no final consensus among scholars on many of the core tenets of CRT. However, there are six that are consistent in education: racism as a normal and permanent feature of American society, whiteness as property, interest convergence, colorblindness, intersectionality, and the usefulness of storytelling as a way to surface lived experience (Bell & Alexander, 2018; Crenshaw et al., 1996; Delgado et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998). These tenets provide helpful lenses through which to examine the schooling of Black children and the struggles to maintain high-quality educational environments for them.

In its efforts at autocorrections, racism gets assistance from neoliberalism. Neoliberalism became an economic force in the 1960s as social movements calling for equality were gaining traction. This body of thought stands on five columns: consumerism, competitive individualism, surveillance (through incessant reporting), precarity, and declining morality (Kezar & Posselt, 2020). Stovall summarizes that practices that are the fruit of neoliberalism act as "the privatization of public goods" existing in a marketplace (Teachers for Social Justice, 2016). Each of these tenets works in education to further the interests of white supremacy by stifling attempts to think creatively about the work of educating children, especially children not favored by the dominant group in favor of efficiency (Kezar & Posselt, 2020). When educators complain that there is no time to think, they are likely experiencing the market-driven forces of neoliberalism. In this marketplace, one must consider what is being exchanged for what.

## Researcher Positionality

My experiences as a school designer and leader connect me to the inquiry this research intends to answer. In 2013, I was part of a team tasked with designing a high school model to address the disparities in college and career readiness outcomes affecting Black and Latino youth in New York City. Our team spent a year researching school practices nationally that positively

affected outcomes for Black youth. We worked with members of the communities we intended to serve, designing the school model. But before our schools could open, we had to jump systemic hurdles to make what was a culturally relevant model "acceptable" to the school district. We then spent an excessive amount of time and energy defending what was left of the distinguishing characteristics of the school from being ground away. Two years after opening our doors, I left the principalship burnt out and in failing health; my leadership partner lasted one more year before moving on to open a charter school with the original model. One year after he left the school, it operated as a traditional high school, indistinguishable from any other small high school in the city.

More recently, I bore witness to attempts to dismantle a high-quality education program at a Tacoma elementary school that served a predominantly Black community. This effort was framed as a response to concerns about a lack of commitment on the part of the district to support the programs. However, the concerns the teachers raised behind the initiative expressed a desire to reduce teacher discomfort. While the teachers were able to secure a vote in favor of dismantling the program, the district overruled the decision and worked with the school to ensure the program's success.

**Roadmap**

Chapter 2, the literature review, will discuss the necessity of high-quality programs for Black children, resistance to these programs, and access to these programs. Chapter 3 discusses methods, including justifications for method selection, sampling and recruitment of participants, the participants and relevant characteristics, the interview protocol, ethical concerns, and reciprocity. Chapter 4, Findings, presents narratives compiled from each participant's interview and the researcher's answers to the interview questions. Chapter 5 is a thematic analysis of the

data from the participant interviews with connections to CRT concepts and tenets. Finally,

chapter 6 concludes the research with limitations, anticipated impacts, and next steps.

## 2. Chorus

Prior research provides a foundation in three parts upon which my research question will sit. The literature review will discuss the literature by exploring (a) the necessity of programs, (b) resistance to high-quality programs for Black students alone, and (c) Black students' access to programming.

Before desegregation, Black schools' separate but equal status allowed for systemic disregard of the physical conditions under which Black students learned and inequitable distribution of resources to Black students. Despite these conditions – and possibly as a response to them – Black schools were deeply connected to the community, with Black educators serving both in the schoolhouse and the community (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tillman, 2004). This connection between the school and the community served students by ensuring that learning was connected to the students' lives and that the students' cultural capital was seen and valued. Black students are not a blank slate. Their cultural capital, ignored or devalued by traditional education models, is vital for engaging Black students, as students from collectivist cultures place great value on the knowledge they have been endowed with from their families and communities (Hammond, 2014). Yosso (2005) identifies six forms of cultural capital that must be nurtured by the community: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant. These forms of cultural wealth enable Black people to dream, move, interact, speak, trust, and fight in a world that is hostile to their very existence. In pre-desegregation Black schools, the connection between school and community made it much more likely that students experienced a continuity of care by building on and building up this community cultural capital (Tillman, 2004).

Desegregation brought about changes to Black students' educational experiences. As school districts navigated integration, one near-immediate change was the loss of Black teachers.

In the decade following the US Supreme Court's ruling in Brown v. Board of Education, more than half of the Black teachers of Black children in southern states lost their jobs (Tillman, 2004). Black educators were summarily dismissed, demoted, or forced out of the profession, regardless of qualifications, often while provisionally certified White teachers retained their jobs (Fenwick, 2023; Ladson-Billings & Banks, 2021; Tillman, 2004).

This disposal of Black educators after desegregation resulted from the movement of Black students into White schools. The prevailing belief among school district leaders was that White families would not want to send their children to Black schools, nor would they want their children educated by Black teachers and principals. These shifts – both in the teaching force and the location of schooling – severed the connection between schools educating Black children and the communities from which the children came (Tillman, 2004).

The choice to place the burden of change on Black educators, students, and communities stemmed from a deficit mindset that held that Black people were a problem to be managed, not humans seeking humane treatment. Dumas (2016) described this type of policy making as antiblackness, summarizing it as "The Black is constructed as always already a problem – as nonhuman; inherently uneducable, or at the very least, unworthy of education; and, even in a multiracial society, always a threat" (p. 16). Meanwhile, the defenders of Black students' claims of equitable schooling chose to argue that Black students would benefit more from proximity to white students than from improvements to their own schools (Ladson-Billings & Banks, 2021). These arguments had at their root an assumption that the Black child was the thing obstructing a quality education, not the system that required Black children to learn in squalid conditions. Here we see how whiteness exists as property – property that benefits those in greater proximity to it.

The claim that there has been resistance to high-quality programming for Black students alone is not advocating that only Black students deserve these programs. It is a way to point out that racial interest convergence catalyzes change – the key to a lock that should not exist. Interest convergence is a phenomenon identified by CRT scholars in which progress in racial equality comes only if there is a benefit to White people (Delgado et al., 2017; Ladson Billings & Banks, 2021). If one thing is to happen to advance the humanity of Black people, there is, either in design or by-product, a benefit for White people – a cut of the action to be paid. In this way, White supremacy is preserved by the permanent assurance that Black people experience no real net gain. The Brown decision presents an example of interest convergence. As pivotal as the decision to strike down de jure segregation was, it served the interest of making the United States look better on the world stage. The need for the nation to rebuff the criticism of its social order by the Soviet Union set the scene. Without those forces in place, there would be no compulsion to allow change in the racial dynamics affecting schools. (Ladson-Billings, 1998). As noted above, White educators benefitted from demographic shifts in the workforce (Tillman, 2004).

Another benefit granted to White families was increased schooling options intended to stave off white flight and attract White families to historically Black schools. Magnet schools, institutions with specialized programming aimed at attracting a broader population, began to appear in northern cities as an option for students across a school district. However, the magnet offerings often went to White students, creating segregation within the school building, with the coveted seats in the specialized program going to White children. In contrast, Black children received the schools' traditional offerings (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This strategy produced the data to prove that a school as a whole was desegregated, even if racial stratification existed within its walls.

Programs designed expressly for Black students in Black neighborhoods face systemic resistance intended to wrestle them into compliance with the status quo. Stovall (2017) writes in *Born Out of Struggle* of the extreme measures taken by a community to get the city of Chicago to open a high school in their underserved neighborhood and the continued struggles to sustain that work. My experience as a school designer and founding principal in New York City resembles the Chicago story.

Efforts by Black communities to take control of their schools have also met massive resistance. When Black families in the Ocean Hill – Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn seized control of the area schools, opposition came from the city government and the teachers' union. The union, the United Federation of Teachers, had taken progressive stances on many of the social issues of the day but drew the line on community control. The result was the longest teachers' strike in the city's history, the creation of a new school district to pacify White families in neighboring communities, and school governance changes that exist today (Griffith & Freedman, 2019).

Anti-Blackness, or anti-Black racism, has been a driving force in the preservation of white supremacist systems that maintain inequitable outcomes for Black students. Antiblackness rears its head in how Black students are perceived in schools. White adults who work with children harbor negative beliefs about Black and Hispanic people – including being lazier, more prone to violence, unintelligent, and driven by unhealthy habits (Priest et al., 2018). A study of adults in the United States demonstrated that Black men and boys were more likely to be perceived as bigger and more physically threatening than White men and boys (Wilson et al., 2017). In a study utilizing university students and urban police officers, Black boys were perceived as less childlike and more likely to offend than White boys (Goff et al., 2014). Black

children bear the weight of White perceptions of them. It is no wonder, then, that Black boys experience disproportionate disciplinary actions in public schools (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.).

Stovall (2017) addresses antiblackness by distinguishing between "schooling" and "education," the former being a site of struggle and the latter being the learning communities provide for their children. This distinction is important because changes to how a society schools its children – school reforms – are merely modifications of a system of white supremacy. On the expectation that schooling can be turned away from antiblackness, Stovall states, "the system built on white supremacy will never do right by the people it has determined to be disposable" (Teachers for Social Justice, 2016). Similarly, Dumas, in Tuck and Yang (2018), speaks to the lack of racial justice scholars' desire to eradicate Black suffering, stating,

> "For scholars committed to racial justice in education, this has traditionally been
> the work: not to dismantle or destroy the system, but to seek redress, largely
> through contributing to deliberation within civil society… We call this seeking an
> end to injustice, but that is not what our work is designed to do; that is not what
> an anti-Black society is interested in (pg.31)."

Stovall (2017) and Dumas (in Tuck & Yang, 2018) are channeling Audre Lorde's (2018) warning about using the master's tools. Efforts to date have, by and large, been half measures that have left systems of white supremacy in place while taking incremental steps resulting in discrete progress towards results that resemble justice. This admonition is expected to shape some of the explorations into high-quality educational programs that exist within school systems.

All of this falls under Dumas' (2016) description of education policy as a site of anti-blackness:

> "What does it mean to suggest that education policy is a site of antiblackness? Fundamentally, it is an acknowledgment of the long history of Black struggle for educational opportunity, which is to say a struggle against what has always been (and continues to be) a struggle against specific anti-Black ideologies, discourses, representations, (mal)distribution of material resources, and physical and psychic assaults on Black bodies in schools" (p.13).

The resistance to attempts to create high-quality learning spaces for Black students suggests that, in the eyes of systems of white supremacy, Black people are not to be trusted with something as fine as a high-quality education. As such, creating and sustaining these high-quality learning spaces is a revolutionary act worthy of study.

# 3. Score

This qualitative study provides an understanding of the genesis and maintenance of high-quality educational programs serving Black students in the United States with a particular interest in leaders' experiences. Through interviews with educators and leaders supporting the work of teaching Black children, this research explores how programs are created and defended against systemic erosion. By comparing contemporary struggles with historical accounts and my own experiences, the research surfaces trends and patterns affecting the work of educating Black students. Finally, it identifies practices that have positively impacted efforts to craft and sustain high-quality educational programs for Black students and the leaders themselves. Knowledge generated is expected to inform ways to sustain rigorous programs and dedicated leaders.

Interviews with educators and educational leaders explored the participants' individual professional paths as educators, the stories around their work related to high-quality programming, their challenges in doing the work, and the strategies they have employed to sustain themselves and the programs. Unlike a highly structured question-and-answer format, the interviews were structured to allow for discussion. Discussions allowed for reciprocal communication between the researcher and the participants. In this way. I muddied the waters between researcher and participant. However, for the discussions to become a mutually beneficial opportunity for storytelling, both the researcher and the participant must come authentically.

This research used interviews as the primary means of data collection. Interviews create space for storytelling – one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory (Delgado et al., 2017). Storytelling makes space for a counternarrative to the dominant story around race and education that preserves the system as it is and allows disparate impacts to continue. This storytelling

moves beyond aggregated data to expose the realities practitioners have experienced in their work to create or maintain programs centered around Black student learning and achievement.

The importance of moving past the data-driven narrative is that such a story masks cultural eradication, the effects of practices that fail to reach students whose cultures differ from that of middle-class White America, and the disconnect between technical measures such as test scores and graduation rates and the application of learning in students' lives. For example, while the Tacoma School District has enjoyed a sharp increase in high school graduation rates for all students, including Black children, the data-driven narrative does not make room for the experiences of Black students and families along the way (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.). Conversations with these students and families expose the impacts of the permanence of racism through microaggressions, school power dynamics, access to opportunities, or outright racial hostility. Quantitative data tells us that Black students are graduating from high school at rates slightly higher than their White peers. Still, storytelling stands to tell us about the experiences of students and families on the way there. Educators' storytelling presents similar opportunities to move beyond the data to a more nuanced understanding of how racism impacts the quality of educational experiences extended to Black students.

This research leans heavily on Chilisa's (2020) work on indigenous interviewing methods, particularly the focused life-story. The focused life-story interview method creates the space for an individual to share what they choose about their life and journey in as complete a way as possible through a guided interview (Atkinson as cited in Chilisa, 2020). Such a telling of one's life story surfaces motivations, inspirations, fears, and intellectual frameworks behind a participant's connection to the work of educating Black children. This method requires building

trust and relationships between the researcher and the participants. The use of a loose interview protocol for conversations and the close defining of the participant pool is informed by this need.

**Sampling and Recruitment**

I include as participants educators and educational leaders who have been involved in creating and maintaining high-quality educational programs serving Black students and who are willing and able to shed light on the challenges, victories, and lessons learned along the way. My sample comprises eight current and former educators in urban school districts in the United States who have brought high-quality programs into existence or who have shepherded these programs through adversity. I compare experiences and lessons learned with my own, particularly as I explore my reflexivity during this research.

This research utilizes purposeful sampling, with all potential participants known to the researcher as practitioners engaged to be currently or in the past engaged in creating or leading high-quality learning environments for Black students. Twenty-one educators were contacted by email (see Appendix A), with secondary communication made by LinkedIn or Facebook. These educators were informed of the purpose of the research, conditions, and anticipated time requirements. A link to an online calendaring platform was included to facilitate scheduling interviews. Of the twenty-one educators who were contacted, nine scheduled interviews, with one of those dropping out of the study because of a scheduling conflict.

**Participants**

The eight participants in this research are veteran educators who have created or led high-quality learning environments for Black children. All have performed this work in or adjacent to public schools and school systems. Sampling bias is present in gender, racial/ethnic identity, and location. While the pool of potential participants reflected a more equitable gender distribution,

the pool's initial small size of twenty-one people and availability to participate shaped

participant makeup. The racial/ethnic identities of the pool of potential participants skewed

towards Black, African American, or of the African Diaspora. Location bias can be attributed to

purposeful sampling, as I sought to include educators whose work I was aware of for inclusion in

this study.

**Table 1**

Research Participants

| First Name | Gender | Racial or Ethnic Identity | Relevant Role(s) | Location of Relevant Work |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brandon | Male | Black, African American, or of African Diaspora | Teacher, School Director | New York City |
| Chris | Male | Black, African American, or of African Diaspora | Teacher, Director, CEO | Oakland, California |
| Jeff | Male | Chicano | Teacher, School Founder | Oakland, California |
| Justina | Female | Black, African American, or of African Diaspora | Teacher, Principal, Director | Tacoma, Washington |
| Matin | Male | Black, African American, or of African Diaspora | Teacher, Principal, Superintendent | Oakland, California |
| Tabari | Male | Black, African American, or of African Diaspora | Principal, School Founder | New York City |
| Xavier | Male | Black, African American, or of African Diaspora | Superintendent | New York City Metro Area |
| Yusuf | Male | Black, African American, or of African Diaspora | Teacher, Principal | New York City |

*Note*: Racial or Ethnic Identity information was self-disclosed by the participants.
While participants may have disclosed other locations during the interviews, the Location of
Relevant Work column refers to the sites of high-quality environments discussed in this research.


**Interview Questions**

Interviews were guided by a research protocol with the questions listed below. (See

Appendix B for the complete interview protocol.) Questions were chunked into five areas: self,

role, challenges, sustaining strategies, and wrap-up. Except for wrap-up questions, which were

each asked in their entirety, lead questions in each area were asked with the bulleted questions asked if needed.

1 SELF

Tell me about yourself.

- What was your path to education?

- What has been your professional path since becoming an educator?

- How do you define Black?

- Who taught you about Black folx?

- How many Black teachers did you have in school?

- Where did you see yourself within school? In the curriculum?

- How and where was your Blackness affirmed?


2 ROLE

*Review the operational definition of high-quality education for Black children: educational programs that de-center whiteness, challenge or disregard metrics born out of racism, value community cultural contributions as foundations for learning, or hold universally high expectations for the application of learning.*

Tell me about the place(s) where your practice has served Black children according to the definition.

- Were you there for the creation/re-creation of the program(s)?

- What made this place or program a high-quality educational environment for Black children?

3 CHALLENGES

What are the challenges you faced in creating/sustaining the program?

- How did you make sense of these challenges?

- How did you work around these challenges?

- How did the challenges adjust to your moves?

- To what did you attribute the challenges at the time?

- Has your view of the challenge changed since then?

- What brought about that change?

4 SUSTAINING

What comes to mind when you hear "rest" or "self-care"?

How did/do you sustain yourself while doing the work you've discussed?

How did you protect the work?

- What does success in sustaining yourself look like to you?

- How successful were/are you in sustaining yourself?

- Is there one most important strategy or schema you held/held onto when sustaining yourself?

5 WRAP UP

- What do you feel deserving of?

- When do you feel most protected?

- What is your superpower?

**Risks, Ethics, and Protection**

Participation in this research was entirely voluntary. Participants could decline to share information, refuse a question, or withdraw from the interview at any time without consequence. Participants received no tangible compensation for taking part in this research.

For the protection of participants, the option to use pseudonyms was offered by the researcher. Some participants opted to take advantage of this option; some did not. Participants were not asked to justify their reasons for their name selection. All references to participants in this research utilize only first names. References to locations were included as participants described them; the decision to name a region, a specific city, or an agency was left up to the participant. While the anticipated risks associated with this research is low, there is potential for professional repercussion to participants based on the answers to the interview questions.

This research was conducted in adherence with the informed consent requirements set forth by the University of Washington. Direct quotes were referenced against the video recordings and transcripts of the interviews. Where quotes were unclear, participants were contacted to provide the necessary clarity.

**Reciprocity**

I hope this research will serve as a healing venture for my participants and myself. The original research design was to follow individual interviews with a group interview. Timing concerns truncated the group gathering. For many reasons, I'm glad this didn't happen, not the least of which is the time and difficulty I had documenting the interviews alone. The intent of the group interview was to create a sort of barbershop space for participants. When I think of a barbershop, I think of a space of care, a place where imposed structures like titles and rank are rejected, a space for truth-telling and collaborative reflection about experiences – whether it be advice, affirmation, or simple acknowledgment, and a place where you feel better going out than you did coming in. Each of the one-to-one interviews had elements of a barbershop-like experience. I intend to complete the loop with the participants as a group by sharing the completed manuscript with them.

I stand humbled by the company I keep. Each interview reminded me that I am surrounded by intelligent, driven, dedicated, real, and imperfect educators who lift and carry the work of uplifting Black children with me. Conducting the interviews and documenting them afterward led me to connect first with my participants' imperfections, followed by everything else. That's a weird place to work from – imperfections. But perfect people don't have to struggle, and we all struggled to do the work we did. So, it's the struggle that brought out the intelligence, drive, dedication, and realness in each of us.

# 4. Voices

Participants were interviewed by videoconference using the interview protocol found in Appendix B. The following are narratives compiled from those conversations. Given the loose structure of the interviews, exchanges did not always flow chronologically. Additionally, participants may have included information during interviews that is not included in this research. The written narrative of each participant's interview consists of an introduction to who they are, background information, history of formation as an educator, the naming of challenges, and strategies for preserving their work or themselves. Concluding this section is the researcher's self-interview using questions from the research protocol.

## Brandon

Brandon is the executive director of a charter high school in New York City. Before working and living in NYC, he has been a teacher program director, school designer, and academic director in schools serving Black children in Chicago and Philadelphia.

Brandon was raised by his mother in the Englewood section of Chicago. His mother, acutely aware of the challenges she faced raising a Black boy in that space at that time, took intentional steps to ensure that Brandon had the best opportunities available. Brandon recalls,

> My mother was very community-minded. My mother realized a lot of different
>
> things. One, she realized she had a Black son... I grew up in a neighborhood in
>
> Chicago – Englewood. Englewood is notorious for crime and violence and
>
> poverty. And so, you know, my mother was a single mother. But my mother knew
>
> that as a Black woman, she could not raise me to be a man, and she knew that in
>
> the neighborhood that I lived in, there weren't enough positive role models. So as
>
> far as my Blackness goes, she wanted me to really know who I was.

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Her efforts at building opportunities for Brandon started with establishing a solid identity through exposure to cultural traditions and strong role models. Brandon goes on to say,

> She taught me about Kwanzaa. I think I might have been seven, maybe younger, probably five or six, when I went to my first Kwanzaa celebration. And my whole life, Kwanzaa evolved into a thing where we would host celebrations at our house. I can remember there were times where it'd be fifty to a hundred people in our living room, we would say poems, pour our libations. We would have these discussions about Blackness and the community and all of these other things. She exposed me to a lot of different sports and coaches. I had a lot of basketball and baseball coaches who, you know, a lot of Black men who could fill those gaps and be role models for me.
>
> When I got a little bit older, she introduced me to a camp called the SIMBA Circle Experience. SIMBA was an acronym for Safe In My Brother's Arms, and it was started out of the Evangelical Lutheran Church with some brothers from Chicago and New York and Ohio. So, I went to SIMBA for a number of years. Again, another transformative experience. We didn't have camp counselors. We had nation builders. And all of our tribes – we were all the tribes – all of our tribes were named after the seven principles of Kwanzaa. And then, when the camp got a little bit bigger, then it was the elements. So, earth, wind, fire, and water.
>
> So, my mother set the foundation of what Blackness is for me and exposed me to a lot of different things and a lot of people. [She] was intent on making sure

that I had a strong Black male presence in my life so that I could have a direction

to follow.

Brandon appreciates the irony of finding his Blackness affirmed in the evangelical Lutheran church, given the segregated nature of the Christian faith in the United States and the predominately white makeup of the Lutheran denomination. Brandon describes the congregation of his childhood as entirely Black, with an overarching message that they were "unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian." The meaning of this message became clear to Brandon when he attended a national denominational gathering and saw the differences between his home congregation and the larger group. He summarizes the experience, saying,

It was… one of those times where I had Black people loving on me and teaching

me things that I didn't understand… until the moment that I needed it, and I had a

real quick understanding of why things were the way they were.

These childhood experiences established both concrete and relative awareness of his Blackness. He was Black because of his history and the traditions of his people, and Black relative to others who shared his faith.

Brandon credits his mother with making sacrifices to ensure he had educational opportunities. Through 8th grade, He attended a predominately Black magnet school, where he was among forty percent of students in the gifted and talented program. He had some Black teachers there, but only one Black male teacher. Brandon recalled that, at his school, he was having conversations and cultural experiences that his friends in his neighborhood weren't having at their schools, with greater depth and meaning. It was when he attended a Catholic high school that, according to his recollection, was about seventy percent white that all the cultural lessons made sense. Brandon recalled,

Now all of the things that people were teaching me. Now I'm in a position to

apply it… not knowing that all of this stuff would come back almost like a test,

you know. Now [teachers were saying], "The world is going to look at you

different." I don't know what you mean by that. "You know we love you all, but

everybody don't. Everybody's not going to treat you the same way." Why you

saying that, Ms. Lake? You don't love me because every time I get in trouble, you

call my mom. But then it's like, oh, okay, you calling my mom because you don't

want me to get in trouble.

Like the race lessons in church, Brandon applied the lessons of his early schooling to make sense

of racial dynamics in high school and beyond. He is grateful for experiences that prepared him

for fights yet to come and for the knowledge to know when he was, in fact, in a fight over his

right to exist as Black.

One of Brandon's high school teachers suggested he might make a good math teacher.

Being a strong math student, he wanted to pursue a career in engineering or actuarial sciences.

But when Brandon recalled his first Black male teacher's impact on him, Brandon started to

become a teacher. He applied for and was granted a teacher preparation scholarship and was

teaching high school students as a young college student. However, poor academic performance

led Brandon down a path of different community colleges before finally completing his

undergraduate degree at a four-year institution.

Brandon had an experience with one of his professors at an urban, Black-serving

community college that developed his mission for building Black educational spaces. That

professor, citing the high quality of Brandon's work compared to his classmates, questioned why

he was at that community college. This conversation brought about a revelation,

It really kind of opened my eyes that, like these experiences, even at the post-secondary level, there are schools that are intentionally built for us. And far too often, the schools that you know are intentionally populated by us are of lower quality than predominantly white institutions.

This revelation extended Brandon's vision beyond earning grades to a greater purpose of building in his community. Brandon was motivated to push systems and create environments where Black students could thrive.

One summer during his time as an undergraduate student, Brandon's then-girlfriend introduced him to the Children's Defense Fund's Freedom Schools. Freedom Schools are described as follows:

The *CDF Freedom Schools* program incorporates the totality of CDF's mission by fostering environments that support children and young adults (known as "scholars" in the *CDF Freedom Schools* program) to excel and believe in their ability to make a difference in themselves and in their families, schools, communities, country, and world with hope, education, and action. (Dawson, 2021)

Brandon worked at Freedom Schools for two summers before opening a site at his old church, making him one of the nation's youngest Freedom Schools site directors at the time. He became a national trainer, teaching others in the movement about the Freedom Schools philosophy and mindset. Brandon was a trainer for a four-year term that wrapped up as he became a teacher.

Brandon was running a school site when he was a student teacher. Because of Freedom Schools, he was a school program administrator before being a teacher. Of the experience and its impact on his mission, Brandon says,

When I was in Freedom Schools, I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I was already

on the path to teaching, and Freedom Schools made me think that teaching was

not enough. It instilled a desire to open my own school… in order for people who

look like me to have a more positive educational experience.

Brandon's transformational experiences as a teacher, site director, and trainer with Freedom

Schools further shaped him into the educational leader serving Black children that he is today.

After earning his undergraduate degree, Brandon began teaching in public schools in the

Chicago area. He moved to Philadelphia to become a founding math teacher at Sankofa Freedom

Academy Charter School, an African-centered off-shoot of the Freedom Schools movement. He

later moved to New York City and fulfilled his goal of designing and opening a school. Brandon,

Tabari, and I were members of a design team tasked with creating a high school model to address

college and career readiness outcome disparities affecting Black and Latino boys. Brandon and I

were co-leaders of one of the three schools that opened with that model. He became the

academic director of a charter school created with the high school model.

### *Challenges*

Brandon brought youthful energy and mission-driven determination to his work at

Freedom Schools. He is a man with a lot of drive and passion for his work. The result was his

ability to open a Chicago-based site despite doubts held by others about the feasibility of the

endeavor and to see that program thrive. However, Brandon ran into a sort of censorship with

regard to his personal style. He recalls,

A lot of the people who are running programs were older Black people, and you

know, didn't necessarily appreciate me wearing baggy jeans or sweat pants

hanging off my butt, [saying] "You know you're not presentable like this… How

you gonna run your program looking like that?" Well, because my kids and the

families that I serve love me, and they dress like this, too. So, we gotta get out of

this notion of you have to present yourself a certain type of way.

Brandon could hold a duality without sacrificing his authenticity; he could understand the deeper

dynamics affecting his community while honoring his youthfulness and personal style. While

there was acceptance from the students he was serving, Brandon was forced to contend with the

discomfort of his elders. Considering his present role, in which he wears a suit and tie more often

than not, Brandon shares that, "I can switch it up. I can play in these different lanes." In this way,

Brandon presents like a jazz musician who, well versed in music theory, bends the rule when

interpreting a tune to his satisfaction.

*Strategies*

When dealing with censorship, denial, or dissuasion as a young leader, Brandon

approached with one of two strategies: constructive defiance or mentored understanding. For

example, when a pastor, fearing low attendance, attempted to dissuade him from holding a

community meeting at the church supporting the Freedom Schools site he was opening, Brandon

purchased food and filled the sanctuary with people. The pastor's doubt may have come from a

place of concern, but the boldness – the defiance – got the work done.

Brandon sought counsel from trusted people in his circle when facing challenges he

struggled to understand. He shares this account of wisdom he received after a troubling response

from attendees at a meeting.

I remember I was at a training, and the whole time people were laughing. Like

they were just laughing at everything I was saying… She was like, "Brandon, you

were too much for the room, and you just have to know that. Sometimes people

are going to laugh at you because that's the only way they know how to respond

to you, and that's their defense mechanism. Because whatever it is that you were

saying was over their heads. So they were laughing, not to be disrespectful to you,

but it was so that they could feel good about themselves. There's gonna be those

times where you are in these spaces, and people can't handle, and so like don't get

upset by it, just reflect on it."

Leaning on his trusted few to think through problems of resistance has served Brandon well. He

continues to use this approach to guide his processing and decision-making.

Brandon offered strategies that, while not tied to any particular challenge, are useful in

sustaining himself in his work and life. These include his approach to self-care and the use of

boundaries. Brandon acknowledges that self-care is "important, but at times impractical" as a

school leader. This statement is not a dismissal of caring for oneself but an admission that it is

difficult to maintain. In contrast, self-care was much more accessible as a teacher when he was

younger. Brandon projects self-care onto his staff.

When I think about self-care right now… what is it that I need to do in order to set

up systems and structures to ensure that my staff is taking care of themselves? …

I think about that more than I think about what it is that I have to do to take care

of myself.

Because he is intentional about hiring Black people for his school, Brandon sees this approach as

caring for his people – his community.

Brandon has boundaries in place to protect his peace. He maintains greater control over

stressors by choosing how and when he will engage with issues. With work, this applies to

emails, phone calls, and accessibility. In his personal life, his boundaries result in an intentionality about engaging in certain conversations. Brandon shares that,

> When I want to get into conversations about education, these are the folks that I talk to. When I want to get into conversations about sports, these are the folks that I'm talking to. When I want to talk about politics, these are the people that I'm talking to. But I'm not going to talk about politics with my educators, and I'm not going to talk about sports with my religious folks. Like, you know, kind of compartmentalizing groups…. I don't need stress, so I don't want to create the conversation that's going to stress me out… When I want to talk [Chicago] Bulls, I'm not gonna sit with my [New York] Knicks friends. We could talk about other things.

Brandon finds this compartmentalization helpful in managing unwanted stress. He also offers that when the content of a social conversation is unclear, he goes into it with no expectations.

**Chris**

Chris is the founder and CEO of Kingmakers of Oakland, an organization that "…partners with public school districts nationally to improve their systems, structures, conditions, and culture for Black male students to excel" (Kingmakers of Oakland, n.d.). Before leading Kingmakers, he was the director of the Oakland Unified School District's Office of Equity, the director of the district's Office of African American Male Achievement, a youth development director, the principal of an alternative high school, and a teacher.

A product of the South San Francisco public school system, Chris found school to be a hostile place, marked with corporal punishment, exclusion, and placement in special education. He describes an instance where his school desk was placed in the classroom's coat closet. For a

boyhood Chris, the school was associated with being paddled. In his retrospective assessment of his early days of schooling, Chris posits that his school didn't know how to reach spirited Black boys.

In contrast, the same traits that got him into trouble in the schoolhouse were seen as assets outside of it. Chris found refuge in after-school and summer activities. He recalled,

Outside of school, that really was a good experience. Boys club, summer camp sports, parks and rec – those are the areas really helped me take my crown out the pocket and rock it, so to speak, and gave me a sense that there wasn't nothing wrong with me. That this was the school, that it was a hostile environment. So, I'm blessed that I got to kind of offset that with wonderful experiences.

It was Chris' coaches and the adults who worked with him outside of school who identified his greatness. Rather than trying to break his spirit, these adults fostered it. Chris went on to say, "I may not have had the words to describe why, but I knew that there was nothing wrong with me, that these were just adults. I just asked 'what was wrong with them? Why? Why are they so mean?'" A young Chris recognized that the treatment he received depended on where he was and who the adults were.

It was not until junior college that Chris found a welcoming place in school. He credits Dr. Zelte Crawford, his first Black male teacher, with changing the trajectory of his academic life. Chris recalled, "It was much more than a class. I didn't want to leave. I mean, it was just so enriching, so affirming, and yeah, really catapulted me and into just a new way of being." Dr. Crawford changed how Chris saw himself by exposing him to the Black experience left out of the K-12 curriculum. This pivotal learning experience led to a desire in Chris to teach and create

transformative learning environments for Black children. He's been on a growth journey since then.

> I've been on that journey of really trying to unlearn what I learned in public school systems, what I learned on television and from growing up in America. And I've been on a journey of unlearning and relearning a more liberated kind of education and pedagogy of folks of color, indigenous, those furthest away from opportunity, or whose narratives were not embedded in math signs, language, art, social studies from an African-centered standpoint.

This testimony highlights the power that one transformative educator holds. Despite a trajectory that might have led to an outright rejection of education, Dr. Crawford's environment created the conditions for Chris to change direction and find purpose. In pursuit of that purpose, Chris went on to finish college, eventually earning a master's degree for Brown University.

Chris became a teacher, led an alternative high school, and worked in youth development. Along this path, he developed some of the principles that would show up in his later leadership work. Chris speaks of,

> …creating classroom conditions where I didn't do classroom management, but leadership development. We weren't using the word SEL (social-emotional learning) then, but we were really embedding the power of social-emotional learning, character development, values, education, and creating a condition where we are all supporting each other."

The principles that allowed for the creation of classroom environments where students co-designed solutions shaped Chris' continued journey.

At the behest of the then superintendent, Chris came to the Oakland Unified School District to lead the district's efforts in addressing African American Achievement. Oakland was the first school district in the country to take on districtwide practices explicitly aimed and improving outcomes for African American boys. Chris describes the focus of the work as "…center(ing) Black children while addressing the system, structure, culture, and conditions that were limiting their greatness, and not locate that problem with Black boys, but with the adult mindsets." Through listening sessions, community input, organizing, co-designing, and prototyping, the African American Male Achievement Task Force became the African American Male Achievement Initiative, then the Office of African American Male Achievement.

After leading the building of the systems and structures that shaped the district's work for Black boys, Chris was placed at the helm of the district's new Office of Equity. This promotion called for yet more creation, as such an office was new to the district. This transition also marked the beginning of a period of overwhelm. Leadership turnover was frequent, with the district seeing five superintendents in as many years. Each change brought a new set of priorities and a constant demand to justify Chris' portfolio of work, not only to the superintendent but also to principals and teachers. This period also included a general shift in the landscape for schools, including the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic and new federal and state laws that governed schooling.

Despite being praised on the national stage, bureaucratic forces, diminishing buy-in from an everchanging cast of district leaders, and resistance diminished Chris' impact inside the district. The mounting demands, increasing resistance to his work, and the wildly shifting landscape took their toll on Chris. He says, "The ten years I stayed were probably six years too long." By the time he left OUSD, Chris felt broken, exhausted, and depleted. He left the district

and started Kingmakers of Oakland. Speaking of the changes he experienced when he left his district role for independent work, Chris says, "I'm not censored, not edited, shamed, isolated, or villainized." By recognizing, however late, that his power lies in working away from a turbulent system and acting on that realization, Chris began a healing journey and reclaimed his crown.

"Take your crown out your pocket" is a phrase that Chris used a few times during our interviews. This mantra is used at Kingmakers to convey an overarching belief about their work of uplifting children. Chris explains, "Take the crown out the pocket and rock it is a metaphor for it's all within me. It's within all of our children. They just have it. They just need the right environment, right?" By "it," Chris refers to the greatness that allows Black students to engage and be their best selves. The crown is the symbolic representation of that innate greatness. However, Chris warned, "We send our beautiful children to the schools, and their crowns get buried, or they get purged." While Chris highlights the resilience of students who face such stifling of their spirits in schools, he also notes that the cost of continuously hiding the crown is a loss of self-esteem and a diminishing of potential. Chris explained that Kingmakers is not in the business of fixing Black boys. Rather, they create conditions where Black boys can show off their greatness without fear.

### *Challenges*

While working for the Oakland Unified School District, Chris faced a series of challenges. Frequent leadership turnover meant he had to continually establish a case for building the conditions that best served students. Clear effectiveness indicators were rejected because leaders did not have the context that their predecessors had. While Oakland's work under Chris was being recognized nationally – including by the White House – locally, there was resistance to centering Black children. Adversaries of the work were emboldened by instability at

the top of the district. Chris' portfolio of work was increasingly overloaded with little or no additional support. The work ceased to be sustainable.

Chris attributes the challenges that eventually drove him from Oakland to the expected machinations of systems that are resistant to change. He calls out, "The system. The system by design. Every time started to show that we did well, the system self-corrected." He faced macroaggression and direct challenges as his team's work showed progress. His work faced budget reductions as their impact increased. The un-subtle message he received was that if he stuck to bureaucratic work, he would be left alone. But if he persisted in bringing about change, he would face problems.

### Strategies

"I think I'm smarter now than I was then."

Chris' strategies for sustaining himself and his work come from wisdom gained through challenging experiences. He summarizes his journey and what he has learned about holding his work with the statement above. Specifically, Chris talks about being mindful of the pace of the work and the necessity of having people around you who can lend support. Regarding pace, Chris offers, "You don't run a marathon at a sprint. You've got to run at one pace to the next spot, then plot your next spot." The running metaphor can be interpreted as a call to be strategic about how one moves from one indicator of growth to the next, exercising caution so that moving at too great a speed doesn't compromise one's well-being.

Chris spoke about the importance of having a human support system when leading work such as his. He gives credit to his wife and three sons, all of whom work closely with him. He says,

When I'm working with leaders now, I ask, 'Who are your five people?' You

should have a doctor, a counselor, a trainer; you should have a motivator, people

who are going to tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear. And

these roles have to be foundational.

The final group, advisors, have specific qualities to ensure they can offer diverse viewpoints. Chris calls them "a multiracial, intergenerational, cross-sectional team of advisors." He stressed the need to hear from allies who can counsel you on how the work is seen and help you predict resistance. Multigenerational advisors allow one to use the wisdom of the past to navigate the future. Cross-sectionality ensures that the leader is hearing and seeing from multiple levels. Chris holds that a team with this level of diversity keeps a leader grounded.

Chris' strategies for sustaining his work involve youth voice, storytelling, and expectations around the scale of time. He states that he always has some sort of youth leadership body on his leadership teams. Chris identifies youth leadership as a driver for innovation and a way to keep the purpose of his work at the front of his mind. There is an echo of Chris' multigenerational advisors here.

Storytelling was a powerful tool used in the African American Male Achievement work and remains such at Kingmakers. Chris describes the work in both instances as an ongoing campaign with the purpose of building will in other people. Chris' teams' storytelling countered the reactive, negative, and crisis-driven narrative that pervaded the Oakland educational community and provided an asset-based counter-narrative of the promise and possibility of Black boys. This form of communication amplified the work. Chris says, "People always thought my departments were bigger than they were. Why? Because we told stories uniquely." This unique storytelling included video, film, and music with viral distribution. Finally, story-based

communication galvanized community partners to act. He credits this component for allowing the work in OUSD to live on past his time there.

Reflecting on the ever-shifting landscape on which he moved in the Oakland Unified School District, Chris reflected, "The one constant is change." He advised that leaders should expect conditions to change, sometimes suddenly and with great force. Chris has also taken a long view. He has developed an understanding that his work is legacy work; no quick fix will move calcified systems to do right by Black students. Much of his growth came from respecting the complexity of the challenges faced when attempting to create high-quality learning spaces.

**Jeff**

Jeff is a veteran teacher in Oakland, California, and a Latina/o Studies and Race and Resistance professor at California State University San Francisco. His professional life has revolved around the Bay Area – attending college at Berkeley, teaching and opening a school in Oakland, and being an academic researcher and professor in San Francisco.

Jeff describes himself as a Chicano male who went to schools that served vulnerable and wounded children – a population in which he includes himself. As a child, he was deeply involved in sports, building a sense of identity and purpose through athletic participation. While he was sometimes involved with activities that harmed his community, Jeff's involvement in sports anchored him. Jeff describes having "one foot often in both spaces." Athletics provided opportunities for Jeff that many of his peers did not receive, such as direction toward college. The association in Jeff's mind between college and sports was strong, leading to his attendance at the University of California at Berkeley on an academic scholarship.

Early into his time at Berkeley, Jeff suffered a career-ending injury. This injury left him enrolled at the university without the anchoring outlet of athletics. Jeff found himself surrounded

by children of privilege who were prepared at elite schools. As he considered dropping out of college, his friends encouraged him to speak to Harry Edwards, a professor of sociology who did a lot of work with athletes. Seeking whatever direction he could find, he agreed. Jeff describes his conversation, saying,

> In that conversation, my life changed. He said some things to me that really forced me to evaluate who I was, who I wanted to be, and how I was spending my time. And it changed the way that I studied. He told me if I studied in the same way that I trained myself as an athlete… if I would use the same discipline that I had as an athlete in my studies, that it was only a matter of time before I caught up to them because everything that they had read, I could read.

Despite other students' economic and social advantages, they couldn't match the life experiences and tenacity Jeff brought with him on campus. In contrast, Jeff could match their intellect if he applied skills he had acquired in athletics to his academic studies. Jeff took Dr. Edwards' advice as a challenge and accepted a charge to share this thinking with young people who grew up like him.

Upon college completion, Jeff stayed in the Bay Area, beginning his teaching career in Oakland. He carried Dr. Edwards' charge into the classroom and never strayed far. Jeff developed his teaching practice within the Oakland Unified School District and at the university level. He eventually opened a charter school to take the things he learned in the classroom and attempt to implement them across an entire school. Jeff describes the intent of opening the school, saying,

We wanted to create a space that promised that everywhere that young people went, they would have that experience – every day, all day. And you know that that's the journey that we're on right now, trying to deliver on that promise.

Having been a wounded and vulnerable child himself, Jeff wanted to create a space for children in ways systems haven't.

Jeff's early schooling experience was not a positive one. He recalled an episode in math class where he participated in a competitive game. When he answered questions, he pointed his finger – something his teacher labeled intimidating. As a result, he was excluded from the game. He describes his reaction to the exclusion, saying,

There was something about it that made my brain work in a certain way. And also, it just made me think about the concept that people were threatened by me. It was just always in the back of my mind. And so, I just became, like, really defiant in that class, and I used to act out a lot.

When asked about his affirming school experiences as a child, he could only recall one with an educator in the 5th grade, a nun named Sister Jeanita, who was the lead teacher and the school's de facto disciplinarian. He says, "Honestly, in my 13 years in school. She's literally the only teacher that I felt like saw me." Jeff recalls,

I would get sent to her all the time because I was seen as a problem in school… This was at a time when corporal punishment was still permitted in school, so she would paddle kids. I remember she took me in the back room where she would paddle kids, and she sat me down. You know, I was expecting to get hit. I was going to get paddled, right? She sat me down. And she was the first person ever in my life that asked me, "What happened to you?" And it just disarmed

me… so I started talking to her. And you know, I felt like she wasn't trying to

change me. She was trying to understand me.

Over the rest of his time in school, Sister Jeanita continued to connect with Jeff. She offered no

messaging on grades or traditional schooling metrics of what makes for a good student. Instead,

she focused on Jeff's well-being.

Sister Jeanita eventually left that school, no longer wishing to participate in practices she

felt were harming students. She opened her own school aligned with her beliefs about student

needs and development.

In his teaching practice, Jeff chose to replicate much of what Sister Jeanita showed him.

Jeff states that teachers must "win the heart to win the head." He means that emotional needs

must be met before a student can or will engage academically. Jeff explains,

If I saw a kid that was either not showing up or not fully showing up, then I

understood that something was in the way of them being who they really wanted

to be as a student and that they weren't in need of tutoring; they needed

something else.

Jeff developed rigor around prioritizing meeting students' emotional needs. While his practices

in this regard have been occasionally looked down upon, Jeff rejects the binary of academic rigor

or social-emotional care, saying, "There is no social justice without rigor, and there is no rigor

without social justice." In Jeff's practice, the two are not separated. He sees meeting students'

emotional needs as a form of differentiated instruction – fitting the learning to the unique needs

of each child.

Jeff seeks student engagement instead of compliance in his classroom. This

approach makes room for students to express themselves in their learning. Alongside this

approach, Jeff doesn't believe in punishing students to make them comply, understanding

that rule-following is not the same as learning. Many of the policies that exist in schools

are downright oppressive and harmful and are merely adultified expectations placed on

children.

Jeff proclaims, "There are no broken children; there's just broken societies and broken

institutions." He goes on to quote one of his teachers, Jerry Tello, who said, "Wounded children

speak the most truth, and we resent them for it." Children expose schools' brokenness in how

they interact or choose not to interact with schooling and how they fail to meet the needs of

children who need functional schools the most. What wounded children say and do moves

teachers who reject broken policies and practices. But these educators take a real risk when they

act on behalf of children.

Schools are so risk-averse, so change-averse. They're such conservative

institutions that when somebody comes in and has a fundamentally different

vision for what needs to happen, schools work really hard to break those people.

Sister Jeanita had left the school where she and Jeff first crossed paths over a difference of

beliefs about what was best for children. Following the philosophy she exemplified, Jeff faced

challenges when he prioritized students over the system in which he worked. By listening to his

students and discerning their needs – needs that would never be addressed in the curriculum or

the operational mandates of schooling – Jeff posed a significant risk to the system's functioning,

even if his students were better off for it.

Expanding his scope from an individual educator's position standing between students

and the system to the system's relationship with society and its most vulnerable members, Jeff

says,

I think there's a general sentiment in this country that public schools are a public

good. And I think anybody who spends enough time in schools, especially the

schools like where we've worked, knows that that's not only patently false but

that the opposite is true. We've literally built schools that are not only not a public

good for wounded and vulnerable children and families, but they're actually a

cancer on those children and families.

Jeff urges truth-telling about the role of schools and avoiding small incremental steps to adjust

school systems as they are. Using the metaphor of school systems as sinking ships, he calls for

acknowledging the foundational flaw – or the gaping hole in the hull – and dealing with it. That

flaw is that vulnerable children are being crushed in schools by systems that perpetuate inequity.

In the face of this, Jeff hopes for a solution-oriented conversation that exposes the real problem

and leads to bold measures to correct it.

*Challenges and Strategies*

Sister Jeanita's influence drove much of Jeff's approach to teaching and learning and

how he sees systemic challenges in his work. He explains,

What she taught me was that school is oftentimes either in the way or directly at

odds with the natural development of the child. She sort of taught me about how

to circumnavigate the system to get children what they actually need.

This is a lesson Jeff learned by watching Sister Jeanita's practice; she showed it with her actions,

not words. She exemplified that an educator who operates in this way needs to work around, and

sometimes against, the expectations of the institution. Jeff explains that "If you teach in this way,

the school is not going to give you a raise. The school is not going to give you a plaque, right?

This school is going to write you up." Jeff encourages educators whose purpose is different than

the status quo to be prepared for blowback and repercussions when they run afoul of systems. Institutions are built to preserve themselves; they punish disruptions.

Throughout his time as a teacher in a public school system, Jeff found himself on the receiving end of systemic repercussions for going against systemic expectations. He explains,

I think early in my career, I ran into obstacles because I was young and unpolished… You know, kind of like constantly and deliberately defiant. I defaulted back to my third-grade self, right? And part of that was, I'm twenty and I knew that what was happening in those schools wasn't right, and I knew I had to do something about it. But I didn't know how to do it, or you know, how to do it in a way that was quote-unquote professional. So I was just banging, you know, all the time. That's what I knew how to do. I think a really skilled administrator would have seen that, right? They would have seen my commitment and my potential and how sharp my mind was, and how thoughtful I was, and how much kids loved me, and how much parents loved me, and they would have taken me under their wing and, like, supported me right and helped me understand. "Hey, you know, like, try to come at it this way." Like, "I see you, you know. I see you." Kind of like what Sister Jeanita did for me. But instead, they would just pound on me for compliance.

Jeff received a lot of written reprimands during his time in the Oakland district. Administrators threatened and attempted to pursue the revocation of his teaching credential. All of these actions were for not complying with mandates he felt were harming children. Jeff urges people operating in systems who want to serve children to reconsider the system's assessment of which teacher it intends to protect and which it wants to get rid of.

Jeff credits his scrappy nature – a byproduct of his upbringing – and like-minded colleagues for sustaining him during battles with administrators while a teacher. Dr. Edwards called out that same ability to "scrap and fight" when he challenged Jeff to shift his discipline and focus to academic endeavors. Jeff also keeps company with a group of professional colleagues who push his thinking and affirm each other in the work. So when administrative challenges came, Jeff did not back down; he did not capitulate. Instead, he stood on his beliefs and pushed back while receiving care and counsel from his people.

While school administrators, in general, posed a challenge, Jeff did point out that he did encounter some leaders who offered support. As Jeff put it, these principals and assistant principals would "run interference and get out of the way… clear obstacles." They took away or limited the weight of compliance tasks and took on bureaucratic work to give Jeff space to reach his students. In these cases, Jeff's efforts were aligned with the administrator's focus: serving vulnerable children well. While rare, these supervisors led from a place of curiosity, seeking to understand rather than control.

### Sustaining Himself

Jeff runs counter to the popular belief that well-being comes from a total separation of work and personal lives. He finds ways to interact with students – and by extension, his community – that are beneficial to his physical and mental health. He explains,

> The mistake I see a lot of teachers these days making is that they… draw this line
> of demarcation between "this is when I'm teaching" and "this is when I'm taking
> care of myself." And I think what has kept me so young at heart and in body and
> able to endure so much resistance was that I never drew that line of

demarcation… Like my teaching and coaching and relationship with young

people was wrapped up in my wellness.

Jeff finds ways to engage with his students around things he enjoys, such as hip-hop and video games. By incorporating these things into his curriculum, he makes space for connections between interests and learning. Jeff says, "La cultura cura," meaning your culture is your medicine. Jeff creates a restoring and sustaining environment for everyone involved by finding cultural connections he and his students share.

Coaching is another way that Jeff sustains himself through his work with young people. Building on the role sports played in his life, he uses coaching as a way to push his students academically. He leverages the advice he received from Dr. Edwards when working with his students, training them with discipline, then urging them to take that same discipline and apply it to their studies. Jeff blurs the line between elite-level athletic preparation and elite-level academic preparation. Jeff's doctoral dissertation and his second published book, *What a Coach Can Teach a Teacher*, discuss the relationship between coaching and pedagogy.

The sustaining elements of coaching come from integrating physical activity into his work and developing lasting relationships. Jeff states that he does not struggle to find time to work out when coaching; exercise is built into his professional life. Coaching allows Jeff to honor his commitment to physical vitality in a craft that doesn't lend itself to it. Coaching also reinforces his role as an educator in the community by forming lasting relationships. During his interview for this research, Jeff was picking up the child of his former players. This type of continued connection elevates human relations beyond the institution's walls.

**Justina**

Justina is a twenty-seven-year veteran of the Tacoma, Washington, school district, where she is currently the Director of Equity, AVID, and Advanced Programs. Tacoma Public Schools serves approximately 28,500 students from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. Before working in this role, she was a teacher, assistant principal, and principal, all in the same district. Justina is a lifelong resident of Tacoma. She was a student in the school district and a parent of students later. Her time as a student coincided with the district's bussing efforts aimed at addressing segregation.

It was a set of experiences and observations she made that set Justina on a course toward teaching and social justice. She traveled by school bus from her home in the city's historically Black neighborhood to a predominately white school in Tacoma's North End. Justina had an astute eye for right and wrong, something she would later associate with social justice. She would watch, listen, and process the things going on around her in school. Her first observation was how some of her Black peers struggled in their predominately white school. Justina recalls,

> As an elementary school student coming from a lower middle-class family socioeconomically, one with a military background and one that learned or had adopted certain mainstream values and ways of doing and being, I was able to navigate that space at that predominantly white school fairly easily. But I also recognized that the other students who were coming on that same bus with me were not. They were having challenges with the educators at that school.

Justina saw students mistreated in school and treated as behavior problems rather than children to be taught and nurtured.

Her second observation came from how Black students, in general, were treated at her school. She and her neighborhood peers were instructed in a part of the school near the office, out of view from the street, and away from the gifted programs. Justina says, "It was just very obvious, even for a young person, that there were some biases, discriminations, social and educational, and justice that were happening at the elementary level for the sake of integration." By fourth grade, it was clear to Justina that her disparate treatment was because of her race. She was now having personal, up-close interactions with racism. A teacher accused her of cheating on a reading assessment after she performed well on it. Despite performing well and having no disciplinary issues, she was repeatedly passed over for leadership recommendations. Justina recalls her realizations during this period, "I learned about racism and discrimination based on how I was treated in elementary school."

Justina had some shielding from the racial assaults at school from her mother. As the youngest of seven children, Justina benefitted from her mother's prior experience in getting her children through the school system. While race was not explicitly taught in her home, Justina recalls, "the unspoken truth was that you have to be ten times better," referring to potential comparisons to white people. However, Justina knows that some of her neighborhood peers did not have the same advocacy and protection. She recalls,

> Some didn't even make it to the fifth grade, and I don't even know what happened,
> but I can imagine that they were completely turned off from school for no reason
> other than racial bias and the experiences that they had at the hands of some of
> those teachers at that school.

Advocacy for social justice in education became a driving force for Justina at a young age due to what she saw and experienced in school. It became clear that she wanted to become a teacher –

the kind of teacher that held protective spaces for Black students to grow. Justina describes her thinking at the time,

> Initially, it was to do a better job than the teachers that I had. But it ultimately was to advocate for students who needed advocacy. In particular, it just happened to be Black students – other Black students who were being mistreated at that school.

This mindset – forged out of the astute observations and painful experiences of a school-aged girl – led Justina further down the path to the work she is doing today.

In high school, a white teacher introduced Justina to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and introduced Black history facts into instruction. This new content caught Justina's interest, prompting her to encourage the teacher to lead a course on Black History. However, her teacher declined to do so out of concern for the optics of teaching Black history as a white man. From this, Justina was compelled to teach Black history. She held on to this goal as a teacher, using the Civil Rights movement as the foundation of the language arts classes she led. Because students were reading and writing on topics that interested them and stimulated curiosity, their performance was high.

However, Justina's motivation to use Black history as a learning tool goes beyond its function as an interesting topic. There is a liberatory element as well. Justina describes her motivation, saying,

> It starts to be like, if I can just educate myself and as many people as I encounter, then we can start healing and start growing as a country – hopefully to be able to acknowledge the wrongs and also uplift and to counter-narrative. What we've been taught is absolutely wrong. Right? You haven't been taught anything about

your culture because of the fact that either it was not [seen as] important enough to be taught, there wasn't somebody that could do it, or they wanted you to believe something about yourself that wasn't true.

The full power of narratives became clear to Justina while volunteering in the classrooms at the juvenile justice center as a college student. She encountered two Black boys, one of whom was engaged in high-level math on a computer. The other boy was busy rejecting any and all academic activity, declaring that Black people didn't want to learn. Justina wrestled with her reaction to the boy's words before making sense that his experiences and the narratives he carried shaped this view of his world. She recognized how deeply engrained this student's beliefs were. Despite being in the presence of his Black peer engaging in high-level math and seeing a Black college student before him, he still held the narrative that Black people didn't want to learn. She also recognized how the opportunities and resources she benefitted from – adult intervention, advocacy, and expectations – shaped her worldview despite the challenges of her early schooling. Justina figured that this boy's reaction was "created intentionally by a system who does not want you to know that you're capable."

Justina became a teacher after her undergraduate degree and continued her education, eventually assuming administrative and leadership roles. Her current role involves pushing the district to be a space where academic standards are held highly for all students. She and her team do this work by tying equity directly to student outcomes. In Justina's view, lowered expectations are a blight on society. Low expectations – often justified by educators by factors such as trauma and poverty – result in lower-performing students, which in turn weighs on the larger society, with Black and marginalized populations paying the highest price. Justina describes her work as "…to intervene, to get in the middle of, to try to change systems, to make people uncomfortable

in the system so that they can really think about what their obligation is to the young people in the school district." Justina used her childhood observations and experiences and her recognition of the power of the stories people tell about themselves to shape this personal mission for her work in the city where she was a student.

*Challenges*

Justina sees challenges to holding high-quality learning spaces whenever educators create or tolerate hostile environments for Black youth. Hostility of this sort can be manifest in one of two ways:

1. An adult provokes a Black student or a student of color, and that student reacts rather than backing down. The student is then punished.

2. A student provokes or bullies a Black student or a student of color, and adults do nothing in response or downplay the incident. The bullied student reacts and is punished.

Justina sees a disparity between administrative responses when a white student responds to provocation and when a non-white student does the same thing. The expectation appears to be that Black students should absorb negative interactions and be tougher than their white peers. Black students' feelings are seen as not being important enough to be honored or defended.

Justina sees the role of anybody trying to hold safe educational spaces for Black youth as interrupting the path of injustice that starts with hostility targeted at Black students and ends with disciplinary action and exclusion. She asks, "Where are the adults in the system that are being the advocates… getting in the way, and saying, 'No, you are not going to write this in their file?' There's not enough people who do that." Justina also has faced pushback from educators who questioned her interruption of events. She says, "As a Black female administrator, that's a whole other conversation in a predominantly white institution." Here Justina alludes to intersectional

power dynamics around which she has had to navigate as she held equitable space for her students.

*Strategies*

Justina's strategies for sustaining high-quality spaces for Black youth revolve around representation and safety. First, Justina calls for people of color to be present in schools, saying,

I feel like people of color need to go physically put themselves in spaces where Black children and students of color are as examples for what can be – modeling what can be – especially in areas where there's the least amount of representation.

Representation matters. Returning to the boy in juvenile detention who rejected learning, Justina wonders how his path might be different if he had been shown representations of Blackness in education spaces.

Representation also matters in decision-making bodies. So Justina volunteers for and nominates people to be involved on policy review panels, student re-entry committees, and curriculum adoption teams. Regarding this work, Justina comments, "You interfere with institutions that are perpetuating rules, policies, and regulations that do not meet the needs of all students in one way or the other." This charge means that Justina and others doing this work must reference their values and employ available tools to maintain an anti-bias lens and stance. Justina also fulfills this charge by designing and delivering professional development and opening up learning space to the community.

Creating opportunities for families and community members to bear witness to the workings of the school was something Justina started as a teacher at a middle school serving a predominately Black neighborhood. She formed the Community Academic Partnership –

families and community members working with the school – to share the work of addressing academic preparation concerns. Justina recalls,

> It was a group that I formed that was identifying how students can start preparing for graduation early… asking what are the skills they need to do and how are we gonna highlight, honor, and uplift the students who are engaging in those types of behaviors.

By bringing in the community, Justina connected the learning to students' lives outside the school building and beyond the school day. This action also made teaching and learning accountable to the community. Justina goes on to say, "You have to build authentic opportunities for students to be assessed by their peers and the community in order for it to be relevant and authentic for them." The *them* referenced here are students and the community. This is a power shift from teachers and curriculum materials to the people served. There was also an increase in accountability for adult behavior in the school. Justina recalls,

> The Community Academic Partnership program that I created brought parents and community members into the school and increased accountability. You went from nobody coming to visit the school, and teachers being able to do or say whatever they want to kids, to, "Oh. People care about these children. I better straighten my ass up." The principal loved that.

Justina credits that behavioral accountability with squashing pushback to the initiative.

Justina created other structures that encouraged student leadership and conversation between educators, parents, and the community around school issues. She carried and systematized these strategies into her educational leadership practice.

**Matin**

Matin is a twenty-eight-year veteran of the Oakland Unified School District. He is the Chief Program Officer of Kingmakers of Oakland. This organization works with school districts and communities to improve educational settings and outcomes for Black male students (Kingmakers of Oakland, n.d.). During his time with OUSD, Matin served as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, network superintendent, and director of the Manhood Development Program within the Office of African American Male Achievement.

Matin grew up in Plainfield, New Jersey, a majority Black and middle-class suburb of New York City. While Plainfield is a predominately Black city, the surrounding municipalities are not. They are, in fact, mostly white. Plainfield exists as a Black island.

Matin describes his family life and his perceptions of race as a child, saying,

I didn't come from a pro-Black family. We wasn't wearing Dashikis. We wasn't having conversations about Malcolm, Martin, and civil rights – none of them. We were Black folks in a predominantly Black community, in a predominantly Black school, with mostly Black teachers and Black staff. My dad owned a barber shop in town. You know, he was like the second mayor of the city of Plainfield, New Jersey. So, being Black is just who we were.

However, he did develop a sense that the color of his skin mattered through incidents with other children in an adjacent neighborhood. The park Matin and his friends frequented for play was only a couple of blocks from his home but over the border into the neighboring town. They would encounter white people in the park and have confrontations. Matins recalls,

We were encountering people who didn't look like us and who didn't treat us as nice as the people who did look like us. I don't know if we had the vocabulary to

describe what it was. But we knew that there was a different level of comfort that

we felt we were in these other neighborhoods.

These confrontations at the park were the beginning of Matin's racial awareness. As he grew, that understanding would deepen through some pivotal events.

In the 1970s, ABC broadcast Roots, a dramatized version of Alex Haley's book. Matin's family watched the series together. He recalls becoming deeply aware, even at a young age, of slavery and its impact on Black life. He describes the clarity that formed in him about the relationship between Black and white as mind-changing. While he lacked the language to describe what he experienced in the park, Matin's processing of Roots planted the seeds of a conceptual understanding of race as he experienced it.

Matin was, by his own account, a middling student. He was neither a star student nor was he getting into trouble. With an educator's hindsight, he describes himself as a student who could go unnoticed in schools. However, Matin does remember some Black male teachers who sought him out. Describing these teachers, Matin says,

There were definitely Black male teachers who saw me. Yeah, I knew they saw

me. They went out of the way to check me when I wasn't doing what I was

supposed to be doing, reminded me that I could do better, and even some who

said "I know your daddy. Don't make me call him." So, there was definitely some

Black male teachers in school that saw me.

Matin could see the difference in how these men in school recognized him and saw potential in him in contrast to how most of his white teachers cast him as invisible.

It was at his sister's graduation from college that Matin found himself uncomfortable being surrounded by white people for the first time. He recalls, "Something about sitting in that

space didn't feel right to me." He wasn't able to clearly describe to himself what he was feeling. But when he gained admission to the same college and took a writing assessment, the topic of his essay was *Why I Don't Like White People*. Despite the topic, he showed proficiency and was placed in a college-level writing class. As a college student, Matin took as many African American Studies classes as possible. Of this period, Matin reflects, "I fell in love with my Blackness. I fell in love with all things Black."

After completing college in New Jersey, he moved to California and worked as an operations manager for Macy's. In this role, he had the opportunity to hire young people from the business neighborhood in Richmond, a predominately Black city north of Oakland. Matin shares,

> That was my first interaction at that level with just young people. I was taken by
>
> their energy, their vibe, and their innocence – but also their openness to learning
>
> and figuring stuff out and wanting to be connected to somebody to help them
>
> make better decisions.

Matin shared that many of the young people he hired had difficulty getting their applications accepted by other employers at the mall. While there were some challenges working with his team, the experience of working with young people showed him that he enjoyed working with and developing them. When he was laid off from Macy's, Matin got his teaching credential and entered the teaching force.

One of Matin's early teaching assignments was teaching math at a middle school. He was shocked when his first two algebra sections were devoid of Black students. This observation ran counter to his observations of Oakland; he expected that there would be more Black students in his classes. Matin sought out a colleague for clarity. He recalled,

We went to his office, and I said, "My class…"

He said, "Close the door." And then he said, "This has been going on long before you got here. The white parents don't want their kids with the Black kids. They want to go to public schools with them, but they don't want them interacting and being in classes with them… Watch after lunch when you have your general math eight and general math seven. That's when you'll see your people."

Sure enough. That's where they all were. I said, "Oh, heck no, we not doing this, not while I'm here."

It wasn't just the segregation of students that Matin saw. It was the depriving of Black students' opportunity to thrive. White students were in Algebra and pre-algebra; Black students were in general math. Black students were being denied the courses that would prepare them to be ready for college by the end of twelfth grade. Angered by this discovery, Matin went about learning the systems of the school, how things worked, and who had been sustaining this practice. As a result of Matin's actions, the practice of depriving Black students of access to algebra in the eighth grade ended.

Much of Matin's later work revolved around schools in East Oakland. A message he received in his mosque was the impetus for his professional move to the area. Matin recalled,

I was teaching in North Oakland, which is considered a more affluent, nicer part of town. I was living in deep East Oakland, and the mosque I was attending, it was also in deep East Oakland. The Imam at the time talked about geographical integrity, like we should live near the mosque and work near the mosque. You know, get your teeth cleaned near the mosque. We just want to have as much geographical integrity to the masjid as possible.

This call to serve near his spiritual home resulted in Matin transferring to Castlemont High School in East Oakland as an assistant principal. When Oakland took advantage of funding to create small schools, Castlemont was broken into smaller units. Matin became the principal of one of the schools, East Oakland School of the Arts.

As a principal, Matin found difficulty reaching the Black boys in his school. His experiences as a student and an educator told him how important it was that he make these connections. So, he reached out for help. Matin describes his outreach, saying,

This is a long time ago. This is early 2000, and I'm sitting in my office. This is before social media. If folks want to communicate to a bunch of people, you'd copy them on an email… I'm writing this email, and it says, "I'm a Black man and a principal of a school in deep East Oakland, and I'm really struggling to reach my Black boys. And I know there are people out there that know how to do it. I need your help." So, I send this email out to maybe 15 people… I said, "I'm gonna have a meeting three weeks from now at Castlemont. If you want to come and help me figure this out, I'll provide some food, and we'll sit down and chop it up."

Matin's email was forwarded far and wide. In today's parlance, the message went viral. Mating received responses from educators nationwide. He got a call from the actor Delroy Lindo, an Oakland native. On the date of the meeting, over one hundred people turned out. Matins reflects on his thoughts following the meeting,

Man, this thing is possible. Like we could actually figure this out, we can change the trajectory of the education of Black boys by changing how we structure our

schools: what we do in our schools, how we treat Black boys, how we see Black

boys. That really planted a bunch of seeds.

The meeting was a springboard of ideas for reaching out to Black boys at East Oakland School

of the Arts and elsewhere. That meeting was also where he first met Chris, a future colleague in

the not-yet-formed Office of African American Achievement and Kingmakers of Oakland.

Matin went on to be the director of the Manhood Development Program within the Office

of African American Male Achievement before returning to the schoolhouse, this time as

principal of Oakland High School. He became the High School Network Superintendent before

leaving the district to take on his current role with Kingmakers of Oakland.

Matin identified three examples from his body of work where he moved to create, expand

and hold high-quality educational spaces for Black children in his care – two as Principal of

Oakland High School and one as high school superintendent. Oakland high school had an

innovative program called Career Pathways. This cohort-based program connected students'

coursework to art, business, and engineering career themes. Students in Career Pathways had an

on-time graduation rate of over eighty percent, while non-Pathways students had a rate of

approximately sixty percent. Furthermore, Matin recalls, the population of students in Career

Pathways was predominately Asian students and Latino female students, with the majority of

Latino males and Black students taking non-Pathways classes. Summarizing the situation,

Matins says, "Statistically, the students who would have been successful in school, whether we

had Pathways or not, were in the Pathways."

Matin opened Career Pathways to all students at Oakland High School. This required

work with design teams to re-create structures such as the bell schedule and use of space to

facilitate schoolwide Pathways instruction better. The design work resulted in a block schedule

that minimized class transitions and gave students and teachers more time together. Opening up Career Pathways resulted in an overall increase in the school's graduation rate, an increase in the percentage of Black girls meeting California's A-G college readiness standards, and a decrease in the dropout and exclusion rates. Matin's work around access to Career Pathways echoed his push for access to algebra as a middle school math teacher.

To make the school environment more culturally responsive to his students, Matin made intentional efforts to increase the number of Black staff members at Oakland High School. In over twenty years of interviewing teachers for employment, he recalled only a handful of Black male candidates – citing an ongoing difficulty in finding Black male teachers nationally. To work around this challenge, Matin created the job of case manager and filled the first three positions with Black men, and then hired Latino and AAPI candidates. The team of case managers reflected the school's student population. The result was that students had staff members they could go to who had a deeper understanding of their culture and contexts.

As high school network superintendent, Matin set out to develop his principals' knowledge of anti-Blackness in schooling. His theory of action was that if school leaders had knowledge of anti-Blackness and its manifestations in school, that knowledge would allow school leaders to work against it. Professional development was paired with examining policies and practices that stemmed from anti-Blackness and their replacement with culturally responsive policies and practices. Matin intentionally sought out a Black woman who was deeply knowledgeable on the content to design and deliver the professional development series to principals – citing the need to address intersectional concerns. This professional development and policy work came to life on Matin's watch and continues with district leadership.

*Resistance and Strategies*

Matin differs from other participants in this study in that he reported little pushback to his efforts at Oakland High School and as a high school superintendent. He recalled that some of the principals under his supervision were passively resistant to the work on anti-Blackness in ways evident through their behavior during sessions. But these leaders were still accountable for the work.

Matin credits the establishment of a culture of respect and mutual interest with setting the conditions of his success, although he does not take credit for it. He says,

> The beauty of it is, brother – and only Allah can create these type of situations;
> this is not my doing at all – but people respected me. People trusted me. And they
> – almost without exception… supported and was down with my efforts to increase
> the chance of Black people being successful in school. Because they wanted it
> too. And me being in that position, not only the official position because of the
> title, but the position of being unapologetically focused on Black kids, they felt
> they had permission to do the same.

That respect was, no doubt, made possible by the clarity of Matin's purpose. Educators working under him had permission to do what needed to be done on behalf of Black students. These conditions made it easier for educators to center Black students in their work because their leader also centered his work on Black students. Matin describes how he broadcasts his purpose, saying,

> I lead with that in all my work… My passion is around the education of Black
> folk. And I guarantee you if you help me fix it – these systems that failed Black

kids – all of our kids will benefit, and your jobs will be a lot more effective and

easier.

Matin's messaging was an invitation into his work rather than a push away from it. The

messaging carried over into how he hired, allocated resources, and developed his teams. At

Oakland High School, those who weren't aligned with Matin's clearly broadcast purpose left for

other schools.

Matin leans heavily on his faith to sustain himself. He follows Islam and adheres to the

practice of praying five times per day.

I pray every day. I take my faith seriously. I pray five times a day. I look forward

to getting on the floor, getting on my mat, asking Allah for the strength and the

guidance to get me, my family, my school community through hard times, to give

us success, to take away the trials that make it difficult for our family and our

community to be successful. Like, this is just part of who I am, and I think it

grounds me and settles me.

Matin's faith practice keeps him in a posture of gratitude. He acknowledges that he is lucky or

blessed and prefers being thankful over being expectant or feeling deserving.

Matin's faith leads to a calm demeanor, even in challenging times. He describes his

calmness as a gift, saying,

I one hundred percent gotta give it up to God for giving me – I don't know if it's a

personality or a tolerance level – a lot of stuff don't bother me. Like I stay calm

under stressful situations.

Matin acknowledges that he does have emotions. However, he deeply understands his work and

finds that getting emotional doesn't help him when he must lead. Recalling interactions with

emotional staff members, students, and families, Matin says that his demeanor has a calming impact on those around him.

Authenticity is perhaps Matin's overarching strategy. Referring to Dunbar (1896), Matin asks, "I'm a 56-year-old Black man; what I need to wear a mask for?" He is true to who he is and uses his agency to choose where he wants to be – opting for settings where he can be his whole, authentic self.

**Tabari**

Tabari is a retired principal of a high school in New York City that served a predominately Black population in a historic Black neighborhood. He describes himself as a person of African descent. He served as an educator for thirty-five years, with twenty-seven of those in an alternative high school setting. The school from which he retired, Nelson Mandela School for Social Justice, was one he had a hand in designing and led from its opening until his retirement eight years later.

Tabari's experience as a student was not pleasant. He graduated near the bottom of his class at the predominately white high school he attended. On his path to graduation, he endured several suspensions, overt low expectations, and being beaten by male teachers. By second grade, Tabari's recalled, "I remember them telling my mother that there was something psychologically wrong with me… that I would never read on grade level," before being placed in special education, where he found other Black male students.

Despite the negative experience of school, Tabari found affirmation from his father, cultural experiences, his conversion to Islam, mentoring, and joining an African culture-centered fraternity in college. Tabari credits his father with inspiring his love of reading. He said, "My South Carolinian father took out the old-fashioned reading program. The program was, 'I'm-a

whip your ass every time I see you without a book.'" By the time Tabari was in the seventh grade, he was reading above the twelfth-grade level.

Tabari's awareness of being African in America was significantly shaped by 1970s Black culture. He cites the Black is Beautiful movement, Black music, books, Black entertainment such as movies and comedy, and cultural symbolism that affirmed Blackness with helping him see where he was in the larger society. Among the elders in his community were Black Panthers and others who had been instrumental in the struggles for Black liberation. Furthermore, Tabari's mother, through her connections with icons such as Whitney Young and Vernon Jordan, exposed him to the Black thinkers of the day. Tabari summarized his early influences: "Those things made me understand that I was African in America or Black in America, and that America hated us." This marked the initial opening of his critical eye toward racial dynamics in America.

In eleventh grade, Tabari converted to Islam, influenced by *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. This identity-forming experience helped alleviate some of the pressures placed on him by being in a school environment that was hostile towards him. When he graduated the following year, Tabari "walked away understanding how racist the school system was, how you can go through a school system from five and get out at seventeen and learn nothing about yourself." His conversion and further clarity of vision left him with a love of learning but a hatred of schooling.

Tabari has benefitted from what he calls "intentional mentorship," an ongoing relationship with an elder for over 41 years. His mentor has consistently developed Tabari through conversation and by passing books to him to push his thinking. This mentoring led to Tabari joining an African-based fraternity in college. The MALIK fraternity that Tabari joined describes its purpose thus:

"MALIK Fraternity, Incorporated was founded on May 13th, 1977, out of the

minds and hearts of 15 young men attending the C.W. Post campus of Long

Island University in the milieu of the Civil Rights Era. The very nature of the

sociopolitical landscape at the time demanded the birth of MALIK and dictated

what this new organization would be about. Cultural pride in Africa, the cradle of

humanity, formed the backdrop of the consciousness that the organization would

uphold as it strove to develop community servants to restore agency to

underserved Black and Latino communities. After all these years, the brotherhood

continues to expand its ranks with community-minded and professionally driven

individuals with a strong commitment to social responsibility." (*THE MALIK*

*MAN | MALIK Fraternity, Inc.*, n.d.)

Being in a community with others his age seeking and developing their own African identities

made Tabari more intentional about his path.

Tabari's journey into teaching began while he was still an undergraduate student. He was

asked by a professor to cover a summer social science class. "Something changed in me," he

reported. After teaching a lesson on norms, mores, and taboos, he changed his major from

political science and economics to history and secondary education. His choice to become a

teacher was sealed when the professor of his first education class gave him Freire's *Pedagogy of

the Oppressed*. The arc that started with his conversion to Islam and the recognition that he loved

learning was further developed in his journey into the craft of teaching.

After completing his degree and serving as a substitute, Tabari became a teacher at

Bushwick Community Outreach Center. This alternative school served students at risk of not

graduating from high school. He worked here during the late 1980s amid the crack epidemic and

neighborhood gang wars. His tenure at Bushwick saw turmoil with leadership and the re-creation of the program as a diploma-granting school. While at Bushwick, Tabari served as a social studies teacher, college advisor, dean, and curriculum writer.

Tabari joined a school design fellowship tasked with creating a high school model to address college and career-readiness outcome disparities impacting Black and Latino boys in New York City. The school model was then used to open three schools; one was the Nelson Mandela School for Social Justice, which Tabari led as the founding principal. He led Mandela for eight years until his retirement.

### *Challenges*

Tabari and I were colleagues in the design fellowship that led to the opening of our respective schools. The design environment was removed from the frantic drive for production endemic in the NYC school system. Instead, we were in a physical and intellectual space that encouraged creativity. That creative space was also brought into the communities we sought to serve. However, when the grant-funded design phase yielded to implementation within the established system, much of the work that called for any deviation from the status quo was ground out of the finished product. Tabari describes the experience:

> We were able to engage in a type of intellectual discussion and research that I
> don't believe educators get a chance to really do… I mean, this is important
> because I think it suggests that even when you try to create these oases of real
> serious laboratory education, the system will squat down on you and tell you
> exactly what you can and cannot do

The message sent was that as long as someone else is paying for it, you can be creative. When the system is paying for it, do only as the system says. Creativity in designing how students learn is a luxury that will not be afforded.

Mandela and its two sister schools were designed with an original agreement that the team would open four district high schools and four charter schools in neighborhoods identified by the team. Design work happened in the neighborhoods with community members at the table. Co-leadership was a core feature of the model. However, because of political uncertainties and power dynamics, many of the key components were eroded or outright removed. The placement of schools was disregarded, and the number of schools was slashed. Co-leadership was never fully actualized. Tabari attributes the departure of his leadership partner, a fully qualified administrator and colleague on the design team, to these broken promises, especially the promise of co-leadership. Impacted by positional and salary disparities that could not be ameliorated at the school level, she left to lead another school after one year.

The school model called for the inclusion of cultural language and traditions that reflected the students we were serving. For example, each day started with libations at a whole-school community circle. These cultural elements were included intentionally to link children of African descent with African traditions. However, without ongoing vigilance, these traditions got watered down. In one of our schools, libations and community circles became the morning meeting. The pouring of water into a plant or onto the earth yielded to miscellaneous team-building activities. Similar things happened to the language used in the schools. *Harambe* and *Ubuntu* were eventually replaced by pulling together and belonging. Tabari, referring to this dilution, said, "This is what white people do to feel comfortable with African universalism."

English interpretations that fall short of the full meaning get selected in the interest of white comfort.

*Strategies*

Tabari takes a pragmatic view of his work as a liberatory educator in a system that is committed to the status quo. He acknowledges a sort of impossibility of the task he has undertaken, stating:

> The students of color recognize that on some level that [liberatory education] is impossible. Because everything that we build, we build on the plantation. And as long as it's built on the plantation, all at the behest or permission of the master, we're already taking it down a notch from what we want it to be.

This level-setting sounds pessimistic but may help inform an agentic engagement in revolutionary acts. Tabari goes on to say, "We're on the plantation, but we're breaking the rules." So, while there is an acceptance of his place in an oppressive system, Tabari has chosen to hold that space with a stance of resistance.

His resistance goes further to define the intended outcome of liberatory education. When describing his vision of success, he describes equipping students with a toolset that will dismantle systems of oppression. Tabari said:

> If you realize that you're designing it on the plantation, you don't do that from fear. You do that from revolution. And so what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna find a way to teach kids to burn the fucking plantation to the ground. And if that's not what we're talking about, if we're not leaning into that… then we're not giving them a high-valued education.

Tabari calls on Lorde (2018) and Woodson (1933/2017) here to encourage the subversive demolition of oppressive learning conditions while those conditions surround him and his students, thereby clearing the way for creating more high-quality learning environments.

Tabari points to intentionality as another strategy he employed as an educator holding spaces for his students. Intentionality shows up in his hiring practices. Intentional hiring was a skill set he developed at Bushwick and carried to Mandela. His staff at Mandela was ninety percent people of color. He achieved this by being clear about the mission and vision of the school, hiring former students from Bushwick, and hiring from the community in teaching and non-teaching roles. Tabari is intentional about how he navigates systemic constraints that he does not have the power to move. Students in New York State must pass the Regents exams in core subjects to graduate high school. Some of these assessments qualify students for advanced placement in college. Rather than making the test the focus of instruction, Tabari recognizes that the Regents exams are there, acknowledges that they have to be addressed because there is a tangible barrier and some benefit that they possess, and returns the focus on liberatory teaching and learning.

Love has been a hallmark of Tabari's practice at Bushwick and Mandela. When he greets students, he says, "I love you on purpose," to remove any ambiguity and to emphasize the intentionality of his actions on behalf of his students. Love is also invoked in Tabari's discourse about knowing when to step down. On retirement, he says, "We owe it to our young people to retire. We have to make sure that the next generation doesn't come up to believe that in order to be committed, you have to die at your desk."

Tabari relies heavily on his faith. He is a practicing Muslim and holds his belief at the center of his being. Over his several decades as an educator, he has faced several challenges that

stood to jeopardize his continued ability to do his work. By leaning on his faith, He could continue fulfilling his mission. "But here's what they didn't understand: I believe in a higher power that not only protects me but doesn't put me in places that he doesn't want me to be. So my steps are ordered." A declaration such as this, fueled by a faith that his purpose is greater than the people or system for which he works, creates the space necessary to act with integrity.

**Xavier**

Xavier is a charter school superintendent in the greater New York City metropolitan area. An African American Male, he credits his grandmother with instilling the value of education in him during his early childhood in Louisiana. Xavier had Black educators in his early years. He recalls that teachers were revered, in large part because they were members of the community. His Sunday school teachers were teachers at school. Literacy was a large part of the crossover from school into the church. Xavier shared, "Sunday school was one of the places I learned to read. But then again, my Sunday school teacher was a certified special education teacher." This connection between schooling and the community likely tied learning to student life, making what was studied during the school day relevant the rest of the time.

Xavier lived in Louisiana until his tenth-grade year when he went to live with his mother in New York. Because the curriculum in Louisiana mimicked what was used in Texas, Xavier did not have in-school exposure to African American History until he moved north. He completed high school in New York and went to college on a basketball scholarship. However, he withdrew from the basketball program because of an over-emphasis on athletics and an under-emphasis on academics. He transferred to another university and completed his undergraduate degree there.

After college, Xavier became a substitute teacher in a well-resourced school serving a predominately white population. This experience raised a question about what could be done in schools for Black students who may not have abundant resources but still have the potential to excel. With this question in mind, he responded to a recruiting email from a historically Black university in the mid-Atlantic advertising a free master's degree program for people entering the teaching profession. When Xavier went to find a teaching position in nearby Baltimore, Maryland, a majority Black city, he recalled being identified as someone who would be able to handle the students, in contrast to molding or teaching the students. Xavier went on to teach government, a course not desired by many of the teachers because it was in a tested area – there was a state assessment at the end of the class that could be used to track teacher effectiveness. He taught the course, and his results showed that students grew under him.

Xavier stepped into school leadership first as a dean of students at a charter school back in New York, then as a principal at another school. However, he found himself misaligned with the school's zero-tolerance discipline policy. He recalled:

> "Zero tolerance didn't align with my beliefs as a Black male school leader…
> There was a lot that was happening that I just wasn't okay with. You know, a lot
> of the thinking, I felt, was geared towards white supremacy, and that wasn't
> something that I would be able to hold and be able to embrace without hostility.
> So, in order for me to keep my peace in terms of being a whole human, I decided
> that wasn't what I wanted to do."

Xavier found a leadership role in a school that didn't require him to trade his conscience for professional effectiveness. He's been leading there for the past eleven years and credits stability in school leadership with the school's success.

Xavier identified two areas where he holds a high-quality environment for students. The first is in his role as a scholar-practitioner. Xavier is a doctoral student studying parent engagement in urban charter schools through the lens of Black male school leaders. His research has allowed him to unpack what it means to be a Black scholar and to explore the limited research on Black genius. He has a particular interest in Black education pre-Brown v. Board of Education and the challenges created for Black people seeking educational equity by the Brown decision.

The second high-quality area is in his role as a school leader. Xavier expands the idea of leadership as knowing how greatness looked historically and guiding the school toward that mark. He does this work by pushing the thinking of his staff and students from the stance of a social studies teacher. On the challenges of defining a high-quality setting in his school, he says:

> "I think that one of the things that limits us in terms of how we view greatness is because we feel like it's taboo to talk about it. It's taboo to talk about what a really good education looks like for Black kids. And that's mainly because, you know, the system is built to uphold white supremacy for the most part. And so anything that happens – in order for us to break down those barriers – it's often looked at as adversarial."

Xavier holds space for discourse in both the scholarly and leadership realms but does not hold them in isolation. Conversations about what greatness at his school looks like inform his research, and vice versa.

*Challenges*

The challenges Xavier identified to maintaining a high-quality learning environment included resources allocated to charter schools, enhanced accountability to metrics, and finding

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staff members that culturally represent the children in his school. Charter school funds pass through the local school district, which takes twenty percent off the top for administrative costs. This leaves the charter school with four-fifths of the per-pupil allocation to serve each child. To maintain their authorization to operate, charter schools must periodically justify their existence to a state body, showing that they outperform comparable public schools. According to Xavier's number, Black male teachers make up two percent of the teaching force, and Black teachers, in general, represent eight to nine percent. Like many leaders of schools serving Black students, he struggles to recruit staff members that look like the children. Xavier attributes many of these challenges to systemic racism and the intentional ways schools were designed. This connection will be further explored in the next chapter.

**Strategies**

Like other participants in this study, Xavier was prompted to take steps to sustain himself due to health concerns and mitigate stress. He is intentional about self-care – incorporating physical activity into his workday, committing time and space to exercise at home, and using technology to keep him on track. Referring to his use of technology, he says, "The exercise ring [on the Apple watch] is a meter of love for yourself." Beyond maintenance, Xavier uses exercise to keep a clear mind in the face of challenges. The need for physical self-care became evident when, in the face of a period of high work stress, he was diagnosed as a person with diabetes. On those events and his body's response to stress, Xavier says, "When you got folks that are coming after your career and coming after your neck and trying to destroy your life and destroy your livelihood, the first thing that goes is your health."

To manage his exposure to stress and limit its ability to harm him, Xavier takes time to be reflective on the events impacting him. This reflective practice has given him space to decide if the stress facing him is worth his health. He shares,

> If something gets stressful or something becomes out of control, I'm able to walk away from it and not feel any kind of guilt because, at the end of the day, if something happens to me, I'm going to get replaced the next day or shortly thereafter… if something happens to me with regard to my family. I can't be replaced.

The space Xavier creates by assessing the stressors and deciding whether to engage – picking his battles – allows him to see his priorities clearly.

Xavier's self-care practices translate to his work. His work on maintaining his own health and peace allows him to show empathy for others in his organization who might need to care for themselves. He encourages others to do what they must, including taking days off to remain energized for the work. Xavier also communicates with staff members when he sees signs of burnout. His aim in making care for oneself transparent is to increase honest communication about human capacity and to minimize the fear of appearing weak when one's humanity simply needs to be maintained.

**Yusuf**

Yusuf is a high school principal in Atlanta, Georgia. He spent his childhood and most of his professional life in New York City. Yusuf grew up in the historically Black neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. Raised in the Islamic faith, Yusuf spoke Arabic as his first language. He entered public school at P.S. 137 in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

P.S. 137 was at the center of a struggle in the 1960s between the residents of the Ocean Hill – Brownsville neighborhood, the teachers' union, and the NYC Department of Education over community control of the schools in the area. The contentious struggle resulted in the longest teacher strike in the nation's history and the carving out of a new school district (Griffith & Freedman, 2019; Perrillo, 2016). At P.S. 137, Yusuf found a school that still carried the legacy of the Black people who fought for it. He recalls,

> The school had a Black male principal and I had Black teachers… Even as early as second grade, we would watch *Eyes on the Prize*. We would sing the Black National Anthem. So, you know, I didn't know of anything different in elementary school because the norm was Blackness.

In school, Yusuf was engaged in conversations about his place as a Black male in America, community expectations for how he should carry himself, and direction toward leading a purpose-driven life. Yusuf recalls that when his father passed away during his fifth-grade year, the school's principal and Black male teachers cared for him. He knew at that point that he wanted to be an educator.

Yusuf completed his K-12 education and enrolled at the State University of New York at Cortland, where he majored in secondary education and African American studies. He arrived on campus with questions about the things he had seen in his earlier years. Yusuf says,

> For me, I wanted to understand why my friends were going to jail or I was losing friends as a teenager. I didn't understand, at a macro level, systems and politics and history… I was always very curious, and I found a lot of answers that helped me learn a lot about the world by challenging preconceived notions of race and systems.

Yusuf understood at a young age that his affirming educational experiences weren't common among his peers. He saw that he and his peers had different trajectories. His choice of majors reflected both his pivotal school experiences and the questions nagging at him.

After completing college, and with the assistance of his elementary school principal, Yusuf found a teaching position back in Brooklyn at the Benjamin Banneker Academy. Banneker was a school grounded in African culture, founded by educators with ties back to the Ocean-Hill Brownsville struggle. The school had what Yusuf describes as an "unapologetic Black principal," African cultural elements woven through the school, and ran a trip to Africa every year. Yusuf taught at Banneker for eight years before stepping away to earn his administrative credential. He then returned to Banneker to assume the principalship of the school.

When asked to describe an environment that met the definition of a high-quality learning environment for Black children, Yusuf talks about Banneker. He says,

> Definitely, Banneker. You know, definitely that school. It was community centered. The adults took responsibility for the kids. It was supportive. It was communal… I remember I had Fred Hampton Day in my school. It was encouraged… his birthday was in December, and I would make sure that we celebrated right, make sure the students knew. We were allowed to be free as teachers to explore Blackness, to push our students… You didn't feel constricted. It was a liberating environment.

Banneker's students came in with expectations of excellence and had those expectations affirmed at school. Yusuf credits those expectations with allowing teachers a certain level of freedom in

their practice. Teachers had a curriculum to use, but there was room within it to include culturally relevant materials.

> I taught U.S. history from a Black perspective. We used literature and documents that were primary sources. We didn't just use a textbook, but we used the words and the writings and the articles. We looked from the bottom up to learn history as opposed to the top down. We were given freedom to do that.

Much of this freedom changed with the arrival of Race to the Top. Yusuf recalls that structures intended to increase accountability muddled the relationship between principals and teachers and changed the level of liberty teachers had to enhance the curriculum.

Yusuf would eventually leave Banneker to assume the principalship of City Polytechnic High School. City Poly was a culturally different experience from the relatively nurturing community of Banneker. Banneker had a legacy of serving Black students well. The tradition out of which it was born still carried weight inside and outside the school. Banneker enjoyed the support of influential members of the community. There was little pushback to maintaining a culture that uplifted Black students. In contrast, City Poly was in the midst of a battle between white staff and Black students and families.

Yusuf took over a school that had been led by a white principal who hired an almost entirely white staff to work with a predominately Black student population. The students were not faring well in this environment. Black students were being suspended for minor offenses before his arrival. Yusuf's first significant impact on the school was to cut suspensions by eighty percent in his first year. He describes his stance on the suspensions, saying, "I was just unapologetic about not suspending Black kids for looking at teachers crazy, according to how they perceive us."

Pushback to the change in exclusionary practices came from teachers, primarily white males. Yusuf describes,

Oh, it was tough. We had some big white guys – I mean, I'm being very frank – big white guys who were P.E. teachers, who were deans, and we had to go to battle. We had to go to battle. I had to push them. I had to let them see the broader picture. Their struggle was that they could not connect and relate to the Black boys. Why are the Black boys talking to them this way but have all this respect for me, right? Why, when I give a directive, they follow, but when they say it, they don't? What are the cultural norms? You know? What is the communication style? How do you connect with the student?

Yusuf's interactions with his staff indicate differing cultural views on authority and communication. Black students didn't respond to intimidation, at least not in anticipated ways. Yusuf found that teachers who took a top-down approach struggled. Teachers who listened to the students, tried to understand them, and communicated respectfully with them made sense of the change.

Yusuf found challenges, not only in how white staff members interacted with the students but in how they interacted with him as well. He recalls an incident with the school's union leader, saying,

We're eating. We were having a staff luncheon or something. I'm eating with the staff. He just comes in front of me and says, "I want to meet right now!" And I have a piece of chicken in my mouth. I looked at him like, "Who do you think you're talking to?" Like, one: if we're eating, we're eating. You know what I'm saying? We don't do that in our community. You don't interrupt somebody while

they eating. You don't make demands to somebody. Furthermore, I'm a principal,

right? So even though I'm only thirty-five, thirty-six, I look young – you know,

there is just a certain respect that principals have.

Yusuf's arrival and subsequent actions shook foundational understandings at City Poly. By challenging disrespect, setting boundaries, and insisting that adults do the work of learning how to build relationships with students, he shifted the school from a white space as defined by the makeup of staff to a Black space as defined by the makeup of the students.

Yousuf hired cultural responsiveness consultants to work with teachers and push their practices. Some staff struggled to adapt to the new cultural expectations, and within two years, many teachers left. In turn, Yusuf hired new teachers and brought over former colleagues from Banneker to execute a new, healthier vision for the school. Within three years, the culture of the school had turned around.

### *Restoration and Sustaining*

Yusuf cared for a seriously ill wife and raised four daughters while in the principalship. As his wife's illness progressed, he dealt with his pain and trauma by remaining busy. He took care of everybody but neglected himself. The stresses of the principalship just added more to the pile. As a result, he found himself overweight, stressed, and unhealthy.

Self-care is a new thing for Yusuf, something he has only started to embrace within the last year. Burying his wife was the tipping point in his decision to care for himself. Yusuf is motivated by his late wife's counsel and the desire to be a father to his daughters. He says,

I've learned how to take care of myself, you know. So really, part of that is to

allow myself grace. I'm not Superman. You know, when you're raised to be the

one, the teacher, the school leader, the model husband, there's a lot of pressure. So

it's letting go of that pressure to be perfect.

Yusuf has begun his healing journey by letting go of self-imposed or cultural pressures and taking time to relax with loved ones. He is transparent with others about what he's going through. This practice fosters empathy for others who are experiencing loss. He finds self-care in forgiveness – both towards himself and others. He rejects the idea of running until he is empty. Yusuf says, "Sometimes, being Black and growing up in Blackness, you are kind of trained to be a martyr. And I'm like, no! I made a decision to not do that, man." Yusuf gives himself permission to be well.

While he draws inspiration for his work from the ancestors who fought and struggled, Yusuf has acquired wisdom about balancing his career and life. He says, "The pandemic has taught me that I have permission to live a life of joy…. and it's okay. I could save the world, but I don't have to sacrifice my life to do that." Yusuf feels deserving of peace. He finds safety when he is with his four daughters. This is when he is able to be himself, can experience unfettered joy, and is with people who love him unconditionally.

**Subjecting Myself to the Interview**

As part of my data collection, I subjected myself to the interview protocol. This self-interview was completed before interviewing any research participants. I returned to my responses for data analysis.

1. How do you define Black? Who taught you about Black folk?

My early childhood had me surrounded by Black people. East Orange, New Jersey in the 1970s was a good time and place to be a Black kid. This is to say that there were no explicit lessons about Blackness that I recall from my earliest days. There were Black people all around.

My elementary school principal and a couple of my teachers were Black. The cop on the corner on my way to school was Black. His daughter and I were in the same grade; I remember having a crush on her in the 4th grade. Local shopkeepers were Black. White people stood out, and the ones around felt all right. Teachers, our pastor, the owners of the local pizzeria and candy store, and the few coworkers with whom my mother was friendly – they all seemed okay.

There were a lot of cultural messages, though. "Black is beautiful" was still a thing. Although I wasn't reading the articles yet, Jet and Ebony magazines were all around with their images of Black excellence. The barbershop on Saturdays always had Black programming on. Although we didn't watch a lot of television at home, we did watch Roots when it was broadcast. I was only four years old, but I remember listening to the older folk talking about it. The deeper messages of it didn't become clear until later in life.

I knew that Black described my brown skin. I knew, because of discussions about my African father and the place he came from, that Black people came from Africa. I knew that white was the description of paler-skinned people. I remember questioning why Adam Clayton Powel was Black. While watching the Miss Universe Pageant, I remember asking why Miss South Africa was white.

My mother always used to tell me, "You have to be twice as good to be seen as equal," in reference to our relationship with whiteness. This started in the 1980s, when I was in elementary school, and continued through my first attempt at college in the early 1990s. She admonished me before we went out in public, on the way to school, when I started working, and – perhaps most critically – while we watched the news together.

My mother made my sister and me watch the news with her as children. I could've told you about the Iran hostage crisis while it was going on. I was six at the time. Perhaps my

childhood was not normal. But it was while we were watching the news that my mother formed in me a critical eye for the events of the day. She prompted questions. Who was in trouble for what? Who held power? How were people who looked like us described in public discourse? What was going on in places where Black people lived?

I should say something more about my mother. Madge Clunis was a proud Jamaican woman who gracefully took no mess and did not suffer fools gladly. She was a registered nurse who, as a subject of the British crown, traveled to England and Scotland for her training before Jamaican independence. She had my older sister unmarried at age 36 in the late sixties and was unapologetic about it. By the time I was born, she had purchased the home we lived in. While aware of the challenges around her, she did her thing nonetheless. I was born when she was 40, so her maturity influenced how she shaped her children's worldviews.

Being Jamaican in the United States is a complex thing. While there are many similarities between the experiences and expressions of Black Caribbean immigrants and Black Americans, there are also differences and tensions. My mother chose to reject the air of superiority that Jamaicans often hold on to, justifying that rejection with the understanding that her children were Black and in America. "No one is going to ask you about rice and peas before they judge you," she would say. She taught us that we should be both proud of our lineage and aware of where we are right now. So when she did explicitly show us about ourselves, she intertwined stories of Jamaican icons like Bob Marley, Marcus Garvey, Nannie of the Maroons, and Harry Belafonte with those of Martin Luther King, Arthur Ashe, Muhammad Ali (even though she hated boxing), and Jesse Jackson.

It was middle school when I began to really see Blackness in contrast to everything else. My school was a boys' choir school in the heart of Newark. We were 50 young Black men from

Newark, East Orange, and Irvington learning to sing classical, jazz, and a sterilized form of gospel music. We performed in front of audiences that looked like us and many that didn't – making sense of the different reactions to what we were doing. During the day, we attended classes in our building in Downtown Newark – an area that still bore the scars of the riots nearly 20 years earlier. So every time we got on that bus and traveled to some affluent, suburban concert venue, the contrast prompted conversation. Whenever some white concert attendees commented on how well we performed that piece from Bach or Bartok, we wondered why they seemed so shocked. I think we became aware of the expectations that white people held for us through those experiences.

By the time I got to high school and started interacting with more non-Black peers, I became aware of Blackness through contrast. There was an ever-present tension between seeing differences and relative value, trust and distrust, and expectations and reactions to living up or down to them.

2. How many Black teachers did you have in school? Where did you see yourself within school and in the curriculum?

I was blessed. I can count nine Black teachers from kindergarten through the end of high school. Three of them were physical education teachers.

Mr. Hamilton was my elementary school principal. He was a proud man who I never saw in anything less than a suit and tie. I remember him coming to talk to our first-grade class about excellence. To hear him tell it, we were the hardest working, smartest, and most beautiful children in the state. Mr. Hamilton held us all to high expectations, and he made sure that we knew it. His school was a safe place.

Mrs. Martin was my elementary school music teacher. I don't know what the music curriculum was supposed to have for us, but in Mrs. Martin's class, we got to know Lena Horne, Eubie Blake, Stevie Wonder, Dizzy Gillespie, and an emerging Wynton Marsalis. It was equal parts music theory and Black music.

Mr. Smith, my 8th grade English and social studies teacher, was another one with his own curriculum. We read *Manchild in the Promised Land*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, excerpts from James Baldwin and Richard Wright, and works from Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. When we discussed our reading, we did it from the lens of young Black men in Newark, with all of its racialized history.

Mr. Hoff was my tenth-grade humanities teacher. He had all the confidence of a former Olympic fencer, which he was. There weren't too many Black fencers then, not to mention elite ones. I think the thing I took from him was how to exude confidence in white spaces.

Mrs. Green was my eleventh and twelfth-grade humanities teacher. She was a veteran educator and possibly the only Black woman at Montclair High School. Mrs. Green taught us the so-called classics, but in a way that was authentic to who she was. I can't exactly say what it was that she did or how she did it, but if you closed your eyes and just listened to her teach, you knew that someone's grandma from my side of town was talking about whatever Greek tragedy was on deck at the moment.

Mr. Johnson wasn't a schoolteacher, but he was my first employer. He was a big, bald, beautifully arrogant Black man who held court wherever he happened to be. At 14, I worked in the office of the Urban League of Essex County. Most of my job was to make copies and distribute materials to businesses in the area. But one of my most important duties was to get two copies of the Newark Star-Ledger or the New York Times – one for him and one for me – and to

be prepared to discuss the news of the day at our 4:30 meeting. It wasn't until I became a teacher nineteen years later that I realized what he was doing.

3. How and where was your Blackness affirmed?

My Blackness was affirmed in my childhood community. Even without explicit instruction, we were the norm. As long as you didn't spend too much time watching television, WE were all around us. We played our music on WBLS or KISS-FM. The barbershop and the hair salons were us. In my early childhood, Black people were who I saw all around me. The teachers I noted before all held spaces that affirmed my Blackness for reasons I've already described.

It might be easier to talk about where my existence as a Black student was not affirmed. I transferred from Saint Benedict's Prep in Newark to Montclair High School in eleventh grade. Saint Benedicts is operated by the Benedictine monks of the Newark Abbey, many of whom were alums of the school themselves. Benedictines take a vow of stability. This means that they stay and serve where they are placed. In Newark, that vow took on a new significance in the aftermath of the 1967 riots. Some of the monks made a conscious choice to stay in a still-smoldering Newark, while many of their brothers chose to follow white flight out of the city to start another monastery in the suburbs. Those who stayed reaffirmed their commitment to educating the sons of the city, even as those sons showed up with darker skin. By the time I arrived at Saint Benedict's, the teaching force included monks who were students at the time of the riots.

A Benedict's education was high-quality in that student leadership was a driving metric. The students were encouraged to run the school with the guidance of the adults. Rites of passage such as the Freshman Overnight and the Appalachian Trail built confidence and cohesion.

Instruction was culturally responsive before that was cool. Saint Benedicts was an affirming space, but it was an affirming space with a tuition bill. Family finances didn't have room for that anymore. So, we moved to a smaller apartment in a more affluent town so that I could attend high school there.

Montclair was a politically liberal and culturally diverse town. But beneath the story were the realities of classism and subtle racism alongside it. At Montclair High School, this played out in the classes and activities students had access to. If you were poor and Black like me, the expectation was a non-college prep, general studies track and a sport. When my guidance counselor, who was also the head football coach, met me, the conversation was more about football than which classes I should take. As soon as I told him that I wasn't interested in the sport, he lost all interest in me. My courses included a remedial reading class, stories in film, and general math. It was only after my mother lost her composure and chewed my guidance counselor out as only a Jamaican could, that my classes changed to humanities, algebra two, and honors French. But low expectations abounded at Montclair. Despite having been a strong student through tenth grade, I barely graduated high school on time. I didn't apply to college until the following year; there were no college conversations with my guidance counselor either.

4. What was your path to education? What has been your professional path since becoming an educator?

I became a teacher later in life than most people. After completing my undergraduate degree at age 32, I struggled with applications to PH.D. programs. It was the statement of purpose that tripped me up. "What impact do you want to make through graduate studies?" "What experience inspired your decision to pursue graduate studies?" I didn't have a clear answer to these types of questions. The reality was that I had finally found my academic groove

and didn't want to stop being a student. This probably would not have been adequate for admission.

During that time, I responded to an advertisement for the New York City Teaching Fellows, an alternate route program into the teaching profession that placed college graduates in high-need schools. I was working as an emergency medical technician in Newark at the time. Early one morning, after a 2:00 pm to 2:00 am shift, I went to work on the application. This application's statement of purpose asked why I would want to serve in a high-need public school. The answer to that question flowed out of me like a river.

My response was inspired by observations I made while working in Newark. I had begun to connect the poor life outcomes of many of the people I treated on the streets with the quality of their schooling. When I thought about the people living with bodies aged beyond their years or the victims of violent crimes, I wasn't looking at college graduates. Usually, I was looking at people served by Newark's lowest-performing high schools, living in the city's poorest neighborhoods. While far from a scientific analysis, I concluded that the quality of education a person receives is a matter of life and death.

I was accepted into the program and assigned to Brownsville, Brooklyn, where I became a special education teacher. The Brownsville section has the highest concentration of public housing in the nation. It was, at the time, known for crime and poverty. During the heyday of NYC's stop-and-frisk, I would see students subjected to pat-downs by police on the way to and from school regularly. But our school aimed to be an oasis from the ills outside. Frederick Douglass Academy VII was a college preparatory high school for the children of Brownsville. The founding principal, Tameka Matheson, was unapologetic about the school's mission. She

was a child of Brownsville herself, so her investment was personal. During my time there, we sent over eighty percent of our students to two and four-year colleges.

Working in Brownsville clarified something that I was carrying from my own schooling: expectations matter. Where expectations were high, students lived up to them. Where expectations were low, students fell. This belief carried me into the next chapter of my educator's journey.

Things move fast in New York City. It was at the end of my first year as a teacher when my mentor discussed school leadership with me. I was in a national leadership program at the end of my third year as a teacher. In retrospect, that was too soon. But everything works out in its own time. Through this program, we ended up in Oakland, CA, where I worked as an assistant principal. I was in Oakland at the start of the district's African American Male Achievement Initiative and hosted one of the program's manhood development cohorts in our middle school.

Oakland was also where I first saw how the affluent, if not interrupted, will drain resources from those with fewer resources. Our school served a cross-section of the city, from abject poverty in the flatlands to opulent wealth in the hills. We qualified for federal Title I funds by meeting a determined threshold of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches. My learning about the need to stand in the way of injustice came at a PTA meeting when I had to explain why there was no way in hell that we were going to use those Title I funds to purchase violins for the school orchestra.

I had an opportunity to return to my old school in New York City to administer a large grant that funded efforts to address disparities in the college and career readiness outcomes impacting Black and Latino boys. That work morphed into a school design fellowship tasked with creating a high school model with the same mission. A team of ten of us created our model

and successfully opened three schools with it. I was selected to be the principal of one of those schools. Two years later, exhausted, burnt out, and in poor health, I left my principalship, and our family left New York City.

It took a year and a half before I returned to the schoolhouse. I worked for a non-profit helping rich people throw money at problems as they defined them. That work did not agree with me; that incongruence was a driving force in remembering why I had become a teacher. I returned to education, once again as a teacher – but this time as a teacher armed with a clear view of how systems operate, how the status quo hurts Black children, and with a renewed passion to disrupt inequity in education.

5. Tell me about the place(s) where your practice has served Black children according to the definition of a high-quality educational environment. What made this place or program a high-quality educational environment?

The school design work I was a part of, and the schools we opened were examples of high-quality learning environments. We started with the mission of building something that would address educational outcome disparities affecting Black and Latino children. The research we did included identifying and studying elements of education – in contrast to schooling – that engaged students and built critical thinking. These elements were opportunities for leadership, rites of passage, robust social-emotional learning, unapologetic cultural practices in the schools, and connecting learning to the students' lives.

Our schools weren't exempt from any of the requirements of other city schools. Students still earned credits toward graduation through course completion. They still had to pass the required NYS Regents examinations to prove proficiency. Our teaching force was represented by

the same union as other teachers. Two of the three schools were co-located with other schools in the same building. We aligned the available time and space to bring the model to life.

6. What are the challenges you faced in creating/sustaining the program? How did you make sense of these challenges? How did you work around these challenges?

We chose to do something different in our schools, and when you do something different, there will be pushback. There was resistance to what we were trying to create during the design and authorization phases. New York City's Office of New Schools served as a gatekeeper to new school creation. Our project was funded by a grant awarded to the Office of Postsecondary Readiness. Both offices operated as fiefdoms in the political kingdom that was the New York City Department of Education. When attempts by ONS to take control of our work failed, the director used his office to stall, dilute, and disadvantage our schools. The meetings we had to get approval from ONS were tinged with racist connotations about how our students would respond to the design. The number of district schools allotted was cut in half, and they were placed in communities we hadn't worked with in design. Chance would have it that a third school would come available after the assigned leader quit suddenly.

In the design phase, we came to expect systemic resistance once we came out from under grant protection. I don't know if we expected that resistance to be so openly tainted with racism or not. There was also a shifting political environment at the time – a new chancellor with a very different approach than her predecessor, shakeups with the superintendents who would be overseeing the schools, and directors jockeying for larger and more visible portfolios. All of that political mess made for dizzying and disheartening times.

The school system's established way of operating posed significant challenges to creating a high-quality environment. Our school was co-located with three small middle schools. The co-

location process was the city's way of housing small schools while taking advantage of the real estate it already owned. School co-location and school space assignment are fascinating phenomena. It is a shell game, as students are neither increasing nor decreasing, merely moving from one location to another. There is an appallingly linear formula for how much space a school will be allocated based on the number and ages of students in attendance. Essentially, each student gets a certain amount of square footage. Add the required space for an office and some storage, and you have a school. Co-located schools share common areas – the gymnasium, cafeteria, and outside areas – leading to a more complex calculus around bell schedules and student traffic flow. None of this accounts for school model design, neighborhood dynamics, or even access to simple human needs like access to water fountains or rooms with windows.

Underlying almost every co-location is a political struggle that preceded it. When a decision is made to place a new school in a building that houses an existing school, the community is invited to comment. There is almost always resistance to dividing a building and bringing in a new school. This resistance comes from feelings of encroachment, strong feelings about charter schools (often the schools proposed to move in), or concerns about disruptions to school culture. Community meetings often happen before a final decision is made on which school is slated to move in. This means that the incoming school cannot appear before their potential neighbors. In theory, the Department of Education takes the community response under advisement. However, I am unaware of any co-location that was stopped as a result of this process. I am also unaware of any co-locations in affluent or predominately White parts of the city.

Our school placement was no exception here. When we arrived, we had to overcome hard feelings. We spend considerable energy repairing bridges that burnt before we knew of them. I

spent much of the spring and summer before we opened building relationships with the key

players in the building. Whatever time was left was spent on negotiating common area use,

ordering furniture and supplies, and recruiting students.

I think that the most significant decision my leadership partner, Brandon, and I made

once we opened our school was to tell the students that we loved them. We used the exact words:

"I love you." We said those words to the entire ninth-grade class during libations on the first day

of school and got the response you might expect from a bunch of teenagers in southern Queens –

everything from groans to laughing. The students resisted that expression of love. But we

overcame that by coming back with it the next day, and the day after that, and every day after

that. We backed up our words with our actions, getting to know the kids, holding them to high

standards, and challenging them to be excellent. The groans and laughing stopped. I knew that

Brandon and I had won that battle when, during a camping trip at the end of our second year, we

heard the boys at the campfire openly talking about how they loved each other – using those

exact words: "I love you."

Brandon and I tried taking a different approach to discipline as well. Restorative practices

weren't as accepted then as they are now. The norm was still to punish students until their

behavior changed. Our approach was tested when we had our first fight. I borrowed a practice

from Saint Benedict's and assigned the two boys to be each other's keepers. They were not

allowed to be apart while at school for one month. Except for the bathroom, if one of them was

somewhere, the other needed to be there as well. If one was using the bathroom, the other needed

to be outside of the bathroom door. We changed their class schedule to make it happen. Before

assigning this consequence, we got the blessing of the parents. One father shared that when he

was on his way to the school for the meeting, he was expecting to leave with suspension paperwork. Instead, he left as a partner with the school in developing his son.

When city rules made us suspend students for offenses listed in the discipline guidelines, we returned them to school as soon as possible. One of those students – suspended for bringing a knife to school – eventually became the student body president.

Other forms of resistance came from the staff. The union chapter leader from the school downstairs filed a formal complaint because our students were talking in the stairwell on their way to lunch. The teachers who applied to come to our school complained that they couldn't use canned curriculum alone. Our chapter leader organized the teachers to vote down an optional piece of the contract that would have benefitted students.

7. To what did you attribute the challenges at the time? Has your view of the challenge changed since then? What brought about that change?

I attributed much of the early resistance to power struggles and a need to control what types of programming get to call themselves a school. I felt that there was a racial element to resistance, but I struggled to call it by its name then. So many things were changing around us, and all of the goalposts were moving. I don't think any of us on the design team could make real sense of what was happening around us.

Resistance to our disciplinary practices came from our superintendent's office. When I shared what we had done with the two boys who fought, the regional safety director asked me why we hadn't just suspended the two boys. He was probably trying to advocate for efficient handling of the situation. But the message was clear: keep things simple, keep the system moving.

Much of the rest of the resistance we faced in the school from staff, I suspect, was about comfort-seeking. People want to be comfortable, even if that comfort is dangerous to themselves or the people they serve. All the complaints about the curriculum, attending libations, and committing time to social-emotional learning and student leadership came from discomfort from doing something different, even if we all knew that the old way of moving left most of our students behind. We were all good at the old way.

With some time, I've come to see all of the resistance as ways that systems adjust to change. Systems are made up of people who want power, predictable movement, and comfort. Leaders jockey for position and innovative programs are moved around the chessboard. The people watching the gauges get alarmed when anything different goes on in the machine. The people feeding the beast will refuse a better view if it means changing position. If school systems were never designed to benefit Black students, if they were designed to marginalize large swaths of the population, then all of us in the game are complicit if we're not changing how things are done.

8. How did/do you sustain yourself while doing the work you've discussed? What does success in sustaining yourself look like to you? How successful were/are you in sustaining yourself? Is there one most important strategy or schema you held/hold onto when sustaining yourself?

I didn't sustain myself while doing this work. That was my biggest failure. During the week, I saw my young daughter only when they were asleep. I answered my BlackBerry whenever it rang. I didn't rely on my team for the help I needed. I skipped meals and chose poorly when I did eat. I took too many things personally. All of this resulted in a serious decline in my physical and mental health.

Halfway through my second year as principal, I was taken to the hospital by ambulance for chest pains and difficulty breathing. I had a cardiac catheterization that evening and stayed for a couple of days in the hospital. Despite all of that and the advice of my doctor to take some time off, I returned to work the following week. Blame that Jamaican work ethic. That episode of chest pain wasn't the last, just the most severe. There was a change to a stronger blood pressure medication, new onset of anxiety attacks, the beginning of therapy, a PTSD diagnosis, and more medication.

During a break at a monthly principals' meeting, I stood in an informal circle with a small group of colleagues, discussing our health problems. We were primarily educators of color, and we all had something going on with our health that could be tied to stress: panic disorders, auto-immune disorders, another colleague with chest pains, gastrointestinal problems, etc. If my hospitalization and the decline of my health had been signs, that conversation was the confirmation I needed to begin my healing. I turned in my resignation the next week and finished the school year. It was the healthiest decision I had made in a very long time.

Since then, I have become much better at caring for myself. The 2021-22 school year was a test of that. No doubt, that year was the most professionally challenging year of my career in education – including the year that I burnt myself out. My caseload at work was twice what it was supposed to be. Students were dealing with mental health challenges coming back from COVID-driven school closures. I was in the middle of my doctoral program. Yet, by working on my healing practice and exercising agency in my work, I was able to stay healthy in the midst of significant challenges.

I've developed a set of practices and beliefs that guide my ongoing healing and set norms for how I approach my work. They're written in my daily book and on the wall of my writing room so I don't forget them.

- Care for your body – If your body is the temple of God, keep it in good repair.

- Nothing is permanent - You are not wedded to any particular way of doing the work. It is okay to step away when it is no longer for you.

- Work your strengths - You do not have to be a superstar if you work in community with others who are strong where you aren't.

- Center your purpose - Your strengths are the technical things you do well; your purpose is why you do them. Your purpose is far greater than the task you are performing at any moment.

- Reject oppressive norms - Respect your humanity by reclaiming your right to feel and reflect.

- Rest regularly and as needed - All of God's creatures take rest. You are no exception.

- Process your pain with others - This work challenges your soul. You need to handle that pain in community with others.

I've also learned to be at peace with the circular nature of my life and the occasional off-path portions of my journey. There have been several clear points of return in my professional and personal life. In the spirit of the Sankofa bird, I have had occasions to go back and get something that I will need for my journey. That journey seemed aimless at times. There have been moments of amazing forward speed on smooth terrain and times of trudging through the wilderness. Both experiences are parts of the same voyage. I get to choose them both and not fret about it.

## 5. Harmony and Dissonance

This chapter will present a thematic analysis of the challenges and strategies participants shared during their interviews. Themes will be connected, where appropriate, to tenets of Critical Race Theory and adjacent frameworks.

The strategies presented in this section do not necessarily align with the challenges. In some cases, participants spoke of more far-reaching strategies than the challenges they presented. It is recommended that challenges and strategies be considered separately rather than linearly connected.

**Challenges**

*Pushing a New Vision*

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced" (Baldwin, 1962).

If the status quo is to accept that Black students will not be afforded a safe, relevant place in which to learn, then educators pursuing high-quality environments for their students must challenge norms and push new visions for their learning spaces. For Chris, that challenge meant getting his district to accept responsibility for addressing the specific needs of Black boys. Xavier presented new visions for what a great school serving Black children could look like. Yusuf rejected a toxic culture by ushering in a new vision for communication and respect in his school. Tabari carried a vision for cultural responsiveness in his school by insisting on authentically African traditions. For Matin, it was a push for access to rigorous learning and robust support for his Black students. In my school, it was a new model of teaching and learning that put students out in front.

None of these participants had an easy path to achieving their goal; resistance was practically guaranteed. Pushing a new vision is what Heifetz (1994) calls an adaptive challenge – a problem that the participants do not have the technical skills to solve, may not have a clear-cut solution, and will require the loss, especially of comfort and competence to navigate. Adaptive challenges sit in contrast to technical problems, where the competence to find a solution exists, even if that solution is harmful or dysfunctional. Navigating adaptive challenges is dizzying work, requiring leaders to maintain disequilibrium in bringing a team to a new way of addressing their work. New visions around race in the United States, especially those requiring the elevation of Black people, are adaptive challenges.

The loss of the power of whiteness is what gets managed in pushing a new vision in this context. Ladson-Billings and Banks (2021) draw a connection between race and property rights as related to inequity, saying,

> 1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequality in the United States.
> 2. U.S. society is based on property rights.
> 3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity. (p.18)

Wilkerson (2020) contends that in the United States, races are ranked in an inflexible arrangement, with white at the top of the hierarchy and Black at the bottom. Educators who are challenging this racial arrangement by daring to suggest what Yusuf, Matin, Chris, Tabari, Xavier, and I have – that Black students should be centered – find that we have picked a fight over what America deems property.

*Challenging Low Expectations*

"If you teach that n****r (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave" (Douglass, 1845/2019)

In the passage above, Frederick Douglass recounted the reaction and prediction his enslaver, Mr. Boyd, had when he learned that Douglass was being taught to read. Whatever moral judgment one may hold for Boyd, he saw things clearly regarding the power of education. An educated person cannot be easily forced into slavery. Almost two centuries late, a similar sentiment infests schooling: if expectations are kept low, students in those schools will not be educated enough to be unfit for diminished status.

When we speak of low expectations, we usually discuss the rigor of the academic work students will be asked to do. Matin's removal of barriers to Black students' access to algebra and remedying the exclusion of Black students from the Career Pathways program fits this description. Black students were being denied the opportunity to face rigorous work in school. However, low expectations can be applied to the institution as well. Jeff's demand that educators address students' hearts, as well as their heads, was the calling out of low expectations, not of the students, but of the schools.

Brandon's situation presents a different perspective here. He experienced low expectations when attempting to do important things. This judgment of his capacity and appropriateness for leadership, manifest in censoring and judging him for his youthful energy and appearance, could be seen as protective or gatekeeping. This research didn't reveal sufficient data to decide either way. Low expectations were also cast onto the community by a pastor who doubted that they would show up for a community meeting. Perhaps Brandon's ability to fill a

church with people not expected to engage says something about the grouping of low expectations.

***Protecting Black Children***

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (New International Version Bible, 2011, Matthew 19:16)

Left unchecked, school systems act as manufacturing machines, the ideal product of which is educated citizens. In any manufacturing process, there is expected to be some waste – some material that the machine cannot cast into the desired form. This situation poses a moral issue. Schools deal with human children, not raw iron. A manufacturing process is not suited for the education of children; it is suited for soulless nuts and bolts.

School systems, operating as machines, use disciplinary practices to reject Black students, resulting in disproportionality in exclusion (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.). A typical exclusion starts with a teacher referral that details a student's behavior that has run afoul of school norms. Severe or persistent behaviors are handled by administrators who can exclude the student from school. Teachers have a form of exclusionary power to address behaviors in the classroom. Like any power, there is room for abuse.

Rogers-Ard and Knaus (2020), in their study of Black educational leaders, give voice to educators' concerns about the seemingly systemic removal of Black children from learning. Quantitative data shows disproportionality in how exclusion is applied at the school level. Qualitative data from this research speaks to how the unequal application of school behavioral expectations impacts Black students and how leaders of high-quality environments interrupt processes of exclusion. Yusuf, Justina, and I have taken measures in our schools to stand in the way of our respective systems' efforts to push students out – Justina by interrogating the origins

of referrals coming to her, Yusuf by taking a stand on suspensions and insisting that adults learn to communicate with children, and me by working with families on community-approved methods of reinforcing behavioral expectations. We all faced pushback – From teachers or our supervisors – in what Dumas (2017) refers to as a demand for Black suffering in schools.

*Exhaustion*

"That dream walk with you crosstown, s'gonna die from overwork" (Baraka et al., 2002).

Leaders who take up the work to build and sustain high-quality educational environments for Black students risk their well-being. Running against systems has consequences. Endemic academic anti-Blackness autocorrects when challenged and punishes agents of change. Punishment need not be physical for its effects to be left on the body. Bearing witness to the mistreatment of children you serve, microaggressions, disrespect, and subtle or blatant threats to fall into line are all things that, in a high enough or persistent dose, can traumatize an educator. Psychological trauma presents in the body as chronic illness (Van Der Kolk, 2015).

Yusuf was overwhelmed by managing change at work while caring for a dying wife and raising four daughters. Chris reached his limit carrying increasingly heavy demands with decreasing impact on ever-shifting ground. Xavier faced work struggles that threatened to derail his career and impact his livelihood. My own work faced challenges from competing political forces both within and outside of my school. All of us faced health challenges as a result of our work for Black children. Thankfully, we have all taken up healing practices and lifestyle changes to reclaim our health.

**Strategies**

Pivotal educational experiences have shaped all of the participants in this research. Shaping may have occurred due to negative experiences in school, the affirmation of being seen

by a teacher, or some combination of the two. These pivotal experiences helped form our educators' values and visions for what schooling for Black children should be. These values and visions, in turn, guided how each crafted strategies to sustain themselves and their work creating and sustaining high-quality learning environments for Black children.

***Unapologetic Clarity of Purpose***

"F\*\*k your couch!" (Chappelle & Brennan, 2004).

The word unapologetic brings to mind a strength of conviction in the face of pressure to moderate oneself. It implies that an apology might be expected by someone – somebody who will remain denied. In a culture where an orderly Black person keeps things civil, to be an unapologetic Black person is to engage in a righteous disorderly conduct in asserting oneself in full. It is the merger of boldness, awareness of self, and a touch of life-affirming arrogance.

Mentions of people being unapologetic are a theme that came up repeatedly in this research. Matin described himself as being "unapologetically for Black kids" in his leadership practice. That clarity gave members of his staff permission to exercise agency – either in alignment with his mission or to leave. He credits it for preventing a lot of potential backlash or resistance to his endeavors. Yusuf recalled having an "unapologetic Black principal" at P.S. 137 and being unapologetic in his stance on student suspensions. His former experience likely influenced his latter position. Brandon's faith was formed in a congregation that was "unashamedly Black and unapologetically Christian." Each of these examples shows a boldness of purpose necessary for the situation.

Including culture in one's work is a form of unapologetic movement. The cultures of marginalized people are frequently dismissed and looked down on in schools (Hammond, 2014). Tabari's insistence on including African cultural traditions and language when educating Black

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children made some people uncomfortable. Jeff's inclusion of his and his students' culture in his teaching practice insults the authority of the curriculum written far away from his classroom. To boldly put culture forward in one's leadership or teaching practice, as Tabari and Jeff have done, is to violate the norms and deny those who take offense their apology.

*Resistance*

"You are either alive or dead, and when you're dead, you can't care anyway. And your method of death can itself be a politicizing thing. So, you die in the riots" (Biko, 1978/2002, p. 152).

Holding spaces where Black children are expected to thrive is a revolutionary act. Despite stated best intentions, school systems persist in tolerating sub-par learning experiences for marginalized students. Leaning on the Critical Race Theory tenet on the permanence of racism and looking at the history of public schools, one must conclude that disparate outcomes negatively impacting Black children are expected. It is a subversive act to create a space within the system where expectations differ.

Data from this research provides two clear examples of resistance to the established school order. Tabari spoke of an awareness that he was "building on the plantation" while teaching students how to tear it down. This is a heavy metaphor. The image it draws sits in tension between Lorde's admonition about using the master's tools and the traditions of fugitive education – teaching in secret from a curriculum of liberation (Givens, 2021). Jeff's resistance to being disciplined into compliance came from the wise counsel he received from Dr. Edwards, who invoked Jeff's discipline and scrappy nature to be used to make a place for him where none had been intended.

Death is ordinary and unavoidable, yet we persist and take that next breath. Racism, permanent and self-correcting as it is, is a reliable foe in creating high-quality learning spaces for Black children. Remaining resistant is a powerful strategy in the face of it.

*Storytelling*

"So gather 'round as I run it down and unravel my pedigree" (Duke, 1992).

Storytelling leverages our most ancient communal information sharing to motivate others and ourselves. Humans use stories to pass morals on to children and to explain things both sacred and secular. Aggregated data cannot match the nuance that a well-told story provides. So, in a time when statistics are frequently used to justify injustice, it should be no wonder that storytelling stands as one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory.

Chris employed storytelling when promoting work on behalf of African American males. Taking advantage of technology and social media, Chris' organizations made a case for centering Black boys in school using music, film, and videos. The messaging of Black boys living their excellence couldn't be replicated with statistics. Matin's plea for assistance early in his principalship was a short story – "I'm a Black principal who needs help reaching the Black boys in my school. The end" – with an invitation to further communication. Virality carried the message into the community and set the stage for deeper storytelling. Justina's work with the Community Academic Partnership takes a different angle on storytelling. By calling the community to bear witness to the workings of the school and set expectations, she used a "come and see" form of storytelling that was clearer than numbers and graphs. Finally, Jeff embodies a living story as an educator in the community. By removing the line between his professional and community lives, he becomes the accessible story that moves between the schoolhouse and the street.

### The Counsel of Others

"Move as a team, never move alone" (Public Enemy, 1990).

Receiving the counsel of others serves to affirm and ground people doing challenging work. Whether received in a moment of crisis, while planning one's next move, or just processing recent events, counsel provides necessary support and restoration. This advice or coaching can come from formal groups, but it is just as likely to be offered by friends, family, a therapist, or the folk gathered at the barbershop. Regardless of the source, educators seeking to support Black youth must seek and receive counsel from people who are invested in them and who are aware of the challenges and demands placed on them.

The participants in this study who identified seeking the counsel of others acknowledge the impossibility of tackling the work of uplifting Black children alone. Matin's email plea was one for counsel. In developing the African American male achievement work, Chris gathered a group of educators and community members to ideate and build work that had yet to be imagined. He keeps what he calls a "multiracial, intergenerational, cross-sectional team of advisors" to inform his thinking and keep him grounded. Brandon got wise counsel from his mother while figuring out his challenges leading a Freedom Schools site. Jeff has a group of like-minded colleagues who push his thinking and affirm him. Other participants alluded to receiving this type of support as well.

### Intentionality of Self-Care

For us to be more human, returning to our natural state before the lies, terror, and trauma of this system. To be who we were before the terror of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy is the power of resting. To no longer be ravaged by this

culture's incessant need to keep going no matter what to produce at all costs. This

is why we rest (Hersey, 2022, pg. 19).

The single greatest failure of my principalship was my failure to care for myself. I

struggled with cultural expectations and a drive to see my school succeed. The harder I worked

without rest, the less effective I became up to the point of my health failing. The cultural

pressures I felt were not exclusive to me. Yusuf spoke of them as he wrestled with his home and

work responsibilities. Chris carried organizational expectations that became unrealistic on their

way to absurd. Xavier faced challenges at work that threatened his career and livelihood. Each of

us paid a physical toll for running too far on empty. Each of us has also learned to take time to

care for ourselves. Xavier summed it up succinctly: "Self-care is love for yourself."

### *Faith*

"In communion with the divine spirit, we can claim the space of accountability and renew our

commitment to that transformation of spirit that opens the heart and prepares us to love" (hooks,

2001, p. 216).

Faith serves us by subjecting ourselves to something greater than our circumstances.

When engaging in resistance, faith provides a point of focus outside of the field of battle, a

respite from continuous assaults. Engaging in prayer necessitates stepping away in order to have

a sacred time with one's deity.

It is telling, then, that Tabari and Matin, the two participants who spoke of their current

religious practice as a strategy, are Muslim. Islam calls for its practitioners to stop for prayer five

times per day. Strict believers adopt a physical position of prayer during these times. So,

remaining faithful requires a willingness to put everything else aside, remove oneself from

distractions and focus on the most important thing at that moment: the prayer.

## 6. Reprise

**Reflections**

Perhaps my motivation for doing this research – for going down this road of inquiry – was to prove to myself that I was not crazy. My positionality sheds some light on why I might think this. Years after walking away from what some would call the pinnacle of my education career, I still, perhaps, seek confirmation that the decline in my physical and mental health related to my work as a school leader wasn't entirely my fault. I may still need someone to tell me out loud that the Kafkaesque machinations of the school system where I worked weren't a hallucination. In this research, I may be seeking absolution.

That was my big bias coming into this research. Neutrality was never an option. How does one maintain neutrality while studying the site of one's own harm? So, the two foci of my inquiry – challenges and strategies – may have been an effort to compartmentalize bias in the former while finding hope in the latter. The stories of challenges faced by other educators creating or sustaining high-quality educational spaces for Black children would likely serve to confirm my experiences. The strategies would be the new information I could package and take with me. I could compile a bunch of battle-tested tactics, condense them down to a sheet of paper, put it into my planner, and get back to work in the morning.

My biases were affirmed throughout the interviews. I expected that much. The educators in my initial participant pool have all had similar struggles. All would agree that public schools, on the whole, do a poor job equitably educating Black students and are proficient in harming Black children and their families. In retrospect, this research might have been complete without addressing the challenges explicitly.

However, hearing the strategies shifted something in my thinking about educational leadership. There is nothing particularly innovative about having a clear vision, seeking the counsel of others, or leaning on faith. Enough has been written on each of these and all of the strategies discussed herein. It was the telling of individual stories that made the difference. It is one thing to read about the power of storytelling. It is another thing entirely to hear different accounts of how storytelling was used to motivate change in spaces one is deeply concerned about. By trusting me with their experiences, the participants in this study granted me permission to be well as I engage in my work, armed with a bit of this community's wisdom.

Everything happens right on time. As I type this conclusion, I am preparing to transition from the classroom back into school administration. It has been seven years since I walked away from my principalship. In that time and that place, there was little time to reflect on what I needed to do to preserve the work and keep myself healthy and capable. As I step back into positional leadership work, I am preparing to defend my thinking and reflection time health from the demands of compliance tasks. My shift reminds me of a story of two monks discussing meditation:

> Two monks were walking in the monastery garden when the younger monk asked
> the elder monk a question. "How much time do you spend in prayer each day?" he
> asked. The older monk replied, "One hour. I spend One hour in prayer every day."
> They continued walking for a while when the younger monk asked, "What do you
> do on those days when you're too busy to pray?" To this, the elder monk replied,
> "On those days, I pray for two hours" ("Two monks, n.d.).

So, does this research grant me absolution? Yes, in that the challenges I faced were real, violent, and damaging. The participants' challenges echoed many of my own experiences.

However, this research also holds me accountable. It challenges me to find the elder monk's second hour to do the most important work: to plan for sustaining myself and the work alongside planning for the work itself.

For my participants and any educators who read this work, I hope these stories and analyses affirm, bolster, and enlighten them. I hope that they find fellowship through sharing these experiences as they continue their work in service of Black children.

**Accepting the Divine Shape of Things and Moving Forward with Purpose**

The findings of this research show the many challenges to creating and sustaining high-quality education environments for Black children and the people who lead them. It also highlights the various strategies to persist in the revolutionary work of holding these spaces and preserving committed leadership. This research is far from the last word on the experiences of educators holding space for Black students. As a doctoral dissertation, it is my first word on the topic. I am merely joining a growing chorus of researchers tackling the workings of education spaces where Black children dwell.

While not by design, this research amplified the voices of educators of color, predominately Black male educators. As participant recruitment took shape and the more gender and racially diverse sample of educators became the nine people who participated herein, my feelings about the research shifted from trepidation about a biased sample to an acceptance of the divinity of a community that looked and sounded like me. After all, I am a Black male educator teaching Black children. My experiences creating and holding spaces where Black children thrive are not the same as my non-Black colleagues. Black male educators experience the schoolhouse and the world outside of it differently. Our stories are worthy of being told and

heard. The storytelling nature of this research lends itself to the enterprise of uplifting these experiences.

There is a small but growing body of research on the challenges facing Black educators in the predominately white field of education. While fifteen percent of public school students in the United States are Black, seven percent of public school educators identify as the same. Only two percent of American teachers are Black males (Carr, 2022; *Insights into the Black Male Educator Experience*, 2022; *Race and Ethnicity of Public School Teachers and Their Students*, 2020). Black teachers are underrepresented in schools. Given the racial dynamics at work in schools and in the larger society, Black children are underserved by a teacher workforce that does not reflect them.

As a result of this underrepresentation, Black teachers find themselves taking on additional responsibilities in service of students. Black male teachers spend more time mentoring, counseling, and tutoring students outside their regular teaching duties (*Insights into the Black Male Educator Experience*, 2022). These teachers are looked at as informal leaders in their schools, especially on matters related to student interactions and conduct. Research shows Black teachers' positive impact on students, especially Black children. These impacts include an increased likelihood of graduating high school and attending college (Gershenson et al., 2018). The participants in this research and I have had the experience of having Black students come find us in the school, whether they are on our class rosters or not. In my experience, Black students come looking for safety and someone who will listen to, protect, and encourage them.

The Black teacher experience is a duality. On the one hand, the extra work that Black teachers perform is uncompensated labor – an iteration of double taxation. In a time of high teacher turnover, Black teachers increasingly cite race-based reasons for leaving the profession,

including stress and fatigue related to being Black in predominately white educational spaces (Carr, 2022). On the other hand, many Black teachers understand the weight of their work, something my mother called a sacred trust. The rich legacy of Black teachers, as described by Woodson (1933/2017), and the complexity of navigating systems not built for us, as told by Givens (2021), Watkins (2001), and Ladson-Billings and Banks (2021) is too valuable a thing to be trusted to others. More valuable still are the young Black children who attend public schools under penalty of law and face hostility for who they are. Held in the tension between the poles of that duality are stories to be told and wisdom to be explored.

Given the considerations stated above, my future research will focus on deeper dives into the experiences of Black male educators, specifically how we manage the duality of our experiences in schools, how we leverage our communities for support, the places we go and the company we keep for restoration and joy, the persistence of that joy, and the lessons we have learned about ourselves and our work. I intend for my future research to be a community space where Black male educators support each other with wisdom and care as we step up to serve and protect our children.

"We gon' be alright" (Lamar, 2015).

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## Appendix A

*Participant Recruiting Email*

Greetings,

My name is Darius Mensah, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Ed.D. program at the University of Washington – Tacoma. I am conducting research on the experiences of educational leaders such as yourself who have created or sustained high-quality educational environments for Black students in the United States.

I am writing to ask you to be a participant in my research. I would love to discuss your experiences, strategies, and reflections on your work. If you are willing and able to participate, I would ask you to commit to two interviews: a 60-minute one-to-one interview with me and a 90-minute group interview with other participants who have done similar work. Interviews would be conducted through Zoom videoconferencing. Participation is entirely voluntary.

If you are willing to participate, please use this link (https://calendly.com/dbmensah-uw/research) to schedule the 60-minute interview. If you have questions, feel free to contact me at (973) 204-4132 or dbmensah@uw.edu.

Sincerely,

Darius B. Mensah MSEd

EdD Candidate

University of Washington – Tacoma

*Interview Protocol*

Pre-Recording

Introduction & Gratitude

My name is Darius Mensah. I'm a doctoral student working on my dissertation in practice in the Educational Leadership program. I am conducting research on the challenges to creating and sustaining high-quality educational environments for Black students. I'm conducting this work by getting into conversations with educators such as you who wave done this work.

Consent

If you agree to be in this research study, you will be asked to take part in an individual and group interview. Today's interview is anticipated to take about 60 minutes. I'll be asking you to discuss yourself, your role in providing a high-quality educational environment for Black children, any challenges you faced in doing that work, and ways that you took care of yourself while doing it. The group interview will be with other educators whom I have interviewed as well. That interview is anticipated to take about 90 minutes and is anticipated to be a time to share sustaining strategies.

You will have the option of using a pseudonym of your choice. I will store the recording of this interview under this pseudonym. (Allow the participant to choose a pseudonym.) The interviews and any information you provide will be kept confidential. I will be storing this recording and my notes securely. Any information that can connect your pseudonym to you will be stored securely until destroyed.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You can end your participation at any time.

<u>Start Recording</u>

State your pseudonym.

Get verbal consent to participate and to the recording of the interview.

- Recordings will be stored on a secured server and destroyed once the research is complete.

1 SELF

Tell me about yourself.

- What was your path to education?

- What has been your professional path since becoming an educator?

- How do you define Black?

- Who taught you about Black folx?

- How many Black teachers did you have in school?

- Where did you see yourself within school? In the curriculum?

- How and where was your Blackness affirmed?


2 ROLE

*Review the operational definition of high-quality education for Black children: educational programs that de-center whiteness, challenge or disregard metrics born out of racism, value community cultural contributions as foundations for learning, or hold universally high expectations for the application of learning.*

Tell me about the place(s) where your practice has served Black children according to the definition.

- Were you there for the creation/re-creation of the program(s)?

- What made this place or program a high-quality educational environment for Black children?

3 CHALLENGES

What are the challenges you faced in creating/sustaining the program?

- How did you make sense of these challenges?

- How did you work around these challenges?

- How did the challenges adjust to your moves?

- To what did you attribute the challenges at the time?

- Has your view of the challenge changed since then?

- What brought about that change?

4 SUSTAINING

What comes to mind when you hear the word "rest" or "self care" ?

How did/do you sustain yourself while doing the work you've discussed?

- What does success in sustaining yourself look like to you?

- How successful were/are you in sustaining yourself?

- Is there one most important strategy or schema you held/hold on to when sustaining yourself?

5 WRAP UP

- What do you feel deserving of?

- When do you feel most protected?

- What is your Super Power?

# Appendix C

*Recommended Soundtrack*

In no particular order:

- Grandma's Hands, on *Just As I Am*, Bill Withers, 1971

- Been Here Before, on *Kingfish*, Christone "Kingfish" Ingram, 2019

- Across 110th Street, on *Across 110th Street*, J.J. Johnson and Bobby Womack, 1972

- The Weight, on Belly of the Sun, Cassandra Wilson, 2002

- Bridge Over Troubled Water, on Aretha Live at Fillmore West, Aretha Franklin, 1971

- Ain't No Such Thing as a Superman, on The First Minute of a New Day, Brian Jackson & Gil Scott-Heron, 1974

- Walk With Me, Lord, on *Salt*, Lizz Wright, 2003

- Fight the Power, on *Fear of a Black Planet*, Public Enemy, 1990

- Water From an Ancient Well, on *Water From an Ancient Well*, Abdullah Ibrahim, 1986

- King Kunta, on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Kendrick Lamar, 2015

- Something in the Way of Things (In Town), on *Phrenology*, The Roots (feat. Amiri Baraka) 2002

- I Shall Be Released, on *To Love Somebody*, Nina Simone, 1968

- A Change is Gonna Come, on *A Change is Gonna Come,* Sam Cooke, 1964

- Alright, on *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Kendrick Lamar, 2015