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Embracing the kaleidoscope: Four teachers' journeys towards sociopolitical development

Daniel Tulino
Rowan University

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EMBRACING THE KALEIDOSCOPE:
FOUR TEACHERS' JOURNEYS TOWARDS
SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

by

Daniel P. Tulino

A Dissertation

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Dissertation Chair: Shelley Zion, Ph.D.

Committee Members:
Adan Alvarez, Ph.D.
Kate Kedley, Ph.D.

Dedication

For Xavier, Harmony-Marie, and Dylan, who bring light, hope, and purpose.

Acknowledgments

To Chereese, Xavier, Harmony-Marie, and Dylan, thank you for always standing by and supporting me. You are the reasons I strive to be and do better each day. Without you, I would be lost.

To Mom and Dad, your support has never wavered. My love for you knows no bounds. To my brother, who I have always looked up to, and still do. You are my guide.

To Dr. Zion, who's compassion and honesty sheds a light on love and hope in ways I never imagined.

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To Dr. Holder, who's friendship and mentorship means more to me than he will ever know.

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Abstract

Daniel P. Tulino
EMBRACING THE KALEIDOSCOPE: FOUR TEACHERS' JOURNEYS TOWARDS
SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT
2020-2021
Dr. Shelley Zion
Doctor of Philosophy

Taliaferro Baszile (2017) tells us, "Education can be revolutionary work". To that end, if education historically has been a means for "inculcating" students into a hegemonic code of beliefs and values (Gramsci, 1971), it is the educator's duty to concern themselves with developing a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/1996; Freire, 1973/1998) in order to transform the world through acts of social justice. The focus of this research project was to uncover, from the perspectives of four teachers, how they came to understand their own critical consciousness and sociopolitical development at a middle school in southern New Jersey. By uncovering the ways these four teachers describe their sociopolitical development and enact critical pedagogies in their classrooms, engage in building relationships with students, families, and staff, and commit to improving equity in their school through a collective mural of their individual journeys, we may bring meaning on how best "to inform prepare pre- and in-service teacher educators about how to better prepare teachers- and particularly White teachers-to be agents of change, disrupting inequitable educational systems (Zion, Allen, & Jean, 2015).

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Given properly equipped teachers and your schools are a foregone success;

without them, I care not how much you spend on buildings and equipment, the

schools are a failure. (DuBois, 1904, p. 543)

As I began structuring this dissertation, it occurred to me - through the guidance

of my advisor - that the final manuscript would not have the same feel of a "traditional"

dissertation. With this study, I utilized a methodology of a mural, that built from some of

the foundational qualities of a portraiture methodology. To that end, I would need a

structure that would lend itself to the traditions of storytelling where the setting and

characters in the study came to life the way they might in a work of fiction. As you will

see throughout this 200-plus page manuscript, I not only tell the stories of the four

participants in the study, but I also weave in my own narrative at certain moments.

Although this manuscript will take on a non-traditional form from time to time, the study

itself holds true to the norms of research. What I have attempted to do here is a

complicated thing, but this was the way in which I felt these stories, including my own,

needed to be told; I am not being sloppy.

What follows is a personal journey of me and research, of me and the review of

the literature, and me and my stories. There will be moments where this manuscript reads

like a traditional research study and others where it reads like an autobiography. I ask you

to come a long on this journey with me and the participants in this study.

Professional Beginnings

I came into the educational world just as efforts to promote and champion the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 were taking full shape. Through standardized approaches to teaching and assessment, schools, districts, and national public policy were promoting and claiming to establish methods that would ensure equal educational opportunities for all students in the United States. By holding school leaders, staff, and students more accountable through various high-stakes assessment protocols, NCLB became a tool of reform for determining which public schools needed closer attention. Further, schools were now responsible to collect and analyze student data in a systematic manner with the overall goal of overcoming any inequalities in student performance, specifically with those students who were not meeting the standards set forth by politicians (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). On the other hand, NCLB was also the first to require disaggregation by "subgroups", and thus at least offered the opportunity for equity in schools.

Since that movement towards accountability, schools have edged closer to maintain the *hegemonic* (Gramsci, 1971/1973, Spring, 2018) code of the status quo, while moving further away from a truly democratic (Apple, 2008; Carr & Thesee, 2017) and liberatory education (Freire, 1970/1996, 1973/1998; Gordon, 1993; Jefferson, Gutierrez, & Silverstein, 2018). In many schools throughout New Jersey, the state department of education utilized accountability systems such as the Collaborative Assessment and Planning for Achievement CAPA, School Improvement Grants (SIG), and Regional Achievement Centers (RAC) as entities that were presented to the general public as collaborative partnerships between the state DOE and local school communities.

However, in my experience working with these entities, they have been anything but collaborative.

Accountability initiatives across the nation, like the ones set in place in New Jersey further led to an atmosphere of school closings, fear, and cheating on standardized tests throughout public schools across the nation (https://www.governing.com/topics/education/gov-school-cheating-scandal.html). This was a far cry from the educational atmosphere I grew up in as a child, not that it was perfect by any means, but one where an education was not based on how well we performed on a state assessment. My personal schooling experience was far more centered on preparing myself and the students around me to pursue a degree at a four-year college or university. Test scores were never spoken of until we all sat down to take the SAT's. Was this a better approach to education than the NCLB or standards-based approach? For me as a student, I would say, yes. I had the freedom to maintain my individualism while also meeting the expectations of the school environment. However, as an educator, I have often found that the intent of NCLB to uplift all students throughout the United States, ultimately led to myself and many other teachers I worked with to merely teach students how to pass a test.

My Teaching Experience

Entering the NCLB world as an alternate-route teacher in northern New Jersey, I experienced shock and disbelief at what was being asked of me during professional development meetings, department meetings, and grade level meetings. Further, I could not understand why the use of fear tactics such as messages from school leaders like, "If

we don't get test scores up, the state will close this building" was needed. Wasn't I working at a community public school where over 800 students came to our building every day? I was young and new to 21st century public education. I had never heard of the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) or the soon to be New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK). I had no idea what "Advanced Proficient" meant or why it was so important for my students to get at least a 200 on their Math and ELA assessments. I did not understand why all students needed to complete a graphic organizer if they already had fluid, academic, and eloquent writing skills. And, I certainly didn't understand why a team of state officials had to take me out of my classroom to interview me about the culture of a school I had only begun working in less than two months earlier. These were unanswered questions back in 2006 when I began teaching, and now, 14 years later have yet to be answered.

What I do know is that *good* teaching was not taking place in my classroom, and *good* teaching was not taking place in any of the classrooms near me in that building. That is not to say there were not *good* teachers in the building, only that what was expected of the teachers and students did not lend itself to *good* teaching. That begs the question: what is *good* teaching, and how can we find the goodness in our schools? Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) defined *goodness* as, "a complex, holistic, dynamic concept that embraces imperfection and vulnerability; a concept whose expression is best documented through detailed, nuanced narratives placed in context (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, p. 142). This was the guiding principle at the inception of this study, and if or how *good teaching* connected to various reform approaches and policies in schools. By implementing a system of requirements, any focus

on solutions to issues of inequity were ignored for trendy solutions. Professional development at the schools I worked in focused only on rigor, growth mindset, and teaching our students to be more and more resilient while ignoring any larger systems at play such as racism, inequitable housing practices, and/or other economic factors impacting the students and their families.

Compared to our peer districts in higher income communities of white and asian students, disparities in achievement persisted. At the schools in which I worked, the student body was almost 92% Black, with less than 1% white students. Therefore, disproportionality in special education and discipline rates were difficult to see, but in examining our own district data, we continued to see areas of concern such as high dropout rates for our high school students, extremely high suspension rates across the district, and a chronic absenteeism rate that seemed to grow worse throughout each year. All of these factors, of course, lead to many other issues of access and opportunity that continue to face many students of color, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and students from immigrant families, specifically in New Jersey (Kozol, 1992; State of New Jersey Department of Education Data and Reports 2020; U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017-2018). What I found during my tenure in this school district was that one of the biggest mitigating factors to societal and institutional marginalization in our schools was the love, hope, and relationship building of small groups of teachers, who, as I look back now, showed some connection to what Friere (1970/1996) called "conscientização" or critical consciousness. I was not sure I would ever come across teachers like that again.

How I Came Into Developing a Critical Consciousness

Throughout the final year of my Master of Fine Arts program at William Paterson University, the chair of the English Department, Dr. Ian Marshall, guided me through an independent study focused on Critical Race Theory and Rhetoric. I had only ever taken one course with Dr. Marshall, in my previous master's work, a 20th century fiction course focused on the study of whiteness, after-whiteness, and Critical Race Theory. This was not what I had been expecting from my final course in my master's program. I was used to reading predominantly White authors and responding to texts through my narrow lens curated over 30 years in an educational landscape that valued White men and their words. I had mastered the rhetoric of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Kerouac. I figured a course titled 20th Century Fiction would be an easy way to complete my degree. My professor had a different plan.

Prior to meeting Dr. Marshall, I had never heard of whiteness studies or Critical Race Theory. He created a syllabus that would not only challenge and critique our understanding of 20th century fiction, but also expose us to countless writers we had never heard of before taking his course. By engaging with texts ranging from David Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness* (1991) to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967/2008) and on to James Baldwin's collection of short stories *Going to Meet the Man* (1965/1995), my time spent with Dr. Marshall began the formal process of my critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/1996), a journey that informally began years earlier. However, I was not aware of the process until Dr. Marshall introduced me to the practice of reflexivity, a practice he taught me to employ after each reading of a text, and after

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each of our discussions at his suburban home over endless cups of black coffee. In short, I came to understand that teaching and learning was more than what I had originally thought, and this profession demanded a commitment to transformational intellectualism (Giroux, 1988; Said, 1994).

This is my story, but it is also the story of many other educators who have experienced moments of transformation. Whether through the reading of critical texts like the ones Dr. Marshall introduced to me, watching films like the Civil War-era, *Glory* (1988), or immersing oneself in cultures unlike their own, an individual's critical consciousness can be heightened in a way that leads to social action against systems of oppression and marginalization (Freire, 1970/1996; 1973/1998). Further, by heightening one's levels of critical consciousness, there is the chance they will engage others in the environments they travel to also begin the process towards critical consciousness, thus creating a community of critical thinkers (Freire, 1970/1996; 1973/1998). Specifically, within an educational context such as a public middle school, teachers who collectively identify as being critically conscious, or "woke" as many scholars are now defining the concept (Storm & Rainey, 2018), can work together to overcome persistent inequities in their schools and communities.

Dr. Marshall invited me to his home on many occasions, where he would pull books from his personal library to send home with me. Works like *Women, Race, and Class* (Davis, 1981), *Shadow and Act* (Ellison, 1953/1995), *The Souls of Black Folk* (DuBois, 1903/1965) and *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon, 1967/2008). We spoke of colonialism and racist systems of oppression, of institutions and Marxism. We spoke of materialism and opportunity, and we even found time to critique literary figures such as

Hemingway and Faulkner, an area of expertise for Dr. Marshall. At times, I felt as if my entire past experience was under attack, his words like bullets shattering a glass wall of which I, and society around me, had built throughout the first 30 years of my life. An existence created through a veil of whiteness (Roediger, 1991) that uplifted my accomplishments through the validation of the bootstraps enigma while ignoring any economic or social systems that catapulted me forward in life.

There were times I felt as if I had to defend not only my existence, but that of my parents and their parents, as well. For as I traced the lineage of my family, it was then that Dr. Marshall helped me to uncover the many foundations of power and privilege (Johnson, 2018; Macintosh, 1995) upon which I stood. I look back now on our conversations and can see why he took the time to read and speak and reflect with me. However, at the time, his motivations for helping me grow eluded me. Why would this man go to such great lengths to ensure that my intellectualism and critical consciousness evolved and progressed? Why would a Black man desire to enlighten a white boy? The answer: he loved and valued me, the way we hope all might love and value one another. He understood the absolute connection that his liberation and my liberation depended upon one another (DuBois, 1903/1965).

Further, Dr. Marshall understood that by taking such an active role in the development of my critical consciousness was an exponential act that flows into the fabric of our collective hope. He was and is the living embodiment of "conscientização", a concept that I will highlight in this study through the development of a mural of the journey of four middle school teachers. For me, learning the impact of transformational educational experiences came through the work of a few mentors. For others, the

narrative may look completely different, but each story can take us one step closer to a revolutionary idea of education.

Important to note in any study that speaks to critical consciousness, is that any explanation of my own conscientização is how I perceive that critical consciousness. From that realization, my newfound and every evolving consciousness has shed light on and continues to shed light on new understandings. For example, as a white male teacher in a school district that's student body was over 90% Black/African American and free/reduced lunch, I was exposed to a way of life very unlike that of my own. Through cultural, religious, and social practices that I was not accustomed to, I began to shift my own perspectives on what it meant to live in "the hood". I was able to see things I never saw before in schools and in the community. My original perceptions of a New Jersey inner-city were generated from movies like *New Jersey Drive* (1995) and *Menace II Society* (1993), hip-hop songs like "Uptown Anthem" and "Life's a Bitch". I could not see beyond my own negative pathologies of what it means to be Black in America, especially in a school setting where my only frame of reference were movies like *Lean on Me* (1989), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), and *Dangerous Minds* (1995). It would take some time before I began breaking down the countless *mis*-conceptions.

I had grown up with a father who was intent on showing me a larger picture of the world, while most of my peers only experienced the world within the bubbles in which their families and community created for them. My father's credo to this day is, "One job and one wife". A man who never missed a day of work in 44 years at the printing plant that started in Paterson, New Jersey and then moved to Lodi, New Jersey in the old Curtis Wright buildings. I remember visiting the plant as a child in amazement at the smells of

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chemicals and the piles and piles of stacked paper. Labor is what my father wanted me to see, to smell, to touch. Years later, post-9/11, I would sweep the floors of that printing plant waiting for the doors to close on New Jersey manufacturing. This was all before I ever considered a career in education. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to labor like my father had done for all those years. I just never thought teaching middle school English would answer that call.

Purpose of Study

Since I entered the field of education formally in October of 2006, the profession has experienced federal movements and acts such as No Child Left Behind (2001), the Common Core standards, and most recently, Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). I spent 10 years working in the lowest achieving school district in New Jersey, teaching English Language Arts (ELA) in grades 6-8 in one middle school before switching to the other middle school to serve as the English Language Arts specialist for two years. All of the schools in our district were labeled by the state Department of Education as either "Focus" schools or "Priority" schools that designated our schools as places where the state department of education needed to intervene and provide additional support and oversight. In the school in which I was the ELA specialist, we lived with state appointed Regional Achievement Center (RAC) turnaround coaches in our building on a daily basis. Some of the officials were there to truly work with the staff and community, while others were only there to ensure state mandates were being met with "fidelity". I cannot remember one day throughout my 10 years in that district where I did not have the pressure from "the state" on my mind. Eventually, we were awarded one of the few School Improvement Grants and became a SIG school. This label was for the schools that

needed the most support, but with that support through additional funding, carried the bonus weight of daily oversight. The autonomy we had been promised was nothing more than paper-thin. This was not transformative or revolutionary work by any means. Defeatism ruled our collective experience, students, families, and staff alike.

Taliaferro Baszile (2017) tells us, "Education can be revolutionary work". To that end, if education historically has been a means for "inculcating" students into a hegemonic code of beliefs and values (Gramsci, 1971), it is the educator's duty to concern themselves with developing a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/1996; Freire, 1973/1998) in order to transform the world through acts of social justice. The focus of this research project was to uncover, from the perspectives of four teachers, how they came to understand their own critical consciousness and sociopolitical development at a middle school in southern New Jersey.

In doing so, I seek to shed light on a narrative that may suggest ways to transform teacher practice throughout the region or for the greater public educational landscape in general by tracing what Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil (1999) describe as "sociopolitical development", a psychological process that "leads to and supports social and political action", (p. 256). Thus, this study seeks to show how four teachers, individually and collectively, critique issues of power and control inside and outside of their classrooms. By uncovering the ways these four teachers describe their sociopolitical development and enact critical pedagogies in their classrooms, engage in building relationships with students, families, and staff, and commit to improving equity in their school through a collective mural of their individual journeys, we may bring meaning on how best "to inform prepare pre- and in-service teacher educators about how to better

prepare teachers- and particularly White teachers-to be agents of change, disrupting inequitable educational systems (Zion, Allen, & Jean, 2015).

This inquiry is one that focuses on possibility and hope, on love as revolution, on progress rather than status quo. By observing and examining teachers' critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/1996), this study seeks to illuminate the possibilities for change within middle school classrooms through the explorations of sociopolitical development and how teachers use critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1983; hooks, 1994) in English Language Arts and Social Studies classrooms.

Beginnings of This Study

My coming to this study began the day I met my dissertation advisor, a person who understands the importance of critical reflection and meaningful action. By inviting me to participate in various educational equity teams throughout the South Jersey region, my advisor helped me grow to better understand the concepts this study seeks to illuminate. In various districts, our work with teachers, equity council groups, and curricular teams has built in me a desire and capacity to dig deeper into the concepts of critical consciousness, sociopolitical development, and equity work. Without my work with my advisor, I would have never come to know myself in the ways I do today, nor would I have met the four participants in this study.

The work I engage in with my advisor stems from a commitment to working towards disrupting the many factors that contribute to under-resourced schools and inequitable educational systems. Our partnerships with local curricular teams, culture and climate teams, and equity councils seek to promote social justice in schools by

eradicating deficit thinking mindsets, inequitable curriculum and instructional practices, and disproportionality in discipline and student success rates. To that end, this study grew from one of our local partnerships, specifically with a small group of teachers who champion school success outcomes for all students. Together with these four teachers, this study will examine how a focus on teachers' sociopolitical development and the critical pedagogies utilized in their classrooms, can lead to a dismantling of the hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) culture in schools.

Many educators are in a constant state of becoming, as well as a constant state of seeking - a seeking of new knowledge, of new collaborations, and of like-minded individuals who understand the transformative power of this profession (Giroux, 1988). I, along with my advisor, seek out spaces and individuals to partner in work that might have more equitable outcomes for students, their families, and the community at-large. It is with this intent that I have selected a site and four participants to work with and construct new knowledge with throughout this study. It will not be neat and tidy, nor will it be a showcase or illumination of what all teachers should strive to be. It will be, however, an inquiry of individual experiences, and how the complexities of those life histories and journeys can provide some intervention into how we proceed with transforming educational curriculum and practices (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Therefore, engaging in work that requires constant, or at least consistent, reflective practice, is something I feel can be linked between the lives of many teachers and my own journey towards *good* teaching and sociopolitical development. Teachers and students operate in spaces where whiteness (Leonardo, 2009; McIntosh, 1988; McIntyre, 2002; Roediger, 1991) continually permeates. The work of challenging,

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questioning, and seeking to mitigate the results of whiteness are paramount if teachers are to ever enact equitable educational practices.

Contextualizing the Problem

New Jersey students, regardless of their socioeconomic setting, are all operating within a system of *mis*-education (Woodson, 1933/2000). Under-resourced school districts in New Jersey fail to deliver an equitable education on a daily basis, a problem that has permeated for decades, which can be seen below in table 1.1. Students in predominantly white spaces are not exposed to a diverse curriculum that offers opportunity to grow their understanding of and attitudes about race and/or people who differ from themselves" (Sleeter, 2011, p. Viii). No matter the state or federal policy initiatives, no matter the government intervention, opportunities for all children remain out of reach (Alexander, 2010; Love, 2019; Meiners, 2007). Districts do not promote social justice in their schools, rather focusing on the civic laws and a perceived "morality" steeped in hegemonic culture and neo-liberal ideals of individual success and bootstrap ideals (Villanueva, 1993) of the American Dream. Further and more specifically, the literary canon, textbooks, and curricula utilized are and have been exclusive entities leaving out the voices and works of marginalized voices which leads to spaces of "symbolic violence" (Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, & Taliaferro Baszile, 2017) against Black, Brown, and gendered bodies in our classrooms. Finally, while white K-12 students make up less than 50% of the total number, the teaching force remains almost 80% white (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Without working with these teachers to develop a deeper understanding of their whiteness, beyond professional development

in multicultural and culturally responsive teaching, the problem of deficit thinking might still remain (Sleeter, 2016).

Educational researchers have critiqued the American educational system for more than 40 years, citing inequities in curriculum and instructional practices (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1990, 2008; Delpit, 1995; Taliaferro Baszile, 2015). With regards to African American students in particular, Howard (2008) describes how inequitable practices often lead to school failure for these students, and poor life options after schooling. These inequitable outcomes are the end result for far too many individuals.

Although schools nationwide have shown a slight uptick in high school graduation rates, an Education Week Research Center analysis of the National Center for Education Statistics from the 2016 - 2017 school year showed that only 78% of Black students and 80% of Hispanic students graduated compared to 89% of white students. Further, only 67% of students with disabilities and 78% of economically disadvantaged students graduated high school. Table 1.1 below shows the demographic breakdown of these student disparities:

Table 1

Breakdown of Student Assessment Disparities

	2016-17	Change from 2010-11 to 2016-17	2015-16	2014-2015	2013-2014	2012-2013	2011-2012	2010-2011
Overall Student Population	85%	6%	84%	83%	82%	81%	80%	79%
American Indian/Alaska Native	72	7	72	72	70	70	67	65
Asian/Pacific Islander	91	4	91	90	89	89	88	87
Hispanic	80	9	79	78	76	75	73	71
Black	78	11	76	75	73	71	69	67
White	89	5	88	88	87	87	86	84
Low-Income Students	78	8	78	76	75	73	72	70
English-Learners	66	9	67	65	63	61	59	57
Students with Disabilities	67	8	66	65	63	62	61	59

Other disparities are more explicit. In 2013 – 2014, "students with disabilities and
English learners made up 12% and 5% of high school enrollment, respectively, but 19%
and 11% of students held back or retained a year, respectively (U.S. Department of

Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). During the same year, 12% of Black grade 9 students were retained, almost double the rate of all students retained (6%).

In the same year, K-12 suspension rates confirmed what many educators had long understood with regards to disparities in discipline practices in their schools. When looking at a 2015 survey of the specific context of this study's school district by ED.Gov, similar trends arise in the data. With an overall district enrollment of 1,383 students, 56.3% of students were white, 22.6% Black, 10.1% were Hispanic, 4% were Asian, and 6.4% of students were two races. However, an examination of Gifted and Talented shows that of all students enrolled in the program 68.6% are white, while only 8.5% of all Black students were enrolled. Further, even though Asian students made up 4% of the total student population, these students made up 11% of the enrollment in the Gifted and Talented program.

Within the same context of the district in which this study will take place, suspension data from the same 2015 Ed.Gov survey aligns with national trends in discipline data. Again, Black and Hispanic students make up a majority of all students being suspended from school. Of the 62 total in-school suspensions given out by the district, 40.3% were given to Black students while 12.9% were given to Hispanic students. White students made up 37.1% of all students given in-school suspension, while zero Asian students received in-school suspensions. However, when reviewing at out-of-school suspension rates, the disparities increase dramatically. Of the 66 students given out-of-school suspension, almost 60% of all suspensions were given to Black and Hispanic students, while white students received 28.8% of suspensions. As many of these educational inequities and disparities can be viewed and systemic and institutional, there

are also many inequitable practices taking place in individual classrooms. In terms of individual teachers, problems of inequity continue to be explicit and troubling. Along with teachers' perceptions and implicit biases that can have a negative impact on students, other issues such as curricula and pedagogical approaches can contribute to the disparities we see in student data.

Teachers' perceptions and implicit biases can negatively impact behavioral and academic outcomes for students of color. Specifically, white teachers' implicit prejudices or stereotypes within our current mainstream Euro-American culture become the mode for which all students must strive to assimilate into if they are to succeed. Rather than including multiple perspectives and voices to enter into the dialogue and constructed knowledge of our classrooms, students of color face racism and discrimination on a daily basis (Sleeter, 2011).

Without a true sense of what curricula and pedagogical practices are being provided to the students in their classrooms, the outcomes can be much more than not passing a test or being proficient on standardized assessments. As Johnson, et al. (2017) make clear, if a curriculum of study "reinscribes and perpetuates oppression" students of color will continue to face violent attacks in the classroom. Violent attacks on their humanity will be perpetuated by the choice of texts in their classrooms and the manner in which these texts and social issues are discussed in their classrooms (Johnson, et al., 2017), if a critical pedagogy is not incorporated. And, in our predominantly white school districts, we are perpetuating a system of oppression, as well. For if the white mind is not liberated from this hegemonic culture in our classrooms, can anyone else be liberated? Baldwin (1963/1990) reminds us that, "The price of the liberation of the white people is

the liberation of the blacks – the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind" (p. 130). We are all bound to this colonial system, bound in our minds and our actions (Memmi, 1967/1991).

In the face of such daunting statistics and an educational culture that seems to be embracing a neoliberal agenda (Meshulam & Apple, 2014) with increasing vigor, I was lucky enough to meet four teachers who in their 20-plus years of teaching have not and will not buy into the idea that *good* teaching cannot take place during this educational and political climate. Four teachers who do not believe that test scores are more important than building long-lasting positive relationships with their students. Four teachers who stand up for what is *right* and *fair*, and who do so before, during, and after school hours. Four teachers, full of as many contradictions that exist in the human experience, but who also take the time and energy to examine and reexamine their own life's trajectories to come to a better understanding of who they are and how they define *good* teaching. Four teachers who have labored together in the same school and social context for the past 20 years, and constantly seek to improve not only their own craft and standpoints, but also the craft and standpoints of the people they work with on a daily basis. Through a collective effort to better the life outcomes of their students and the world they inhabit, these four teachers have advocated for their students and families in their school district, for the staff they work with, and for each other. This *good* teaching is an on-going and ever-present endeavor and one in which this research study is intertwined.

Introduction of Participants

Four veteran middle school teachers from New Jersey collaborated with me on this research inquiry at Central Middle School, a place where they have worked together for the past 20 years. Jacqueline Williams, who grew up in a white, middle-class family in southern New Jersey, has been a special education teacher and has taught middle school English Language Arts for over 20 years at Central Middle School. Jacqueline earned her Doctorate in Education and is the school advisor for the Girls in Action student action group that discusses current social issues and collaborates to take action against gender inequities. While earning her Doctorate in Education, Jacqueline advocated for herself and served as a role model for other women by defending herself in court against an abusive husband. This experience is one of many that helped shape her understanding of the world and how she wanted to educate her students. Jacqueline's love for her students is only surpassed by her love for her own children, a love that stems from deep daily reflection.

Carter Willings also grew up in southern New Jersey and went to an average-sized public high school, nestled in the middle of one of the original Levittown developments. Carter reflects fondly on his childhood, but as one of the few African American kids in his neighborhood, he can also trace a few hate-filled memories that he has shared with me and his students. He did not know he wanted to be a teacher, but a chance meeting with one of his former high school football coaches changed his trajectory. His coach asked him if he would like to coach, and after graduating from Colgate University, Carter entered the world of public education. Much like me, Carter was a coach first, and then completed an alternate route program to earn his teaching

certification in middle school Social Studies and Science. He originally taught at an alternative school for boys for 4 years before landing his job at Central Middle School where he has been for the past twenty-plus years. Carter's African American father was in the military, so he was raised primarily by his mother, an immigrant from Japan, who worked third shift factory jobs. His mother chose to work third shift jobs so she would not have to worry as much about any language barriers that impact her time at work.

Ruth Gilbert is also a special education teacher who teaches English Language Arts in a pull-out resource classroom with 29 years of experience at Central Middle School. For the past 19 years, she has also served as the teacher's association president, advocating for all teachers in the building. Ruth grew up in a middle-class, all White neighborhood in Mishawaka, Indiana. Her family moved to Michigan and then moved again to southern New Jersey only a month before her 16th birthday. Originally, Ruth strived to be an athletic director, but soon decided to teach adaptive Physical Education. She remembers wanting to nurture people like her younger sister who had a disability and never received the education she deserved. Ruth fights for the underdogs, and is vocal in her opinions on fairness, equity, and justice. Together with Carter, she has fought for 20 years to implement more equitable practices at Central Middle School. Growing up in a mostly Republican home and social environment, Ruth believes exposure to cultures and people unlike herself is the best way to understand the full picture of the human experience.

Finally, William Devers has taught middle school Social Studies for the past 24 years, 4 years at a school for students with behavioral exceptionalities, and the past 20 years at Central Middle School (CMS). Since his years in high school, William has

wanted to be a teacher and a coach. Like Carter and me, past teachers and coaches had a direct influence on the trajectory of his career path. William was also raised in southern Jersey in a neighborhood where White and Black children rarely lived or played together. His love for Social Studies stems from his mother's civic-minded passions, and endless pursuits for equality in his hometown. William labors over his pedagogy on a daily basis, but is passionate about teaching hard history, facilitating civil discourse around topics of race, gender, and oppression. He is equally passionate about coaching the middle school baseball team at CMS. William's teaching hangs tightly to the United States Constitution and stands firm in his belief that all people be treated equally and equitably. For this reason, he started three student activity clubs at Central Middle School: The Young Republic, the Gender-Sexuality Alliance, and a flag-football club.

Throughout the past 20 years, Jacqueline and Ruth have also both worked as in-class support teachers in Carter's Social Studies and Science classes, and William's Social Studies classes. By working so closely with each other in various classroom settings and on various committees, these four educators have grown together and supported one another inside and beyond the classroom walls. Further, it is important to note that Ruth and William live in the same neighborhood as me in southern Jersey, only a few tenths of a mile from one another. This fact cannot be overlooked, as many of our geographical, racial, and economic standpoints certainly manifested throughout the study.

The participants all see themselves as experienced educators and advocates who believe that building relationships and striving for more equitable student experiences in school is the ultimate goal of education. To that end, each participant sees themselves as part of a small group of well-intentioned humans working to make the world a better

place both inside and outside of Central Middle School. I have spent time with each teacher in their classrooms and at equity council meetings, community gatherings, climate team meetings, and in various school settings. I have spoken with each of them at length during kitchen table conversations, group gatherings, through text messages, – group and individual – and over lunches and brunch. I have seen them teach individually as well as together on a few occasions. I seek to present full, individual representations of each teacher, as well as a story of their collective will, experiences, and agency that traces their journeys towards sociopolitical development and will add to the field of transformative practices in schools.

Research Questions

Specifically, this study explores the following research questions that illuminated the collective journey of the educators for the past twenty years, and also led the way for you, when I joined this journey:

1. How do these four middle school English Language Arts and History teachers describe their journey towards Sociopolitical Development?

2. To what extent do these four middle school teachers' practices incorporate and enact sociopolitical development in their classrooms?

3. How do each of these teachers explain coming to "know" (about) and talk about social justice as well as what they have done differently and who has influenced them?

Significance of Study

This study is presented as mural built from the tenets of portraiture as methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), and captured the lived experiences and journeys toward sociopolitical development of four middle school teachers in the southern Jersey region. By shedding light on the daily interactions and classroom practices of teachers within a specific context who share a common goal of better life outcomes for their students, this study has the possibility to engage its audience on two levels: 1) Inspire teachers to engage with their own sociopolitical development and 2) Spark ideas in readers about how to intervene with inequitable practices. Teachers who begin the process of sociopolitical development (SPD) to develop their critical consciousness can enact a pedagogy and (reimagine) curriculum that responds to the individual needs of their students, while also raising the critical consciousness of their students. Through direct dialogue, relationship building, and praxis, teachers can forge with their students a collaborative environment that promotes social justice and hope in their classrooms. Classrooms such as these can be the small revolutionary sites our educational institutions need to enact real change in our world. Through the examination of teachers' sociopolitical development and instructional practices, in this study I seek to illuminate how classrooms can be transformed into a place of learning where a more responsive curriculum and pedagogical approach (Gay 2002; 2010) benefits the educational experience of all students.

By opening spaces for students to engage with multiple perspectives of this diverse world, they can engage in courageous conversations with their peers and "develop empathy for the points of view and perspectives of various groups and will

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increase their ability to think critically (Banks, et. al, 2001, p.198). Gay (2010) believes

we must support our students in becoming positive citizens who view one another and

their cultural differences as valuable to their own "societal and personal development" (p.

31). As Zion, Allen, and Jean (2015) assert, we need to truly examine our own identities

and face "the realities of individual and institutionalized systems of oppression, in our

schools, communities, and universities" so we can begin the necessary work of exploring

how we can overcome some of the barriers in our schools, for this study, beginning with

curriculum (p. 931). In the Figure 1 and Table 2 below, I lay out the framework for how

sociopolitical development can increase the critical consciousness of not only teachers,

but the students and school community, at large.

Figure 1

Advancing Critical Consciousness

Advancing Critical Consciousness

SELF

1. Critical Social Analysis

2. Collective Identification

Sociopolitical Development

4. Sociopolitical Action (Personal, Group, Mass)

3. Political Self-Efficacy

THE CONSTANT STATE OF **BECOMING**...
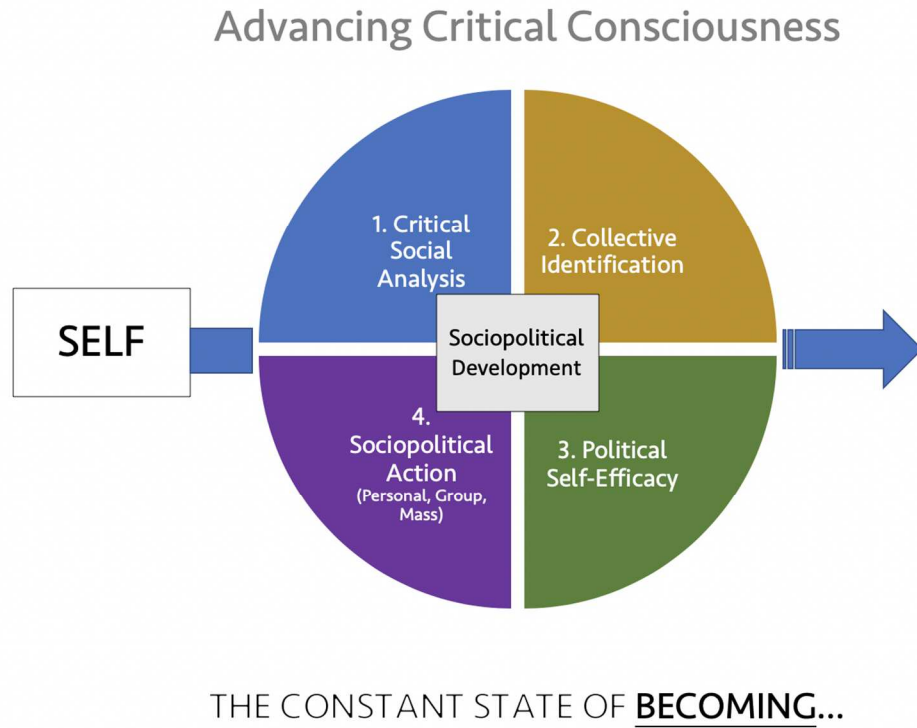
In figure 1, I detailed how I understand the relationship between sociopolitical development and how that advances one's critical consciousness. It is within this framework that we can imagine what sociopolitical development looks like for teachers, for students, and even for schools and systems.

Table 2

A Framework for Advancing Critical Consciousness

	For teachers	For students	For schools/ systems
Critical Social Analysis	- Critical self-reflection - Participating in the development of a framework for "good teaching" - Understanding biases, critical practices - Book clubs	- Critical self-reflection - Understand biases, critical practices - Research & projects	- Purpose of schooling - Framework for "good teaching" - Understanding biases - Book clubs
Collective Identification	- Facilitating professional development - Revising curriculum - Teacher's union - Shared values	- Shared values - Shared experiences - GSA - Student voice - Student government	- Partnering with community - Partnering with universities and local districts
Political Self-Efficacy	- Participation on the school's Equity council - Participation on the school's Culture Team - Facilitating GSA - Facilitating of the Young Republic	- GSA - Student government - Community town halls	- Equity council - Creation of Culture team - Reforming curriculum - Community town halls

	For teachers	For students	For schools/ systems
Sociopolitical Action	- Facilitating PD - Building deeper content knowledge, critical pedagogies, healing relationships - Participation on the school's Equity council - Facilitating Gender & Sexuality Alliance - Facilitating Young Republic	- Participation in the Gender & Sexuality Alliance - Participation in the Young Republic - Community town halls	- Policies Culture - Curriculum - Equity council - Community town halls

In table 2, I have detailed only a few ways I saw each member of the school community engage with the dimensions of sociopolitical development. When teachers, students, and schools engage in the four dimensions of sociopolitical development, the individual and collective critical consciousness of an entire school community is advanced. It is through this critical reflection and sociopolitical action that teachers, students, and schools can begin to dismantle and destroy hegemonic practices.

For the context of this study, it is important to explicitly note some of the ways teachers can take action in their classrooms and advance critical consciousness in their

classrooms. I add this note because, even if they cannot make the school and district change, they have the power to reflect and take action, in their own classrooms, relationships, and pedagogies, which will ultimately lead to the advancement of their students' critical consciousness. By engaging in critical practices, teachers can also learn about their own positionalities and how their personal biases manifest in the classroom (Gay, 2013). By engaging in difficult conversations grounded in critical texts about race, power, and privilege, teachers can begin the long, but necessary, process of overcoming any anxiety they may have had towards issues of race, ethnicity, or cultural diversity (Gay, 2013). This work is imperative to setting the stage for any challenging of the canon and entering into critical practices with their students. For this study, I worked with four teachers who may not know the academic terms to name their approach to teaching, but they certainly understand that their job is to engage students in ways that critique the status quo and to seek ways to include multiple perspectives throughout their studies. In the next section of this chapter, I will detail how I conceptualize my own journey and process of advancing my critical consciousness.

Conceptual Framework

Within a social justice framework informed by my personal understandings of critical pedagogy (Dewey, 1916; Dubois, 1903/1965; hooks, 1994; Freire, 1970/1996; Giroux, 1983; Leonardo, 2013; McClaren, 1997; Woodson, 1933/2000), I will continue to question the constructs of our historical and current educational institutions to redefine and reexamine literacies as it pertains to all people in the 21st century. Grounded in critical pedagogical theories and Feminist Standpoint Theory (hooks, 1984/2000; Hill Collins, 2004; Blanchett & Zion, 2010) to frame my perspective, I can see and begin to

understand the power and privilege (Johnson, 2018) that lies within daily human interactions. This study is framed within teacher identity studies that seek to examine and "recognize/address, describe, and critically confront historically institutionalized racial inequalities, racism, and whiteness" (Jupp, Berry, & Lensmire, 2016, p. 1152) within the present educational climate while also focusing on how individuals act and interact within these systems.

This concept of "constantly becoming" is something I first learned about during my time completing my MA and MFA at William Paterson University. Up until that point in my life, I had always viewed academics strictly as a vehicle of attainment. A next step towards a career, family, and wealth. Not until I heard the words, "The artist is in the constant state of becoming" fall from the wise mouth of Bob Dylan in Martin Scorsese's (2005) documentary, *No Direction Home*, about the artistic trajectory of Bob Dylan, did I first come to see that education could be a tool used for knowing myself and critiquing the systems in which we all operate. What I didn't know then, and I am still working to better understand, especially as a white cis-gendered male, is that this process of becoming is just as much a process of unbecoming - an explicit attempt to unlearn so much of what I had learned in school, in my community, and through the media. This process is not and was never an Orwellian attempt at forgetting what I had learned along the way, but rather a stripping away of how I had come to know the world. This stripping away, this process of unbecoming and becoming again, comes in waves (see figure 2), waves in which sometimes I have successfully ridden their current too short, and other times completely wiped out on the drop into the wave. This is how I see myself now as I engage in the process of becoming, and reflecting back, this is how I see myself in the

past as well. It is within this metaphor that I have conceptualized this study and how I see the many elements of the educational system interacting with one another upon and within each wave.

The biggest idea is that of the constant attempt to understand how to ride the wave of identity examination. As moments can propel us forward and then release and pull us back again, our identity remains in a constant state of fluidity, unfinished and never easily defined. That first moment of catching a wave, a first ride, is a rush disconnected to most, if not all, prior experiences. In most cases, we are alone on that first ride. Whether we ride it to shore or fall, we are inevitably pulled back, as we can never beat the tide, no matter our will. Eventually, we learn to let go, and embrace the pull rather than clinging to our comfort within this environment of beautiful chaos. Instead, we choose to try again in an effort to find balance. We are infants upon our surfboards, infants and toddlers as DuBois (1903/1965) and Baldwin (1963/1990) described white America. With each attempt to ride a new wave, we learn more. At times, we will feel in unison with the energy of the wave, with Nature, while other times off balance scrambling with all our might for an elusive control. Even the slightest of "missteps" can send us flying face first into the face of a giant, growing swell. Even then, at the moment of complete crisis, there is an endless current of opportunity to re-engage, climb up once again, and seek to find an understanding of how the wave operates and manifests. The image that follows is fluid and will forever remain in a dynamic state beyond the pages of this inquiry:

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework
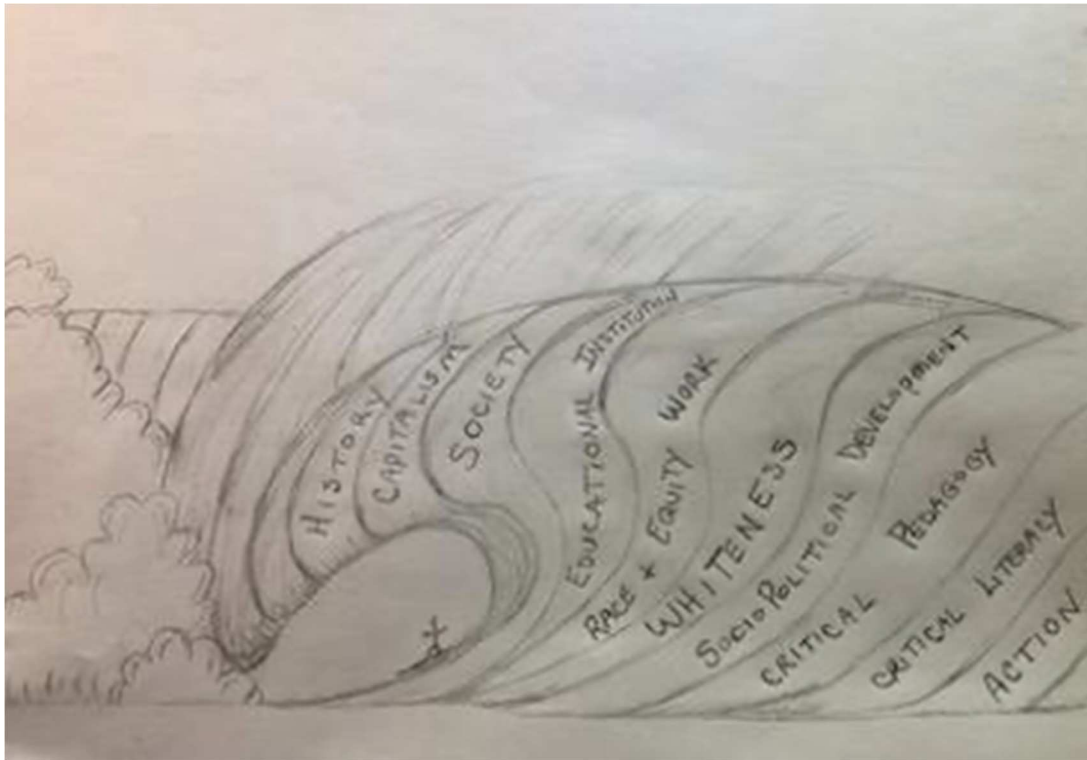
When we finally find the courage and the momentary balance, we can take aim and ride the wave again, embracing the rush and onslaught of indecision and unknowing. For it is it that unknowing that we can begin to construct a new base of knowledge. Again, we are pulled back. We tumble. We make small mistakes. We learn. We watch others ride waves the complete distance to the shore with ease. We are humbled. We grow. We continue to struggle, but with more ease. We let go of who we think we are, and what we think we know.

Critical Whiteness Studies & Critical Literacy

Literacy, in terms of civil rights, is much more than only a way to express oneself – even expression is suppressed at its basic levels – it is a way to create capital in all forms (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). Leonardo (2004) contests that white privilege is a term that actually masks the real problem of racism: white supremacy. Leonardo writes that even when "white" people disavow their white privilege, they still find themselves in a position to assert dominance over people of color, "It conjures up images of domination happening behind the backs of whites, rather than on the backs of people of color" (p. 138). With that said, by working within this framework, this inquiry will seek to uncover ways that whiteness impacts our current educational system and how a small group of teachers make sense of and try to disrupt these constructs through the use of care, hope, and critical literacy (Shor, 1999).

Literacy, specifically, critical literacy is a form of cultural citizenship and politics (Giroux, 1992). In doing so, populations of people who have been silenced and marginalized will now be empowered to dismantle existing forms of oppression. In the classroom, this form of empowerment can create ways for students to participate in the discourse and decisions that shape society and history. In this way, students will have the access to resources, skills, and knowledge that empowers them to construct authentic identities in relation to others and resist acts of subjugation and violence (Giroux, 1988). This social justice-oriented concept of education builds upon Freire's (1970/1996) understandings of praxis as an essential component of education.

Freire's work (1970/1996) was fundamental to the development of critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Freire (1970/1996) believed that traditional modes of education do not develop a critical consciousness in students. Instead, students remain silent sitting as objects who are in classrooms solely to be receptacles of handed-over knowledge. If students were empowered to reject their passive position, they could engage with one another in praxis of change through the process of dialogue and communion. The idea of teachers actively supporting students' growth as active learners is a crucial tenet of Freirean philosophy on teaching. Freire (1970/1996) believed that within the act of teaching, one must view themselves as a learner. In this way, classroom observations during this study will seek to uncover how teachers and students come together both as teachers and learners, ready to partner and engage in critical thinking.

Standpoint Theory

Within this framework, I also included a focus on Standpoint Theory (Blanchett & Zion, 2010; Harding, 2004). An understanding of Standpoint Theory is necessary within a critical framework, as understanding one's positionality within various contexts will have a direct impact on the manner in which one reflects on that positionality creating further critical consciousness and sociopolitical development. In all, this framework sets the foundation for challenging issues of oppression and marginalization in our schools and society.

Methods

This study utilized a phenomenological approach, grounded in sociopolitical and critical theories, as well as decolonizing research methods (Darder, 2019). By framing

this study within a portraiture approach, it relied upon some of the artistic techniques and goals of ethnography by seeking to capture and understand how a small group of teachers think, behave, and interact as within a given context. By utilizing this methodological approach, I sought to capture "the essence of the human experience" and "to record and interpret the perspectives of the people" in the study (Hill-Brisbane, 2008, p.644). Along with this approach, this study was informed by a decolonizing form of critical inquiry that "seeks to encompass an underlying commitment to the conceptual rethinking and transformation of norms, as a qualitative process of analysis" (Darder, 2019, p. 8). As a phenomenological study, specifically, this study sought to illuminate the possibilities for change within multiple middle school classrooms through the use of critical pedagogy and observing and examining teachers committed to sociopolitical development. By bridging the gap between art and science, this method provides opportunities for the researcher to enter into the work as a co-constructor of new knowledge throughout the process of inquiry. Further, although there have been studies that focused on the sociopolitical development of youth, very little has been written about the sociopolitical development of teachers. To that end, this study stays within the traditions of phenomenological inquiry by "writing about a phenomenon in which very little has been written (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000, p. 644).

Building from tenets of portraiture methodology, I seek to "capture the complexity and aesthetic of human experience" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4), by listening *for* each participants' story, rather than only listening to their stories (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This does not mean that this inquiry is "designed to be documents of idealization or celebration" of the participants (p. 9). Rather, in the

search for "goodness" this inquiry aims to establish an expected balance of "virtue and evil" and "strength and vulnerability" in each of the participants. This balance is central to understanding what a search for *goodness* encompasses. To that end, it is my responsibility to document and analyze the countless ways goodness will manifest and be expressed throughout this study.

One of the main reasons for extending portraiture methodology into a mural is its dependence upon metaphors to carry the message of inquiry as well as striving to connect the researcher and audience through universal themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). To capture the "feelings, perspective, and experience" of not only the participants in this study, but also the relationships being formed with the researcher, a metaphor for how I see this study's conceptual framework is needed.

Mural as Meaning

To better understand the journeys of each participant towards sociopolitical development, a more complete image was needed. In fact, a methodology focused on the "revolutionary-not-yet" (Taliaferro Baszile, 2016) was needed. A methodology that would live beyond the study, our current social climate, and possibly beyond the lifespan of the participants, and help the community think about their local issues now and in the future (Bliss & Lamont, 2010; Conrad, 1995; Song & Gammel, 2018). To that end, this study utilized the principals of mural artwork that captured the participants' journeys through their personal and professional histories, as well as some of the author's stories along the way. To capture these experiences, a line of inquiry was needed, therefore positioning the author as the inquisitor. However, beyond the design of the study, the

final mural was co-constructed by the author and each of the participants through "kitchen table reflexivity" (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015), member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rossman & Rallis, 2017), and a shared decision-making policy that guided the study throughout its entirety. Through this use of internal validity, the mural became a shared vision created throughout the many iterations of data collection and analysis.

By considering the background, middle ground, and foreground of the collective experiences of all participants and the local and regional context in one grand image, this mural seeks to capture the overall themes that advance critical consciousness: Critical Social Analysis, Collective Identification, Political Self-Efficacy, and Sociopolitical Development. Through the expression of images (moments) captured throughout the data collection period, and in listening for the stories being told during shared dialogues and critical reflections, this mural acts as a way to capture all the messages that were sent out to the world during the data collection period (LaBoskey, 2007). This method of inquiry and analysis has the power to "stimulate community pride and commitment to justice while teaching outsiders about the struggles of traditionally pressed people," (Conrad, 1995, p. 98).

Researcher Role and Assumptions

Through a critical constructivist paradigm, I find myself searching for information to assist with asking the right questions to the many problems our country is facing with regards to education. As a teacher and coach in northeast New Jersey public schools for a decade, there were times I was inspired, surprised, awakened and disappointed. I was blessed to have the opportunity to grow at a steady pace and refine my pedagogy over the

course of those ten years. Even there, the framework of whiteness allowed me to attain status and opportunities I most likely would have never achieved without such power and privileges awarded to me based on my racialized and gendered position. I certainly would have never gotten my foot in the door had I not known the principal of the school, who has also benefited from the racial and class structure of whiteness (Roediger, 1991). However, my teaching tenure was earned on its merit, as far as I know (Although, there may be more to that story). One could theorize that I was given my tenure simply because I was a white male teaching English in an economically marginalized school district that thought they needed my "expertise" within that particular context. At the very least, I experienced small advantages along the way, irrespective of my abilities and commitment to my craft.

Through this time spent in northeast New Jersey public schools, where our schools consistently ranked near the bottom of the state rankings and were visited by state officials on an almost daily basis, I learned that an equitable education was beyond my control as an individual classroom teacher or educational coach. Policies, mandates, government oversight teams and programmatic shifts ruled the day-to-day operations of our school with little to no voice coming from our students, their families, or the community at-large. Through my multiple English and Writing degree programs at William Paterson University, my ideas on the subject only came to a deeper understanding as I saw in each of my courses what literary texts were valued, and which ones were left out of the canon.

The concepts that will be examined in this study's research questions stem from an intellectualism described by Said (1994) as a person who is "fueled by care and

affection" rather than by a sense of professionalism and selfish profit-seeking (p. 82). Said writes as a Palestinian-American who utilizes his personal historical context to enlighten emerging intellectuals entering any field of study. By examining a few global connections to the United States context, we can uncover a history of oppression that's roots continue to grow throughout our country's institutions. I have never been perceived as an outsider, as described in Said's (1994) work in intellectualism, yet my mind has always driven me far from most people. Generally, I am accepted into many social and professional circles, which makes it easy for me to assimilate into the professionalism described by Said. However, I would much rather work towards the "amateurism" Said (1994) details throughout his work. By doing so, I can commit to preserving and furthering causes that truly seek social justice. By assimilating too deep into professionalism, I run the risk of corrupting my thoughts for the betterment of the capitalistic venture that is the campus institution. This is not something I wish to become, I would much rather focus on social justice and if professionalism can be a part of that goal and ethos, then so be it. This means that when I enter a social sphere, specifically an educational research sphere, my acceptance into that sphere is usually welcomed and rarely questioned. With all of that said, I must acknowledge that my role as researcher is embedded in power and privilege, and without constant reflection throughout this study, I may have perpetuated the systems in which this study seeks to dismantle.

Organization of the Dissertation

In chapter 2, I examine literature in sociopolitical development and critical consciousness, racial identity, critical whiteness, and the tools critically conscious teachers utilize such as critical pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and critical

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literacy. I also lay out the conceptual framework used in the development of the dissertation questions and link these bodies of literature to the scope of the problem and the focus of the research I plan to conduct. In Chapter 3 I detail my methodology—including a discussion of the participants, the variety of data collection methods to ensure a shared knowledge construction and meaning-making with the participants. In Chapters 4 -7, I present the individual portraits. In Chapter 8, I provide my analysis of the data and the creation of the mural, and Chapter 9 includes the discussion, limitations, conclusions and lessons learned. In this final chapter, I also explore implications for further research, and implications for schools that are striving for more equitable outcomes.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to explore teacher journeys toward sociopolitical development, and to explore how teachers described and demonstrated coming to know about and talk about issues of social justice, and how their teaching relates to social justice. In this chapter, I review literature across various theoretical areas. First, I discuss several studies on critical consciousness and sociopolitical development. Then, I transition to research literature on racial identity and critical whiteness. I conclude this section, by discussing the research literature on critical pedagogies such as culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies, as well as critical literacy.

Background to the Problem

Since the turn of the twentieth century, our schools have been sites of perpetual "*mis*-education" (Woodson, 1933/2000), places where racism (DuBois, 1903/1965) manifests and is reaffirmed through curriculum, standards, and pedagogical approaches. Without a challenge to the hegemonic norms (Gramsci, 1971) and colonial mindset (Memmi, 1967/1991) of our current and historical educational institutions, students of color and other marginalized students will continue to be viewed as "unsuccessful" and "failing" (Delpit, 1995). One way to counter these assumptions is to understand how the development of one's critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/1996; Freire & Freire, 1973/1998) can further one's sociopolitical development (Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil, 1999). In the context of this study, when thinking about the development of teachers' critical consciousness, we can also then think about how that will lead to the development of the students' and school community's critical consciousness, as well.

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For many students, English Language Arts and Social Studies classrooms have become perpetual testing sites, where rote skills and test preparation are the norm. As the United States continues to see growth in ethnic and cultural diversity, our schools continue to promote an education ruled by Eurocentric standards and hegemonic codes. These overt and covert structures continue to marginalize students of color every step of the way (Banks, 1994; Sleeter, 2003; Gay, 2010). Many classrooms, in many school districts, do not offer spaces for critical engagement where students and teachers learn from one another on a daily basis, creating collaborative environments where social justice is at the forefront of their learning experience.

To many scholars, racism is at the forefront of such classroom design where authentic dialogue and collaboration do not exist (Memmi, 1967/1991; Freire; 1970/1996; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The core of this inquiry seeks to find out how middle school teachers of English Language Arts and Social Studies make sense of and to what extent take action against issues of racism, hegemony, and oppression in their classrooms. Throughout this inquiry, I will enter into conversations with four middle school teachers to see how they understand to what extent they enact these practices in their classrooms.

Many teachers never strive to undo or resist the dominant forms of knowledge construction nor the deficit-minded approaches they bring to the classroom. However, educators who find value in working towards more equitable outcomes for all students, and who strive to reflect and take action on a daily basis will continue to search for the missing pieces in the puzzle of social justice work. Like Sisyphus, these teachers know the doing is in the struggle, that in the striving we come to a place of better and deeper

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understanding. In pushing the rock up the hill and watching it roll back down, they, too, are like the surfer who wipes out time and time again yet finds a way to stand back atop that board ready for the next wave.

In Table 3, I detail how I see each element of this review of the literature connecting to the theoretical framework of this study: advancing towards a deeper critical consciousness. I then show the connections between the elements of critical consciousness and how they connect to Racial Identity and Critical Whiteness Studies. Finally, I detail the connections between the literature for Teaching for Social Justice Through Critical Pedagogy and how they connect to the four elements of advancing critical consciousness.

Table 3

Connecting the Literature to the Framework for Advancing Critical Consciousness

Literature Review Section	Element of Advancing CC
Critical Consciousness & Sociopolitical Development	Critical social analysis; Collective identification; Political self-efficacy; Sociopolitical action
Racial Identity & Critical Whiteness	Critical social analysis; Collective identification

Literature Review Section	Element of Advancing CC
Teaching for Social Justice Through Critical Pedagogy	Critical social analysis; Political self-efficacy; Sociopolitical action

The literature review that follows is guided by Table 3 and will go into detail how this study enters into conversation with each aspect of the theories included.

Searching for the Missing Piece to the Puzzle

Critical Consciousness

To better understand our own biases created through social norms and our own *mis*-education, as well as understanding how we are positioned in each of the social identity categories, and thus privileged and oppressed, and how that informs our values, beliefs, and biases, we must investigate and interrogate our own positions and place in the world (Freire, 1970/1996). As we begin to develop critical consciousness, issues of racism, sexism, classism, and other ways we oppress and marginalize will come into greater focus. By reflecting on this newly gained knowledge, we begin to view the world through a new lens. This lens is one in which we begin to see the world through a critical eye that examines the constructs and implications of race, sex, and class (Davis, 1981; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). We can no longer look past the impact of such oppressive institutions such as racism. This is a scholarly sentiment that dates back to the turn of the

twentieth century (Dubois, 1903/1965), one that continues to permeate our schools, today.

Throughout the many progressions in education since the dawn of the 20th century in the United States, critical consciousness has remained at the foundation of each step forward. Being aware of oneself and society (hooks, 1984) is the first step in developing what Freire (1970/1996) described as "conscientização". As it translates to the classroom, teachers who develop a critical consciousness understand the many key elements at play in their classrooms (Gay & Kirkland, 2003). The context in which they teach, the texts utilized in instruction, as well as the teacher's approach to teaching can all have lasting effects on how effective they are with their instruction. Further, teachers who develop an ability and habit of self-reflexivity (Gay & Kirkland, 2003), can examine the racial and cultural implications of their practices. In classrooms with teachers who enact tenets of sociopolitical development acts of symbolic violence against students of color, especially Black students, will be lessened, if not eliminated (Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, & Taliaferro Baszile, 2017). For example, with a focus on Black literature, teachers and students can enter spaces where critical consciousness can be developed through a dialogue of shared teaching and learning (Freire, 1973/1998) in the truest sense of communion.

Cherry-McDaniel's (2017) work shows how by implementing Black textualities to English language arts classrooms is one way to promote critical consciousness, "Critically conscious students must be taught that knowing who they are and knowing how to strategically navigate citizenship is ultimately to act on their own behalves and on the behalves of others" (Cherry-McDaniel, 2017, p. 41). When teachers and students

view each other as subjects rather than objects, students can begin to think of themselves as part of the larger community. The inclusion of Black textualities takes these understandings to a deeper level beyond the individual. Students who become critically conscious will then understand the importance of being members of communities and organized groups. The author asks us to imagine a classroom where students take action together through the use and collaboration of their favorite hashtags such as #WOKE, #amInext, #lovewins, and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. Further, the author urges us to imagine classrooms where, "Black textualities can provide new forms of texts and embrace new ways of reading and articulating the world, for the purpose of self-determination, performing citizenship, and engaging in meaningful activism (Cherry-McDaniel, 2017, p. 46).

One major question is whether or not these tools can be used to assess the critical consciousness of people who have not been historically marginalized. Further, by only focusing on racial and social inequalities, the scales suffer from not being framed within a critical understanding of how intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Lorde, 1984/2007) works and manifests. Obviously, these tools can add to our general understandings of how social oppression impacts individuals in society, however, no one person can be defined without including their entire existence (Moore, 2019).

Gay and Kirkland (2003) outlined how personal and professional critical consciousness concerning racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity should be a major component of teacher preparation programs. The authors argue that many preservice teachers, who happen to be White females, find three key ways of avoiding development of their personal and professional critical consciousness. The main strategies of resistance

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include silence, diversion, guilt, and benevolent liberalism. The authors believe that the necessity for Culturally Responsive Teaching stems from the ideas that a) multicultural education and educational equity and excellence are deeply interconnected; b) teacher accountability involves being more self-conscious, critical, and analytical of one's own teaching beliefs and behaviors; c) teachers need to develop deeper knowledge and consciousness about what is to be taught, how, and to whom.

For students of color, improving educational opportunities are directly tied to the self-reflexivity and critical consciousness development of classroom teachers. Teachers also need to be made aware of the potential obstacles of this development or they will forever find themselves pushing back against personal and professional growth. One of the general problems teachers have is that they confuse reflection with describing issues, ideas, and events. In most cases, true critical reflection means you have to consider these issues, but that most teachers do reflection only through their own lens, and don't think about other views. This problem is magnified and coupled with that fact that preservice teachers very rarely have the opportunity to see what true self-reflexivity looks like, as it is rarely, if ever, modeled for them.

Sociopolitical Development

Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil (1999) presented a theory of sociopolitical development (SPD) centering the "African American struggle for social justice and its spiritual underpinnings" (p. 256). Sociopolitical development is built upon Freire's (1970/1996) concept of critical consciousness. Specifically, sociopolitical development is the psychological process that leads to and supports social and political action (p. 256).

Further, sociopolitical development can be described as more than a cognitive component of one's development. At its core is the capacity to actively "help create a just society" which is an essential component of this process (Watts, Williams, & Jager, 2003). Informed by reflection and action, critical consciousness can be viewed as a precursor to SPD. According to Watts, et al, (2003), sociopolitical development is a relative notion.

As Zion, et al. (2015) inform us, "In order to improve the academic and affective experiences for students, teachers must be prepared to work effectively with students who come from various backgrounds, and who have been traditionally underserved by the educational system" (p. 915). SPD, as informed by critical and anti-racist pedagogy, and "grounded in the larger theories of critical consciousness and liberation psychology" seeks to disrupt societal and cultural oppression (p. 917).

Watts & Hipolito-Delgado (2015) further the conversation about how sociopolitical development should have the ultimate goal of helping "young people make the transition from insight to action" (p.850) by focusing on youth community organizing. In this literature review of scholarly journal articles that mentioned critical consciousness and were based on critical consciousness theory and practices, the authors found that there was a focus on discussions of programs, activities, and techniques to foster and promote critical consciousness but no focus on action. This literature review of 30 theoretical articles yielded shared values and concepts that further inform how critical consciousness can be understood in terms of structures and activities: shared values, fostering awareness of sociopolitical circumstances, encouraging critical questioning, fostering collective identity, and taking sociopolitical action.

For white teachers in particular, sociopolitical development offers a pathway to better understanding one's position within systems of power and privilege. This act of "kitchen table reflexivity" (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015) holds great magnitude for teachers who pursue an anti-racist pedagogy. Without such questioning of privilege and power, sociopolitical development cannot be achieved. For many, if not all, white teachers, "internalized ideologies that justify the racial status quo, devalues cultural diversity, and fails to account for white people's beliefs and attitudes" (Zion, et al., 2015, p. 919) are consistently brought into their classrooms unchecked. Before we can take action against such biases and oppressive systems, we must explore our own racial and cultural experiences, and critically examine how those experiences and values impact our curricular and instructional practices.

Studies have shown teacher progress with regards to SPD. Findings from a 2015 study (Zion, et al.), utilizing the sociopolitical development stage framework designed by Watts and colleagues (1999), found evidence of "teachers exploring their own identities, understanding the broader, social systems in which they and their students live, and developing skills to make changes within those systems" (p. 921).

Specifically, for white teachers, Zion, et al. (2015) found core features of SPD that resulted from their engagement in a Critical Civic Inquiry (CCI). By choosing to enroll in a year-long course, teachers learn how to create and implement curricula and instructional choices based on student input, as well as adopting the core features of SPD. As stated earlier, the core features discussed in this study were Understanding Self Within Systems of Power and Privilege, Uncovering How the System Creates and Perpetuates Oppression, and Building Skills to Take Action. This study has an explicit

connection to White Racial Identity theory, that will be covered later. The key points of data analysis in this study were autobiographical papers, curricular and instructional documents, a final write up of their critical consciousness project, discussion forums, and interviews with each teacher participant. The resulting themes were tied directly to the core features of SPD, and each participant had concrete examples of unpacking their privilege and making it more concrete, as well as gaining a better understanding of how systems harm students. Maybe most importantly was that each of the participants began to take steps toward taking action against oppressive systems while still working within the system (p. 930). Zion, et al. (2015) did caution, however, that having the participants "self-report" their findings, it was difficult to determine the full breadth and depth of each participant's growth in SPD.

Racial Identity & Critical Whiteness

Critical Whiteness

From our elementary schools on upward to our college-based basic reading and writing courses, we are providing a disservice to many of our students who enter our classrooms from backgrounds where their languages and cultures are not valued in a setting governed by the rules of whiteness (Leonardo, 2009; McIntosh, 1988; McIntyre, 2002; Roediger, 1991). The issue of what is being taught in our classrooms is a historic problem that has only become worse through standardized curricula and the traditional canon. Fanon (1967/2008) explains how the white world imposed on him the ideas, language and customs of the dominant, colonial society. This systematic approach to framing a white reality can be seen today in social media, news reports, and within

literature and writing classrooms on every academic level. The only way to gain access

into the white world, is to ascribe to the many standards set and imposed by the white

hierarchy under which our schools act (Leonardo, 2009). In 1904, W.E.B. DuBois spoke

of the race issue in America stating that:

> First of all, the most hopeful thing about the race problem to-day, is that people
> are beginning to recognize its intricacy and be justly suspicious of any person
> who insists that the race problem is simply this or simply that – realizing that it is
> not simply anything (p. 293).

Now, in 2019, I feel that the race problem described by DuBois remains in a more

precarious state. Countless people act and speak as if we exist in a post-racial world as if

the race problem has been solved. One need not look any further than our classrooms to

see that we are still climbing that mountain towards a better understanding of our

collective racialization.

Critical whiteness studies provide a lens for educators to examine the impact of

racism on educational policy, literacy, and praxis, and how this racism directly hinders

the progress of students of color in our public schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995;

Leonardo, 2004, 2013; Roediger, 1991). Through multiple literacies (Gorski, 2009), we

can reveal the social and cultural dichotomies of our country and find what needs to be

done to rectify many of these inequities and issues of access, success, and equity for the

children of our country. Through my own experiences and the experiences of other white

teachers, we can see how reflecting on our practices and biases can enrich a culturally

responsive classroom that disrupts forms of disconnect or deficit mindset a teacher may

have towards the children in their classroom by erasing intrinsic, subtle, invisible, and explicit racism a teacher may possess, exemplify, and perpetuate.

Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) continues to grow as a field of scholarship whose aim is to uncover and expose the countless structures that perpetuate white supremacy and white privilege. Further, CWS examines the many misunderstandings of identity that whites have held onto throughout history. As Mills (1997) explains:

> One could say then, as a general rule, that *white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race* are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement. And these phenomena are in no way *accidental*, but prescribed by the terms of the Racial Contract, which requires a certain schedule of structured blindness and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity (19).

To answer the charge made by Mills (1997), we need to design studies that illuminate the journeys of teachers committed to challenging oppressive systems. What can we learn from engaging with and co-constructing new knowledge centered around race, systems of power, and possible actions taken against oppressive educational structures? What can we learn from uncovering the resistance to this kind of work, whether it be self-resistance or institutional resistance? A deeper understanding of how whiteness operates is needed for this conversation to unfold. Lipsitz (1998) informs us, "Whiteness is everywhere in U.S. culture, but it is very hard to see" (p. 67). If whiteness remains invisible but all around us, what can we do, as educators, to mitigate it's

consequences in our classrooms and beyond? How can we take action against an ever-elusive opponent? Leonardo (2013) reminds us that we must locate whiteness, so we can make it "peculiar", as it has remained for too long as the "norm".

CWS can be used as a tool for white educators engaging with anti-racist pedagogy. By examining the meaning of their own privilege and its impact on pedagogy, white people can learn to acknowledge their own perpetuation of racism and oppression. And this concept is paramount in a profession where the student diversity continues to grow while the teacher population remains predominantly white. Outcomes for our Black students remain equally as critical as they have in the past. As hooks (1992) argued, "All Black people in the United States, irrespective of their class status or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness" (p. 23). For those who might argue against this sentiment, we need not look too far into our history to remember the racist birther arguments made by the current U.S. president against President Barack Obama. No other president in history ever had their place of birth come into question. This was a clear example of how whiteness tried to claim a sense of "normalcy" and what Mills (1997) describes as "an epistemology of ignorance" where "whites have agreed not to recognize blacks as equal persons" (p. 97).

It is to that end that CWS invites white people to develop an awareness that critically questions the conceptions of what is "good" and "normal". Allen (2004) urges educators towards an examination of whiteness, so that we do not leave whiteness intact.

Racial Identity/Teacher Perceptions

Understanding how our racialized world, specifically Whiteness, has perpetuated *mis*-education (Woodson, 1933/2000) in our schools is of the highest importance. We are all socialized within the racial contract (Mills, 1997), therefore, our perceptions of the world continue to impact the curriculum we write and enact, as well as how we perceive our students. By looking deeper into the impact of teachers' racial identities and perceptions, we might be able to better understand how or why they began a journey towards sociopolitical development.

One way of countering the impact of our collective *mis*-education is to review the work of antiracist pedagogy, as well as inquiries around teacher perceptions, specifically perceptions of white teachers. One understanding of the development of the White racial identity can be traced to the work of Janet Helms (1990, 1995). Helms described a six-step approach to understanding how the White racial identity develops much like that of the critical consciousness scales discussed earlier. Lawrence and Tatum (2012) provide great insight into the phenomenon:

> For Whites, the process involves becoming aware of one's "whiteness," accepting this aspect of one's identity as socially meaningful and personally salient, and ultimately internalizing a realistically positive view of whiteness which is not based on assumed superiority (p. 1)

These underpinnings of the development of the white racial identity can be linked to other works from our past from those voices who were negatively impacted by the social

dominance of whiteness. Baldwin (1963/1990) believed white America was trapped in a history they did not understand, a history they could not be released from:

> They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men. Many of them, indeed, know better, but, as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity (*The Fire Next Time*, p. 20).

This commitment, like the commitment presented by Edward Said in *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994) is one that demands an "audacity of daring, and to represent change, to moving on, not standing still" (p. 64).

In a recent study situated within the critical hermeneutic tradition, Utt and Tochluk (2016) conducted in-depth interviews with two white teachers in urban school districts, one from Los Angeles and one from Chicago. These teachers had participated in workshops and conversations "focused on investigating privilege, intersecting identities, anti-racist White history, and what it might look like to be part of an anti-racist White culture while sharing personal struggles regarding efforts to live out an anti-racist practice" (p. 7). The authors found that by presenting narratives from white teachers shed light on the pitfalls and growth of the teachers engaged in this work, but also recognized the innate relationship to power and privilege of narratives from white teachers.

From the shared narratives, the authors showed how these white teachers were able to develop a positive, anti-racist white identity by coming to a better understanding

of themselves through an examination of their own personal histories. Specifically, one of the teachers came to a better understanding of how privilege positively impacted their pedagogical practices. This continuous self-reflection connects explicitly to the theoretical underpinnings of critical consciousness and SPD. The authors, one of whom was a teacher-participant in the study show how even teachers who have been engaging in anti-racist practices for some time, can still be unaware of their complete privilege. Microaggressions, such as learning the names of the lighter-skin black students quicker than the darker-skinned students, is one example of Colorism that happens more often than we realize. Therefore, the cultivation of a stronger anti-racist white identity through self-reflection and inquiry are integral in understanding "into how privilege manifests are necessary to interrupt subconscious enactments of microaggressions" (Utt & Tochluk, 2016, p. 10).

However, the authors caution that they also found a troubling tension in one of the teacher-participants who, instead of gaining a deeper understanding of her own history, ethnicity culture, began to distance herself from her connection to Whiteness and being white. In this way, the teacher began to escape reality, rather than gain a better understanding of how their relationship to and with Whiteness. According to the authors, White people do enact four behaviors that distance themselves from their Whiteness: Distancing from white culture, distancing from white people, over-identifying with people of color, and over-identifying with European roots. The authors conclude that "Each of these behaviors undercuts the ability of White teachers to successfully implement the pedagogical practices suggested as part of a trans- formational, culturally

responsive, or anti-racist approach, as they reinforce a lack of self-awareness and impair relationship building (p. 11).

Teaching for Social Justice Through Critical Pedagogy

Teaching for Social Justice

Within a larger context of a social justice framework, critical consciousness and sociopolitical development have the potential to create an environment where issues of racism, sexism, and classism can be questioned and dismantled through collaboration, discussion, and social action. English Language Arts and Social Studies teachers have the unique opportunity to engage students in ways other teachers may not see. Through the use of popular and canonical texts, as well as collaborative pedagogical approaches, teachers can engage students in a dialogue that leads to empowerment to overcome systemic issues of oppression (Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008). In this way, the students' lived experiences become the basis for the curriculum and pedagogical approaches being utilized in the classroom. This democratic approach to education (Dewey, 1916) connects relevant social and cultural issues to history and other institutions. Through this approach, students can find ways to engage with social action on a local level that might empower them to see themselves as agents of change. This can only happen in a classroom where the teacher is also in the constant state of reflection, critical reflexivity (Freire & Freire, 1973/1998). Although many marginalized communities of color face what Kozol (1991) described as "Savage Inequalities", teachers have the ability and power to utilize the strengths their students bring to the classroom as means for dismantling issues of racism, sexism, and classism. Teachers can

learn from their students and in turn, teach the students the literacy skills they may need through a much more responsive curriculum and pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Sleeter, 2011).

Critical Pedagogy

Giroux (1992) views literacy "as a form of cultural citizenship and politics". In doing so, populations of people who have been silenced and marginalized will now be empowered to dismantle existing forms of oppression. In the classroom, this form of empowerment can create ways for students to participate in the discourse and decisions that shape society and history. In this way, students will have the access to resources, skills, and knowledge that empowers them to construct authentic identities in relation to others and resist acts of subjugation and violence (Giroux, 1988). This social justice-oriented concept of education builds upon Freire's understandings of praxis as an essential component of education.

Freire's work (1970/1996) was fundamental to the development of critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Freire (1970/1996) fundamentally believed that traditional modes of education do not develop a critical consciousness in students. Instead, students remain silent sitting as objects who are in classrooms solely to be receptacles of handed-over knowledge. If students were empowered to reject their passive position, they could engage with one another in praxis of change through the process of dialogue and communion (p.72-75). The idea of teachers actively supporting students' growth as active learners is a crucial tenet of Freirean philosophy on teaching. Freire (1970/1996) believed that within the act of teaching, one must view themselves as a learner. In this way, classroom observations during this study will seek to uncover how teachers and students

come together both as teachers and learners, ready to partner and engage in critical thinking.

The Mississippi Freedom Schools provided a roadmap of possibility when they implemented critical pedagogy into their day-to-day schooling during an alternative summer school program that focused their curriculum on "students' knowledge, skills, and motivation to critically promote change in their society (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1999, p. 61). This type of schooling can be the catalyst to transform students' understanding of the purpose of schooling by integrating a pedagogy that better represents the ethnic diversity in their schools (de los Rios, Lopez, and Morrell, 2015). With a goal of creating justice-oriented citizens through the use of a culturally responsive pedagogy and critical literacy, students can engage in a deeper understanding of their own sociopolitical development (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003).

Apple (2017) states that the very foundation of critical pedagogy lies in "the process of repositioning" and in relational thinking. Through this belief, we are asked to take on the perspective of those disempowered and dispossessed, and act to change conditions of oppression and inequity. This is the foundation of critical pedagogy. By viewing education as a political and ethical act, we begin to understand how power dynamics control the formation and distribution of knowledge. Freire's conceptualization of critical pedagogy illuminated the idea that education only truly takes place when a teacher is ready to partner with the students and enable them to engage in critical thinking (Freire, 1970/1996).

On a more specific, focused level, it is important to engage with and uncover equity pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 1995) and critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). This may seem like a contradiction to my prior point; however, I believe, again, that equity and critical pedagogies are more general in nature than culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies. Equity pedagogy can be described as teaching strategies designed for the success of students from diverse ethnic and multicultural backgrounds. For a teacher to engage with such practices, they would have had to develop a level of critical consciousness that created an environment for such practices. This form of critical pedagogy seeks to overcome and eliminate forms of racism by improving students' literacy development and linguistic skills through critical literacy (Freire, 1970/1996; Gee 2014). By engaging students with complex, relevant texts and issues, students can develop critical thinking skills while also developing reading and writing skills, and/or vice-versa.

Critical pedagogy is the starting point for such a critical literacy. When teachers begin to employ these approaches to their craft, students' voices are lifted and shared knowledge becomes the norm (hooks, 1994). Teachers and students come into communion together creating a new form of knowledge that challenges the status quo and dominant forms of oppression that have crippled our nation and schools for far too long (Freire, 1970). As stated earlier, these theoretical frameworks that inform my work can all be housed within a broader conceptual framework of social justice that has been informed by scholars such as DuBois (1903/1965) and Woodson (1933/2000). Therefore, even though my work will specifically focus on critical consciousness, equity and critical pedagogy, and critical literacy, I do not wish to look past or ignore the foundational

works of these two scholars, as they have informed me and will continue to inform me and my work for years to come.

Culturally Relevant and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Gay (2002) believes that a culturally responsive curriculum must include the study of a wide range of ethnic groups and individuals, while never shying away from or ignoring controversial topics. Further, a culturally responsive pedagogy contextualizes "issues within race, class, ethnicity, and gender; and including multiple kinds of knowledge and perspectives" (Gay, 2002, 108). When implemented, a culturally responsive curriculum can support students in becoming more "aware of existing social inequities and their history" (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003, p. 187).

The enactment of a culturally responsive curriculum (Gay, 2002; Sleeter, 2011) has the potential to provide spaces for the development of positive relationships on the academic and social outcomes for our students. Presently, many of our schools lack curricula that represent the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity of the students in their schools (de los Rios, Lopez, and Morrell, 2015). However, through the curricula and literary canon being utilized (de los Rios, Lopez, and Morrell, 2015), a hegemonic code of norms is maintained and manufactured in far too many of our schools. Without a renegotiating of the texts and pedagogical approaches being employed in our classrooms, our students will continue to be placed in positions where they do not challenge the status quo of what information is presented to them or how it is presented to them (Loewen, 1995). If incorporated, a culturally responsive pedagogy can have positive effects on the academic and social outcomes for these students (Sleeter, 2011). Further, by engaging in

a critical pedagogy with students' experiences as the motivating factor, classrooms can become the staging ground for which social change can manifest (Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008).

This concept is emphasized by Gay (2010) who states that we need to find ways to change teacher educators' beliefs and attitudes about racial and cultural differences because "most culturally diverse students and their teachers *live* in different worlds, and they do not fully understand or appreciate one another's experiential realities" (p.144). Ladson-Billings (1995) emphasized that succeeding academically should not be the only goal for our students. Additionally, a culturally relevant pedagogy should provide a way for students to maintain their cultural integrity (p. 476). Further, Gay (2002) believes that a culturally responsive curriculum must include the study of a wide range of ethnic groups and individuals. By doing so, a curriculum can find ways to engage with controversial topics, rather than ignoring them. Further, a culturally responsive pedagogy contextualizes "issues within race, class, ethnicity, and gender; and including multiple kinds of knowledge and perspectives" (Gay, 2002, 108). When implemented, a culturally responsive curriculum can support students in becoming more "aware of existing social inequities and their history" (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003, p. 187).

As our student population continues to diversify, preservice teachers 'preparation as a culturally responsive teacher will assist them in embracing the diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds of their students and their families. Further, by engaging in culturally responsive practices, preservice teachers will also learn about their own positionalities and how their personal biases manifest in the classroom (Gay, 2013). By engaging in difficult conversations grounded in critical texts about race, power, and privilege, these

preservice teachers began the long, but necessary, process of overcoming any anxiety they may have had towards issues of race, ethnicity, or cultural diversity (Gay, 2013).

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Building from Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995) and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2000), Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014) seeks to "provide pedagogical and curricular interventions and innovations that would move teaching and learning ever further from the deficit approaches that echoed across the decades" (p. 93). In doing so, CSP seeks to move "resource pedagogies" beyond the limits of educational jargon and terminology into a space that truly centers "the languages and literacies and other cultural practices of students and communities to ensure the valuing and maintenance of our increasingly multiethnic and multilingual society" (p. 94). Paris reminds us of the value of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogies while also critiquing their shortfalls:

> Relevance and responsiveness do not guarantee in stance or meaning that one goal of an educational program is to maintain heritage ways and to value cultural and linguistic sharing across difference, to sustain and support bi- and multilingualism and bi- and multiculturalism. They do not explicitly enough support the linguistic and cultural dexterity and plurality (Paris, 2009, 2011) necessary for success and access in our demographically changing U.S. and global schools and communities (p. 95).

It is within the centering of dexterity and plurality where Paris (2012) strikes the loudest chord. If educators are to truly build a partnership between the classroom and the

home life of their students, then they must center the language practices and cultural practices of their students in the curriculum they teach, as well as their instructional practices. Educators must view the cultural experiences and practices of the young people in their rooms as equal to that of the school norms and practices. This does not mean that teachers and other adults in a school must supplant the dominant ways of knowing, rather educators should "support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence" (p. 95).

Much like the Young Lords of the late 1960's, CSP offers a way for students to engage with the dominant ways of knowing while also learning how to critique and take action "by resisting hegemonic Whiteness" (Flores, 2016, p. 20). In this way, CSP has direct links to critical consciousness and sociopolitical development by fostering critical reflection and critical action of sustaining one's own pluralistic practices.

Drawing on Paris's (2012) and Paris and Alim (2014), one early study (McCarty & Lee, 2014) used two ethnographic cases as their foundation to explore what culturally sustaining/revitalizing pedagogy (CSRP) looks like in Native American community settings. After consideration of the possibilities, tensions, and constraints of (CSRP), the authors argue that given the current linguistic, cultural, historical, and educational realities of Native American students is unique and must be viewed as such. In collaboration with local stakeholders to make a positive change, the authors asked, "how can CSRP work in service to the goals of Indigenous education sovereignty"? (p. 118) What they found was that the educators in both ethnographic cases understood that "balancing academic, linguistic, and cultural interests requires direct accountability" to

the students' communities. Further, as seen in many other contexts of marginalized communities, efforts to sustain the cultural and linguistic values and practices of the students contrasts directly with many federal education policies that focus on high-stakes accountability. By privileging "a single monolingual and monocultural standard" Native American students and many other students from marginalized communities may continue to have negative school experiences.

One recent study (Doucet, 2017) presented a framework of tools to support the development of early childhood educators that can be built into teacher preparation curricula. The study focused on the nexus between Freire's (1985) framework of *humanizing* pedagogy and *culturally sustaining pedagogy* (CSP; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). With a focus on teacher perceptions of immigrant students, the author argued that linguistic discrimination, disparities and disproportionalities, and teachers' perceptions were three factors that impact immigrant students to new classrooms. Doucet found that for immigrant children to feel welcomed, teacher practices needed to create environments where each students' "humanity is seen and honored, and in which their cultures, languages, and family histories can be bolstered and sustained" (p. 200).

Borck (2020) built upon this concept of *humanizing* students utilizing ethnographic methods at a Brooklyn alternative high school BCHS to research the various individual and institutional utilities of culturally sustaining pedagogies. First, Borck found that teachers must communicate with students about structural inequalities, specifically how race and class intersect. Second, it is equally important for students to understand that any perceived failures in school are the result of "social structural inequalities rather than individual shortcomings" (p. 383). Finally, while finding value

and worth in their cultural identities, students must also be able to code switch between their home lives and that of the dominant culture. Borck observed teachers from various disciplines enacting this kind of culturally sustaining practices, while also pointing out that teachers from similar cultural and/or socioeconomic backgrounds were able to "transmit a criticism of the power structure that disadvantages the students while teaching them skills to properly engage within the power structure as a means to an end" (p. 384).

In contrast was how one of the white male teachers understood culturally sustaining practices. The white teacher understood that teaching in front of 25 students of color would be met with a different reaction than that of a teacher who mirrored the experiences of the students in the school. Specifically, this white teacher understood the difference of destabilizing *white authority* while building *relational authority*:

> That's where a lot of white teachers get tripped up and that's where I've had to develop as a person and a teacher. So, when I think about my relationships with my students, I think about how I can communicate to every individual, "I see you. I know you. I care about you. I got your back. And I've got your back to the extent that I'm gonna jump in your face when I see you screwing up." And they need to know that that's coming from me, Sam, not me White Man. They need to think, "This is Sam. Sam knows me. Sam's watching out for me. Sam cares about me. So, when Sam says, 'Shut the hell up and work on this' it's because I need to do it." May 7, 2012 (p. 386)

This understanding of the relationship between teacher identity and students' identity is of the utmost importance when attempting to enact culturally relevant, culturally responsive, or culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is concerned with what bell hooks (1994) calls the privileged act of naming. A lived experience linked to processes of self-recovery and a means for shifting power. Although critical literacy can be applied to most texts, literature that lends itself to a critical approach tends not to provide "happily ever after" endings of social issues of complexity (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999). What this means top teachers is providing a way for not only students, but teachers as well, to reflect on their ways of knowing and identities to overcome a "discourse of deficiency" (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011) where we must include a relevant curriculum that centers students' experiences and includes texts that link to students' identities and ways of knowing (p. 154). In this sense, we can explore what differences make a difference. If we can illuminate and amplify the traditionally marginalized voices through an inclusive canon (Peel, 2017), we can then begin to understand the history and experiences of those who have been silenced in our curricula and other forms of knowing and learning. Further, by engaging in a critical pedagogy that utilizes critical literacy, we can begin to understand the importance of culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006) and culturally responsive (Gay, 2003; Sleeter, 2011) pedagogies in our classrooms, pedagogies that lead students to take action on important social issues (Sleeter, 2014; Dover, 2015).

Freire's work (1970/1996) was fundamental to the development of critical literacy theory and critical pedagogy. Freire believed that in traditional modes of education, students are not allowed to develop a critical consciousness, rather they are receptacles of information. Freire envisioned a different model of education, one of liberation that would act as a vehicle that steers the way towards classroom curricula and activities that address, critique, and dismantle assumptions and myths of the status quo and dominant ideologies. This, too, can be critical for teachers who want to position themselves as critical-minded, anti-racist educators. Freire emphasized the importance of students rejecting their passive position, gaining agency in the process of their education, and embarking on a praxis of change (p.72-75).

A critical literacy framework provides a way for students and teachers to examine issues of inequity, racism, and many other forms of oppression (Comber, 2015). Shor (1999) described critical literacy as a way of challenging the status quo and uncovering new ways of constructing the self. The goal, then, of critical literacy is a more equitable and social justice-oriented society (Luke, 2012. A place where we empower students to become active participants in activism within their classrooms, and in their schools. Critical literacy aims to equip students to become "justice-oriented citizens" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) who critically examine and address issues and structures of injustice. By engaging students in meaningful dialogue and texts that are relevant to their experiences, we can create a truly democratic education (Chilcoat & Ligon, 1999, p. 47; Sleeter, 2011). Through a critical literacy students can "become catalysts" in resolving their communities' problems, and problems at-large. As students analyze canonical texts, popular texts, and mainstream media, they will build what Bacon (2017) describes as,

"the ability to interrogate social, historical, and political contestations of literacy is a pivotal educational mandate" (p.425), and critical literacy is a way to engage in such interrogations.

Specifically, Soares and Wood (2010) examined the impact of teachers who brought a critical literacy perspective to their social studies classrooms. By focusing on how teacher pedagogy can impact students by connecting the past to the future for the common good. The authors found that students' experiences in school can be negatively impacted by racial and cultural differences, specifically how Black students are perceived. If teachers, specifically Social Studies teachers, respect and affirm diversity in their classrooms, "we as educators can promote democracy and understanding in the minds and actions of the students we teach" (p. 486). The authors further recommend that "teachers provide specific guidance that will help students connect to the real world as well as find their places within that world" (487), connecting directly to the critical underpinnings of a Freirean theoretical framework (1970/1996). By engaging in critical literacy, the authors argue teachers can promote students to critically examine their own social studies by focusing on five themes: Examine multiple perspectives, find their own authentic voice, recognize social barriers and cross borders of separation, find their own identity, and engage in service tied to democracy. By focusing on these five themes, specifically in our Social Studies classrooms, teachers can provide "opportunities for them to expand their thinking and to grapple with issues of freedom, social responsibility, citizenship, and personal identity" (493).

According to Freebody, P. & Freiberg, J.M. (2011) critical literacy is about developing habits of mind and an awareness of, and resistance to the ideological work of

texts. It's also about interrogating multiple viewpoints and disrupting the commonplace. Burbules and Berk (1999), in their discussion of critical thinking and critical pedagogy, underlined the significance of the word "critical" which was to carefully examine "faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, assertions lacking evidence, truth claims based on unreliable authority, ambiguous or obscure concepts" (p. 47). Shor (1999), a close associate of Freire, described critical literacy as a way of challenging the status quo and uncovering new ways to construct the self.

Critical literacy offers a useful theoretical framework in which to examine the issues of equity and learning as it relates to curriculum and how texts are used in our schools. Specifically, this study will show how moving away from standard textbooks and moving towards a more inclusive text selection will help students to critically examine multiple perspectives on moments in history. Along with teachers who enact a culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2002/2013), a critical literacy framework can provide the avenue through which students can become active members of their community by entering into a dialogue that constructs their own knowledge, that "is critical to the development of a democracy that actually includes everyone" (Sleeter, 2011, p. 5).

Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, and Taliaferro Baszile (2017) utilize these counternarratives theory to specifically show how a critical literacy pedagogy can be enacted in English Language Arts classrooms to counteract anti-blackness and symbolic violence against Black bodies in the curricula we use and our instructional practices. The authors argue that "the racial violence that unfolds in various communities seeps into the English language arts classrooms" and that "the language used to describe Black bodies

derives from disdain, disrespect, and devaluation of Black people" (p. 60). Further, the authors argue that educators can unintentionally and intentionally "shoot metaphorical bullets that kill the spirit and humanity of Black students" (p. 61). In a classroom where racial diversity is present, Black students' experiences are of great importance to understand whether or not teacher practices are perpetuating this kind of violence. Johnson et al (2017), by focusing on practices and a curriculum that embrace the "Black struggle", like the autobiography of Assata Shakur, as well as the Eurocentric perspective, students can engage with a broader understanding of democracy and foundational texts such as The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

In a study that focused on Black males and their experiences with critical literacy, Wood and Jocius (2013) found that Black male students succeeded when three aspects of critical literacy were in place: Culturally relevant texts, a sense of collaboration, and an engagement in critical conversations. For example, one student who originally resisted reading texts, changed his perceptions of reading when given the opportunity to select books with covers that reflected his own life experiences. This showcases the importance of diverse literature in our curricula as well as in our classroom libraries. However, reflecting one's experience is not necessarily enacting critical literacy. To that end, the authors also argue that after selecting an appropriate text, students need to feel supported and accepted to reduce "the common pressures related to reading in the classroom" (p. 666). They also argued that to fully engage Black males in critical literacy, teachers should consider modeling how best to critique texts, engage students in independent critical conversations, and to create extension activities that ask students to research problem areas in their communities that link to their texts.

Further, Leland, et al. (1999) speak to the power of text selection as a way to critically engage about issues of power and social justice. Authors found mixed reactions from teachers engaging with the critical literacy text set that was introduced. By focusing on texts that can be viewed from multiple perspectives, some teachers thought that the new texts could be a catalyst for critical conversations, while other teachers were more resistant. This type of resistance, the authors found, was to be accepted, as many teachers resist any change. This did not, however, impede their work. As with other studies, the authors laid out multiple essential components that anchored their work with critical literacy grounded in critical conversations that lead to some sort of social action. One such example was a classroom of third and fourth graders that made posters about the dangers of firearms that were eventually shared with the rest of the school. The authors concluded their work with a review section of many texts that can be included in curricula and classroom libraries to promote critical engagement and social action. By providing examples of critical literacy in the primary grades, this article shows how all teachers can engage students in critical literacy regardless of their age. To that end, the authors also provided an implicit link between critical literacy and one's sociopolitical development of students. What the authors did not allude to is any importance of teachers' biases or perceptions and how that might impact the overall outcomes of implementing such text sets.

Curricula

de los Rios, Lopez, and Morrell (2015) assert that many of our schools lack curricula that represent the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity of the students in their schools. A hegemonic code of norms is maintained and manufactured in far too many of

our schools, especially through the curricula and literary canon being utilized. Without a renegotiating of the texts and pedagogical approaches being employed in our classrooms, our students will continue to be placed in positions where they do not challenge the status quo of what information is presented to them or how it is presented to them (Loewen, 1995). Further, a critical pedagogy taking place in the classroom, students and teachers will remain stuck within systems of oppression and hegemony. Through a critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008), teachers and students can begin to engage in a "war of movement" (p. 238-239) that allows space for the questioning and critique of social and economic inequities. Fanon (1967/2008) states this issue as a "cognitive dissonance", where students grapple with their own preconceived understandings of the purpose of schooling and education.

Further, our current system of education in the United States intentionally suppresses and leaves out information (Anyon, 1980; Apple, 1990, 2018; King, 2018; Loewen, 1995). Without a true sense of what curricula are providing to the students and teachers in their classrooms, the outcomes for the students can be much more dire than not passing a test or being proficient on PARCC/NJSLA. As Johnson, et al. (2017) make clear, if a curriculum of study "reinscribes and perpetuates oppression" students of color will continue to face violent attacks in the classroom. Violent attacks on their humanity will be perpetuated by the choice of texts in their classrooms and the manner in which these texts and social issues are discussed in their classrooms (Johnson, et al., 2017).

In our predominantly-white school districts, we are perpetuating *mis*-education and a system of oppression that feeds the school-to-prison pipeline, the undervalued service industry, and other forms of new slavery (Alexander, 2010; Love, 2019; Meiners,

2007). Baldwin (1963/1990) reminds us that, "The price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the blacks – the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind" (p. 130). We are all bound to this colonial system, bound in our minds and our actions (Memmi, 1967/1991). For if the white mind is not liberated from this hegemonic culture in our classrooms, can anyone else be liberated?

If reading is a non-neutral process (Luke & Freebody, 1997) then it is imperative that we, as educators, must question and examine the texts utilized in our curricula and canon. It is not enough to rely on a prescribed sext of texts to act as our guide. We must ask questions such as "Whose story is this?" "Who benefits from this story?" and "What voices are not being heard" as we interrogate the assumptions of our literary canon and English Language Arts curricula (Leland, et al. 1999). What we leave out of a curriculum can be as dangerous as what we include in the curriculum, reaffirming beliefs, myths, and assumptions that construct a social order of dominance over raced, gendered, and sexualized beings (Freire, 1970/1996; Anyon, 1981; hooks, 1994).

This can be seen in the almost innate negative reaction to Black bodies throughout our country and displayed on media outlets at an almost dizzying pace (Dumas & Ross, 2016). From police shootings to Black people having the police called on them, these forms of physical and symbolic violence have existed from the dawn of this country and persist with great agony in our current systems (Dumas, 2016). With the incorporation of a more inclusive canon into our curricula, one that reflects the experiences of our students, we can provide spaces in our classrooms where a more social-justice awareness can be promoted (Janks, 2012). Without such inclusion, we, as teachers will continue to perpetuate instances of symbolic violence in our classrooms (Johnson et al. 2017). As

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Woodson (1933/2000) reminds us, any lynching that takes place in the streets began in the classroom.

Canonical texts perpetuate ideologies of what is considered normative (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Petrone, 2014). Through the valuing of whiteness, heteronormativity, and physical and mental abilities, groups of texts can privilege one set of ideals while marginalizing that of the others. As knowledge is constructed in our classrooms, students will play out the norms they come to learn through the curricula and texts read in class. Without a critical engagement with such a traditional set of texts, students will continue to struggle with the tensions between their identities and the ones presented to them in their classrooms (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Petrone, 2014). Further, within the context of canonical literature, we can teach students to question, analyze, and critique the author's intent and purpose for creating their characters and setting, as well as the social and cultural implications for each text. However, most classrooms teach students to read *with* the texts they are provided rather than *against* such texts (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Petrone, 2014). Just as Loewen (2015) asserts, we must teach students to question history and the texts created within that historical context. To do so, one must engage with a critical literacy that provides the lens to question curricula and the canon.

Filling in the Gaps

A mural of the four middle school teachers within this context can illuminate to what extent curricular choices impact and expose the sociopolitical development of these classroom teachers. Any choice made about the curriculum, whether to embrace it, change it, or resist it, will provide a broader understanding of how these teachers make

sense of their pedagogical and personal choices. As stated earlier, the student population at Central Middle School is diverse in many ways. Without teacher practices and curricula that value and center the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds of all students, symbolic violence in the classrooms may persist, implicitly and explicitly. However, as studies like the ones mentioned in this literature review focus on one particular group of students, I wonder what teacher practices might look like when they strive to sustain all students' cultures and linguistic backgrounds?

My central research questions are relevant to this inquiry, as well as the central concerns in educational research for many reasons. Most importantly, critical consciousness and sociopolitical development in ELA and Social Studies classrooms can begin to dismantle the oppression of marginalized students in our classrooms, as well as broadening cultural and historical knowledge for students in a predominantly white context. Educators can no longer see themselves as final products whose sole purpose in the classroom is to deliver or hand over knowledge to their students. This "banking" (Freire, 1970/1996) approach to teaching is antiquated and dangerous.

For me, a critical consciousness framework speaks to society on a broader level where impact can be greater generalized. Students come to our schools every day within a framework of *mis*-education that is centered around racism. Through the frameworks I have detailed and described here, I hope to illuminate how the development of critical consciousness in English Language Arts and Social Studies teachers can be a step towards dismantling the oppressive and hegemonic nature of our educational institutions. But, knowing is not enough. For real impact and change, we must take action.

By working with these four teachers, we will seek to make whiteness peculiar through the examination of our own sociopolitical development. This portraiture intends to focus on using critical consciousness (Freire, 1970/1996; Freire & Freire, 1973/1998) and the sociopolitical development (Watts, et al., 1999; Zion et al., 2015) of middle school English Language Arts (ELA) and Social Studies educators in disrupting issues of racism, sexism, and classism through a critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) that focuses on equitable outcomes for all students (Banks & Banks, 1995). This work will take a special type of educator, one who sees themselves as an agent for change, one who willingly seeks to challenge the status quo, and creates authentic learning experiences with the students in their classrooms. My assumption is that I may not see explicit culturally sustaining practices because many teachers in this region haven't even been trained to integrate culturally responsive or sustaining practices, yet. If I do see elements of responsive and sustaining practices, my assumption is that they will be much more nuanced, and any connections made will be made by my own understanding of such practices. My assumption is that I might see the teachers creating an environment that is safe, welcoming, and asset-based, through relationship building, but I do not assume teachers will be implementing these practices in the name of culturally responsive/sustaining practices as theorized by Paris & Alim (2012) or Kinloch (2015). However, as Ladson-Billings (1995) has pointed out, in many cases culturally responsive teaching is just *good* teaching.

We may never fully understand to what degree a person has grown or not grown. This assumption is one I am also making within this dissertation study, as well. What we can continue to analyze is what actions they do or do not take in taking action against

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inequities in our society and schools. Still, within a study that focuses on one's critical

consciousness and sociopolitical development, understanding and reflecting on one's

racial identity, power, and privilege, especially for white teachers, is central to this work.

To that end, the participants in this study bridge the gap between what traditional ways of

teaching and the possibility of releasing power and control in the classroom over to the

students through a shared space of teaching and learning. Through the use of critical

texts, students can engage in meaningful conversations about how certain groups of

people have been marginalized throughout United States history and offer up

counternarratives to assumed stereotypes. This is a journey, a process of unbecoming and

becoming that I will attempt to capture throughout the co-constructed portrait of each

participant.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Movement building, to be clear, is the process by which we inspire and activate a sense of collective courage and agency in pursuit of a more just state of affairs. (Taliaferro Baszile, 2016, p. 210).

Background

Our schools have been designed to maintain and manufacture hegemony. Critical pedagogy is the tool that could disrupt that hegemony, and a lack of it will ensure its maintenance, especially through the curricula being utilized (de los Rios, Lopez, & Morrell, 2014). Without critically examining what takes place in our classrooms, we will struggle to unearth the inequities in pedagogy and curricula that exist. Enactment of a pedagogy that focuses on responding to individual students can have a long-lasting impact on our society. A pedagogy of disruption can tear down systems of racism and oppression. However, observing one's pedagogy is not enough, as it does not tell a complete story. For this study, I turned to a decolonizing interpretive approach of inquiry (Darder, 2019).

Specifically, building from the methodology of portraiture, this study aimed to create a mural of the four participants and the author. Together with the teacher participants, we explored our beliefs, values, life histories, and interactions with one another to build a broader and deeper narrative full of paradox, contradiction, and nuance. By seeking to capture the "goodness" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) of each individual in this team of teachers, we examined and analyzed to what extent each of us

takes an active role in understanding the societal and historical forces that affect our lives and the lives of our students, as well as taking action against oppressive systems, even if at the beginning of sociopolitical development (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003).

Building from Portraiture

Building from portraiture methodology, I sought to "capture the complexity and aesthetic of human experience" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4), by listening *for* each participants' story, rather than only listening *to* their stories (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This does not mean that portraits are "designed to be documents of idealization or celebration" of the participants (p. 9). Rather, in the search for "goodness" this inquiry aimed to establish an expected balance of "virtue and evil" and "strength and vulnerability" in each of the participants. This balance is central to understanding what a search for goodness encompasses. To that end, it was my responsibility to document and analyze the countless ways goodness manifested and was expressed throughout this study. This is one way I was different from the participants. However, through an iterative approach utilizing kitchen table reflexivity and post-observation conversations, we all engaged together in the creation of the mural by listening to and for our collective story.

Taliaferro Baszile (2015) reminds us that knowledge is never neutral and is "always a story of some kind" (p. 239). Understanding how individuals make meaning of their worlds can be a challenge in any context. We are all raced, gendered, and sexualized bodies with stories to be told (Taliaferro Baszile, 2015), that exist in a world of power and dominance (Gramsci, 1971). In many cases, schools, and the teachers in their

classrooms, act as sites of struggle and contradiction between competing interests and ideologies (Meshulam & Apple, 2014). Therefore, to enact meaningful and equitable change in schools, a framework for critical teaching is needed. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/1996; hooks, 1994; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008) is a vehicle that steers the way towards classroom curricula and practices that address, critique, and dismantle assumptions and myths of the status quo and dominant ideologies. The end goal, therefore, of this study is one in embedded in the nature of an intellectualism (Said, 1994) that strived to examine and uncover how this team of 4 middle school teachers, along with the author, made sense of their own experiences, communicated with one another, and understood the world around them (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Further this inquiry acted to "reconcile" my own identity and culture with that of the realities of others, a goal that will provide the roadmap for my future scholarly and academic endeavors. To that end, portraiture methodology was a perfect starting point to capture the ways in which a small team of teachers "reconceptualize the notion of literacy" (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011, p. 165) while confronting the injustices of their classrooms within an emancipatory consciousness (Freire, 1970/1996).

Throughout this study, I sought to understand the "deep meaning" of teachers' experiences and how they articulated their experiences (Clandinin, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 85). Through dialogue and reflection, multiple meanings for the participants and myself were revealed. This inquiry relied on and utilized "description, interpretation, and critical self-reflection" to capture and understand the experiences of this group of middle school teachers (p. 86). By focusing on the storytelling and reasoning of the study's participants, I sought to explain the personal and social

experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) and racial identity (Helms, 1990, 1995) of teachers who have developed a critical consciousness and promote sociopolitical development within and outside their classrooms. By focusing on the way these teachers made sense of their worlds, I examined the structure and content of their stories through a critical lens as it relates to language and power (Gee, 2014). As this study was driven through a critical lens, the overall purpose of this research study is transformative in nature by "raising questions about how power relations advance the interests of one group while oppressing those of other groups, and about the nature of truth and the construction of knowledge" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 61). Further, this work "seeks to bridge art and science" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005) that hopes to inform, inspire, and "capture the fluidity and complexity of the living world" (p. 8), through analytical rigor and community building that deepen and broaden the conversation around what is "good" teaching. Beyond good teaching, the final mural intended to inspire revolution in terms of revolutionary praxis as told by Taliaferro Baszile:

> Beyond rebellion, then, there is still always the ongoing, everyday work of building a community, a world, where relationships are not driven solely by material self-interest, but where other things like basic human dignity, self-knowledge, and communal relations that sustain us literally and spiritually matter, even and perhaps especially in the face of the forces that deny their relevance (p. 212).

In order to systematically study and understand teachers' sociopolitical development (Watts, Williams, & Jagers, 2003; Zion, Allen, & Jean, 2015) a "probing, layered, and

interpretive" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p.5) inquiry was appropriate. The design of this study allowed me to pursue specific lines of inquiry, and explore in-depth information on views, experiences, practices, and pedagogies of a team of middle school teachers. The goal of any critical qualitative inquiry was to "critique and challenge, to transform, and to analyze power relations" in its results or findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 59). In doing so, this inquiry specifically examined the nature of power relations within the context of the study as they relate to the larger social constructs that help shape our daily experiences. Through this method, I entered into an examination of the power dynamics at play within a specific context to uncover the intersections of social structures to better understand how the dynamics of a team of middle school teachers in a specific context were shaped by the larger systems of society as well as their immediate educational setting.

Mural as Meaning - As an Act of the "Revolutionary-Not-Yet"

To better understand the journeys of each participant towards sociopolitical development, a more complete image was needed. In fact, a methodology focused on the "revolutionary-not-yet" (Taliaferro Baszile, 2016) was needed. A methodology that would live beyond the study, our current social climate, and possibly beyond the lifespan of the participants, and promote the community to think deeper about their local issues, now and in the future (Bliss & Lamont, 2010; Conrad, 1995; Song & Gammel, 2018). This study utilized the principals of mural artwork to capture the participants' journeys through their personal and professional histories, as well as some of the author's story along the way. In this way, this study allowed me to explore the histories of how each person came to be and how they take action. To capture these experiences, someone had

to take the lead and I was that lead artist, laying out a vision and process, making final choices about placement and color and details. As I was the lead, the other participants were contributors to the overall creation of the mural. However, beyond the design of the study, the final mural was co-constructed by the author and each of the participants through "kitchen table reflexivity" (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015), member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rossman & Rallis, 2017), and a shared decision-making policy that guided the study throughout its entirety. Through this use of internal validity, the mural became a shared vision created throughout the many iterations of data collection and analysis.

By considering the foreground, middle ground, and background of the collective experiences of all participants in one grand image, this mural seeks to capture the overall themes of Critical Social Analysis, Collective Identification, Political Self-Efficacy, and Sociopolitical Development. Through the expression of images (moments) captured throughout the data collection period, and in listening for the stories being told, this mural acts as a way to capture all the messages that were shared and discussed during the data collection period. This mural seeks to create greater depth than individual portraits, as the four participants have been working together in the same context for the past 20 years. While still holding tight to each of their individual stories, the mural manifested through the countless connections and contradictions found along the way during the observations, kitchen table conversations, text messages, emails, and informal conversations throughout the past six months. This more sophisticated approach to storytelling will add layers of depth that individual portraits may have left out. This mural strives for the architectural elements of the given space, in this case, Central Middle

School, to be harmoniously incorporated into the picture, or story, that manifests from this inquiry.

Although many connections can be made after the fact with individual portraits, this mural was designed to capture the natural connections and contradictions between the four participants and author as the data collection was taking place. Through an iterative approach to data collection and analysis by way of maintaining a critical reflective journal throughout the data collection process, as well as maintaining field notes and impressionistic records during each observation and conversation, connections and contradictions were used inductively during each stage of the data collection process to further understand the phenomenon at hand. Further, throughout the entire process, the author critically examined his own place in this study to better understand how his own journey towards sociopolitical development connected or did not connect to the experiences and practices of the four participants.

In this way, the author entered the story only when a connection or a contradiction was felt, as evidenced in the impressionistic records collected during data collection. These impressionistic records also acted as a springboard towards further informal inquiry throughout the data collection period, which has resulted in a story that cannot be separated into individual parts, but rather a mural that contains the shared lived experiences of the four participants and the author and how they came to be. Further, this mural also seeks to demonstrate how each member of this team remains in the constant state of becoming educators for positive change.

By considering the foreground, middle ground, and background of the collective experiences of all participants and the local and regional context in one grand image, this mural sought to capture the overall themes of From the Heart, Building Relationships, Residue, Power and Control, and Advocacy (www.theartofeducation.edu). Through the expression of images (moments) captured throughout the iterative data collection and analysis period, and in listening for the stories being told during shared dialogues and critical reflections, this mural acts as a way to capture all the messages that were sent out to the world during the data collection and analysis period (LaBoskey, 2007). This method of inquiry and analysis has the power to "stimulate community pride and commitment to justice while teaching outsiders about the struggles of traditionally pressed people," (Conrad, 1995, p. 98).

Murals as Critical Consciousness and Sociopolitical Development

Murals have a long tradition in taking action against the oppressor. Specifically, murals have deep and long roots in social movements, specifically in covert and overt displays of revolution (Awad, 2017; Bloch, 2012; Gabriel, 2018; Orozco, 2014; Platt, 2010; Rolston, 2014; Rolston & Ospina, 2017). From the Chicano muralists along Sunset Boulevard fighting for civil rights to the activists fighting to keep the memory of the Arab Spring alive in Egypt to the activist peace artists of Colombia, murals have the power to capture and preserve lived histories that can exist far beyond the lives of those the wall art has strived to capture. This research inquiry is one such act of communication and preservation.

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Without question, one of the most significant art movements stemmed from the many rebellions during the Mexican Revolution that erupted in 1910 (Orozco, 2014). Of all the historic artistic movements in recent history, the ethos of this movement speaks most closely to what is needed in our current social and educational contexts:

> Muralists Jose ́ Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros – but many artists who were active and important to the development in the arts and culture of Mexico after the war. These artists were responding to and incorporating multiplicities of languages, poetic expressions, techniques and themes through initiatives that pre-date the first mural projects, including those at the National Preparatory School, now the Old College of San Ildefonso. The experiences and condition of the Mexican people during the Porfiriato and the Mexican Revolution nourished the imagination of artists and their aesthetic. In turn, these artists and their aesthetic ventures nurtured the collective imagination of a transformed country, a rejuvenated people and a new nation (257).

This moment laid the foundation for the Mexican muralist movement and a new way of thinking about art. Through new forms of expression, this group of muralists attempted "to give art a social, national and regional meaning (257). This form of movement building is what this research inquiry strives to do, by creating an image of educational possibility and transformation.

More recently, a group of murals had the power to bring people together for a specific cause, the Mystic River mural project in Somerville, Massachusetts (Song & Gammel, 2011). The goal of these eco-murals was to promote environmental awareness

and inspire youth about their community and local environment while inspiring people to continue to reflect on the meaning of the place. By raising awareness to this ecological matter, this eco-mural movement shed light on a local social issue by connecting to what Taliaferro Baszile (2016) stated is a "sense of agency, thought, and programs that work to transform ourselves and our institutions" (p. 213). The creation and display of community murals, like these eco-murals, have the power to transform ideals through a process of dialectical thinking, radical imagining, community building, an ethic of self-determination, and love-ability (Taliaferro Baszile, 2016). This inquiry hopes to have the same long-term impact of some of the works described in this chapter.

Bliss and Lamont (2010) traced the history of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in California. Further, these researchers documented with photographs and created an inventory of the current location of each mural and the current condition of each mural. Many of these murals were designed to promote positive images of the American experience during the Great Depression, while some of the murals also displayed images celebrating California's rich and historic multicultural heritage. Although these murals may not convey a message of revolution or transformation, they do speak to the importance of history, multiculturalism, and of place.

Finally, murals have the power to increase self-reflection and self-understanding, as many of our own phenomenological views have the power to remain hidden (Biddulph, 2005). Through a methodology or mural-making, we can collectively use visual imagery along with written text as a methodology for clarifying understandings of the 'self'" (p. 51). Through the creation of a mural through images and text, we can continue the process of "surfacing" our conscious and unconscious awareness (2005).

Drawing on my existing knowledge of sociopolitical development, critical pedagogy, and teacher education, the goal of this study was to illuminate the stories of these four teachers and how they came to understand the phenomena through a portrait of each individual that eventually became a collective mural. Each of the individual stories served as the background and middle ground of the mural, while the foreground was created through the connections of their collective experiences.

Participants and Site Selection

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 4 teachers who have worked together in a local middle school in the southern New Jersey region for the past 20 years. For consistency, the participating middle school teachers are active teachers in the local South Jersey context at the secondary level. The race and gender representation of the study was two white females, one Black male, and one white male. As I had some general understandings and knowledge of the phenomena being studied, applying purposive sampling practices (Maxwell, 1997) provided me a lens to select the individuals that best represented ''particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices'' (p. 87). This technique of sampling spoke to the nature of this qualitative study in that it allowed me to select four individuals who have partnered and engaged in work with the university at which I currently work.

Participant 1: William

William Devers has taught middle school Social Studies for the past 24 years, 4 years at a school for students with behavioral exceptionalities, and the past 20 years at Central Middle School. Since his years in high school, William has wanted to be a teacher and a coach as many of his past teachers and coaches had a direct influence on the trajectory of his career path. William was also raised in southern Jersey in a neighborhood where White and Black children rarely lived or played together. His love for Social Studies stems from his mother's civic-minded passions, and endless pursuits for equality in his hometown. William labors over his pedagogy on a daily basis, but is passionate about teaching hard history, facilitating civil discourse around topics of race, gender, and oppression, and coaching baseball. William's teaching hangs tightly to the United States Constitution and stands firm in his belief that all people be treated equally and equitably. For this reason, he started three student activity clubs at Central Middle School: The Young Republic, the Gender-Sexuality Alliance, and a flag-football club.

Participant 2: Carter

Carter Willings also grew up in southern New Jersey and went to an average-sized public high school, nestled in the middle of one of the original Levittown developments. Carter reflects fondly on his childhood, but as one of the few Black kids in his neighborhood, he can also trace a few hate-filled memories that he has shared with me and his students. He did not know he wanted to be a teacher, but a chance meeting with one of his former high school football coaches changed his trajectory. His coach asked him if he would like to coach, and after graduating from Colgate University, Carter

entered the world of public education. Much like me, Carter was a coach first, and then completed an alternate route program to earn his teaching certification in middle school Social Studies and Science. He originally taught at an alternative school for boys for 4 years before landing his job at Central Middle School where he has been for the past twenty-plus years. Carter's African American father was in the military, so he was raised primarily by his mother, an immigrant from Japan, who worked third shift factory jobs. His mother chose to work third shift jobs so she would not have to worry as much about any language barriers that may impact her time at work.

Participant 3: Jacqueline

Jacqueline Williams, who grew up in a white, middle-class family in southern New Jersey, has been a special education teacher and has taught middle school English Language Arts for over 20 years at Central Middle School. Jacqueline earned her Doctorate in Education and is the school advisor for the Girls in Action student action group that discusses current social issues and collaborates to take action against gender inequities. While earning her Doctorate in Education, Jacqueline advocated for herself and served as a role model for other women by defending herself in court against an abusive husband. This experience is one of many that helped shape her understanding of the world and how she wanted to educate her students. Jacqueline's love for her students is only surpassed by her love for her own children, a love that stems from deep daily reflection.

Jacqueline is a conscientious person who smiles with sincerity and speaks her truth at all times. She understands privilege, how it impacts her life positively and

negatively, and understands that many inequities persist in schools and even in her own classroom. She has a firm grasp of the systems of power at play that control her life and the lives of her students, and she inspires her students to challenge those systems of power and control each day she can.

Participant 4: Ruth

Ruth Gilbert is also a special education teacher who teaches English Language Arts in a pull-out resource classroom with 29 years of experience at Central Middle School. For the past 19 years, she has also served as the teacher's association president, advocating for all teachers in the building. Ruth grew up in a middle-class, all White neighborhood in Mishawaka, Indiana. Her family moved to Michigan and then moved again to southern New Jersey only a month before her 16th birthday. Originally, Ruth strived to be an athletic director, but soon decided to teach adaptive Physical Education. She remembers wanting to nurture people like her younger sister who had a disability and never received the education she deserved. Ruth fights for the underdogs, and is vocal in her opinions on fairness, equity, and justice. Together with Carter, she has fought for 20 years to implement more equitable practices at Central Middle School. Growing up in a mostly conservative home and social environment, Ruth believes exposure to cultures and people unlike herself is the best way to understand the full picture of the human experience.

Site: Setting to the Story

The selected site was Central Middle School (pseudonym), located in a southern New Jersey suburb 22 miles outside of Philadelphia. This site was selected because of its

proximate location, its academic performance on statewide assessments, the racial and socioeconomic makeup of its student body, and the district's commitment to improving issues of equity within their schools. Central's student demographics are more diverse than most schools in the regions. There was also a more explicit reason that this site was chosen for this study: The Incident. The incident in question will be narrated in much greater detail in chapter 4, however, it is important to note here, that I was invited by my advisor to a town hall meeting that would change and catapult my research interests, as well as kickstarting a relationship with each of the participants and myself. At the conclusion of the town hall meeting, my advisor formally introduced me to William. Our bond was formed immediately after our first handshake. Further, William did not let me leave that meeting without meeting Carter, Jacqueline, and Ruth; William made this a priority. Neither of us knew at that moment that the work we would eventually engage with together began that night.

Being a critical qualitative research study, my goal was to conduct an in-depth study of four middle-school teachers within the same context. Therefore, the number of participants had to be manageable and realistic within the scope of a timely doctoral dissertation. Further, the participants were all from the local southern New Jersey context, which is a context that I am familiar with through my professional experiences and educational partnerships. Utilizing a context in which I am familiar with allowed for a more consistent sample while attempting to understand the complexities of each participants' experiences in relation to a specific context. I plan to explore this context further through future scholarly work.

By including participants from this local site, this methodology provided the participants and me the opportunity to "focus in on the meaning of a particular aspect of experience" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 85) in a distinct location that shared some similarities from the larger south New Jersey regional context. Further, by engaging with these teachers in their context, I sought "to document and illuminate the complexity and detail" of this unique context with the hope that the reader will find themselves represented in the greater universal themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Data Collection

As the process of data collection was iterative, I will explain the collection and analysis of each component of the process in unison. This study utilized four methods of data gathering and collection: semi-structured kitchen table conversations, classroom observations, gatherings with the participants and five students, and the author's critical reflection journals. Further, field notes from each method of data collection, as well as impressionistic records during classroom observations were collected and analyzed. Data collection and analysis can be seen below in Table 4.

Table 4

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Source	Data Moments	Total Instances	Analysis Method
Classroom Observations	Audio & Video Recordings; Descriptive Field Notes, Impressionistic Records	20 Total Observations (5 x 4 Participants) 45 minutes/observation	Audio/Video Review; Transcriptions; 2 Rounds of Coding; Analytic Memos
Kitchen Table Conversations	Audio & Video Recordings; Descriptive Field Notes, Impressionistic Records	12 Total Conversations 3 x 4 Participants 60 – 90 minutes/KTT	Audio/Video Review; Transcriptions; 2 Rounds of Coding; Analytic Memos
Group Kitchen Table Gathering	Audio & Video Recordings; Descriptive Field Notes, Impressionistic Records	1 Focus Group with the 4 Teacher Participants 120 minutes	Audio/Video Review; Transcriptions; 2 Rounds of Coding; Analytic Memos
Student Kitchen Table Gatherings	Audio & Video Recordings; Descriptive Field Notes, Impressionistic Records	2 Gatherings 5 Student Participants	Audio/Video Review; Transcriptions; 2 Rounds of Coding; Analytic Memos
Reflection Journal	Recordings & Transcriptions	15 Audio Recordings; 15 Transcriptions	Emic Coding for added thick description

Data Source	Data Moments	Total Instances	Analysis Method
Digital Images	Images of Classrooms, Hallways, Cafeteria, and Building	32 Digital Images	Emic Coding for added thick description

Timing

I collected data from September 2019 – January 2020. It is important to acknowledge that I had worked with this group of teachers, specifically Jacqueline and William, prior to the official start of this study. I continue to engage with and support the teachers in this study as a climate team member as well as facilitating trainings centered on equity and a book club. As much of this work is continuing after the official data collection has stopped, the "formal" data I have is a snapshot within an ongoing relationship with the participants. To that end, the ongoing interactions may have also influenced my understandings and interpretations of the data.

After a slow start to getting final board approval and scheduling classroom observations, participants and I began to see one another on a regular basis. The time period of data collection was important, as the Social Studies unit focusing on Slavery and the Civil Rights movement was one of the key curricular aspects to the study. I wanted to be present for a few specific lessons, most notably the lessons that focused on a text written by Julius Lester, as well as the presentation of the students' Freedom Projects at the end of the unit.

Kitchen Table Conversations

Through three kitchen table conversations with each participant, some that extended to two hours in length, descriptive data was collected that gathered insights into the participants' thinking about how their critical consciousness had developed over time, and how they saw that consciousness enacted in the classroom with their students. Each of the kitchen table conversations focused on no more than ten questions. These conversations were informal in nature and held tight to the concept of "everyday talk" as the driving force to creating a "safe space" for "our research process and reflexive engagements with positionality" (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015, p. 750). As Rossman and Rallis (2017) inform us, throughout this series of iterative conversations, the goal will be to draw from the participants concrete examples and elaborate details to ensure the richness and thickness of the context and their experiences within that context. As participants respond to broad questions, our conversations deepened with sub-questions and other follow-up questions that occurred naturally, to ensure that we captured the full essence of the participants' experiences (Clandinin, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The first conversation sought to gain knowledge of the participants' life histories. This was followed up with a conversation that aimed to orient myself and the participants to the specific area of focus, in this case sociopolitical development.

The third and final conversation provided me and the participants an opportunity to engage in a reflective dialogue about the meaning of the experience in light of their history (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 86), a process that not only shed light on the participants' experiences, but one that highlighted the innate complexity of their life

histories, as well as building upon the ongoing analysis of earlier interactions. These conversations also focused on to what degree the participants view their own "capacity for effective change (liberation behavior) (Watts, et al, 2003, p. 192), inside and outside the classroom.

Classroom Observations

To deepen the understanding of individual perspectives of sociopolitical development and how it is enacted, I conducted a total of 20 instruction-based classroom observations (4 teachers x 5 observations each), that took place in each of the participants' classrooms within the same middle school. During these audio and video-recorded observations, I took continuous notes – field notes and impressionistic records. As planned with the kitchen table conversations, I shared initial findings of the classroom observations with each participant to engage in a reflective dialogue about the meanings, contradictions, and paradoxes found throughout the observations. This allowed me to better understand the context and decisions of the participants through a collaborative and iterative meaning-making process.

During each observation, I wanted to be as aware as possible as I took descriptive field notes and impressionistic records in my notebook. After each observation, I relistened and re-watched the observations to see if I missed anything, while also looking and listening for emergent themes and continuing to listen *for* the story.

Group Kitchen Table Gathering

At the end of the data collection period, the participants and I engaged in a two-hour focus group to gain further insights from the individual participants and as a

collective group, regarding their experiences, beliefs, and attitudes about teaching and learning, while also examining the interactions between the participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). In this open environment of expression and discussion, the participants and I focused on similar topics connected to the kitchen table conversations to further understand how each individual reacts to the generation of new understandings through an interactive discussion that might "disturb the natural rhythms of social reality and encounter (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 12). In this way, the mural methodology provided a foundation where interactions could be detailed to a greater extent with a focus on gestures, attitudes, and individual and collective voice "as a way of illuminating more universal patterns" (p.12).

The participants and I utilized a similar approach to our focus group as we did with the kitchen table conversations. Through "everyday talk" we engaged in a fluid and natural flow of conversation.

Student Kitchen Table Gatherings

Two student gatherings were conducted two weeks after all the observations and kitchen table conversations were completed. This data was collected to add an additional layer - or shading - to the overall mural being painted. This data was not utilized to confirm or disconfirm any of the initial data that was collected, only to see and hear how some of the students' experiences of being in these classes. Further, by waiting until after the Slavery and Civil Rights unit was completed, the students and I were able to converse about the work they conducted for their individual Freedom Projects. This was an

important discussion topic, as it directly connected to the initial incident that drew my attention to Central Middle School and the work being done by this team of teachers.

Eight students were selected from Carter's and William's eighth grade Social Studies classes, of whom five participated. Carter and William each asked specific students from their classrooms if they would like to participate in the group gatherings, seeking to get students to participate from backgrounds who have been historically marginalized within the Central Middle School context. Of note, all five were students of color, four females and one male. Three of the students came from William's classes and two came from Carter's classes. The students and I met twice for 45 minutes each time during their set study hour. I provided pizza, chips, and soda for each of our meetings, for which the students expressed a great deal of gratitude. Each focus group session, focused on 5-7 questions, all centered on the instructional practices and climate of their classrooms. During the gatherings, I took minimal notes, as I wanted to replicate, as best I could, an atmosphere similar to the teacher kitchen table conversations. The goal was to create a safe enough space for the students to genuinely engage in everyday talk the way the teacher participants and I engaged.

Reflective Journal

Throughout the entirety of the data collection period, I composed and maintained a critical reflection journal that draws on critical ethnographic approaches of inquiry (Madison, 2012). This journal served as a tool of reflexivity that assisted the research to constantly engage in the act of reflexivity. Reflexivity (Lewison et al., 2008) is the process of the researcher reflecting upon and acknowledging one's positions and

subjectivities in the research. Data collection and analysis, as well as the theorizing of data, are all impacted by the subjectivity of the researcher processes highly subjective (Atkinson, 2005). Therefore, the role of the researcher needed to be analyzed, as well. As Ortlipp (2008) tells us, "My aim was to make my decisions, and the thinking, values, and experiences behind those decisions visible, to both myself and to the reader" (697). In deciding on mural methodology, I not only strived to make my own thinking and values visible in print, but also in the form of an image embedded in the experiences of the participants. As the particular needs to reflect upon their identities, values, and beliefs while interacting with each participant and in interpreting the data collected during observations (Cortazzi & Jin, 2006).

The data collected in the journal entries served as a way to continually examine the ways in which my own positionality continued to perpetuate systems of oppression (Lewison et al., 2008), as well as capturing any paradoxes and/or contradictions expressed by the participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Further, the goal of this reflection journal was to hopefully come to terms with my own positionality in this study by critically examining my own biases and personal history as it related to the other members of this study.

Utilizing observations, kitchen table conversations, group gatherings, and a reflection journal allowed me to triangulate multiple data collection points that all contributed to a more thorough exploration of the participants' and my own experiences and understandings of the inquiry phenomenon.

Table 3.2 details how each data collection source captured each element of the theoretical framework. In some cases, data collection sources captured multiple elements of advancing critical consciousness. For example, during classroom observations, I captured moments of critical social analysis through classroom discussions, as well as collecting evidence of sociopolitical action through critical pedagogies employed by the participants. A further example of this process was the data collected during kitchen table conversations that revealed how each participant engaged in critical social analysis, collective identification, and political self-efficacy. A final example was during student gatherings, where students articulated how their teachers engaged in moments that I analyzed as connecting to critical social analysis, collective identification, political self-efficacy, and sociopolitical action.

Throughout this process, I was able to collect at least one form of data that connected to or revealed, either through dialogue or action, each element of advancing critical consciousness, as detailed in Table 5.

Table 5

How Data Collection Connects to the Theoretical Framework

Data Collection	Element of Advancing CC
Classroom Observations	Critical Social Analysis; Political Self-Efficacy; Sociopolitical Action
Kitchen Table Conversations	Critical Social Analysis; Collective Identification; Political Self-Efficacy; Sociopolitical Action
Teacher Kitchen Table Gathering	Critical Social Analysis; Collective Identification; Political Self-Efficacy; Sociopolitical Action
Student Table Gathering	Critical Social Analysis; Collective Identification
Reflection Journal	Critical Social Analysis; Collective Identification
Digital Images	Political Self-Efficacy; Sociopolitical Action

Data Analysis

Kitchen Table Conversations

Audio and video from all of the kitchen table conversations was transcribed and analyzed. I found that descriptive coding (Saldana, 2016) was helpful for organizing

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initials patterns in the data. This type of coding was used to identify topics, to better

understand the message of each piece of data, and to engage participants in an on-going

dialogue about early findings. In essence, I utilized this first cycle of coding to

understand exactly what was being spoken or written about in the data. From this

"groundwork" a second cycle of coding and further analysis can be conducted (p. 104).

The second cycle of coding was more specific and detailed in nature. Through the

process of pattern coding, I began to create meaningful units of analysis to better interpret

the data (Saldana, 2016). By doing so, I was drawn to and began to identify relationships

between prominent codes, which I was able to reflect upon and continued to analyze in

the same iterative process I had utilized throughout the study. Further, I examined the

charts and graphs created by Dedoose based on the themes of advancing critical

consciousness that helped me visualize the themes in a condensed manner.

The reason for this approach lies within the kitchen table reflexivity tradition of

speaking about things in places where only a select few can speak truly and openly (Kohl

& McCutcheon, 2015). From that point of view, our conversations revealed not only

information about the participants but also about my reactions and reflections to these

interactions. Each subsequent kitchen table conversation built from prior interactions,

including informal conversations and classroom observations. As our relationships began

to grow and take shape, I began to see the main themes throughout our conversations and

the time spent in their classrooms: Critical Social Analysis, Collective Identification,

Political Self-Efficacy, and Sociopolitical Development. Through this approach to

inquiry the participants, along with the way they engage with their students, can be seen

as "the primary agents of knowledge production and local resisters to the status quo"

(Flores, 2020). By taking this approach, we can "decenter hegemonic modes of knowledge production in ways that are essential for imagining new futures." As I see it, the new futures Flores (2020) imagines can be on an individual, collective, or systematic level where each person and the institution are radically changed for the better. In essence, this approach to research is driven by hope.

Classroom Observations

I completed an initial round of coding for each of the classroom observations. After each observation, I reread my notes for emerging themes and asked each participant follow-up questions during informal conversations and during scheduled kitchen table conversations. These coded themes furthered my understanding of the teachers' sociopolitical development. After all observations were completed for each participant, I completed an additional round of pattern coding (Saldana, 2016) to look for common patterns. I looked across all of the patterns to create themes for the classroom observations.

The gathered data from the 20 observations were also used to develop thick descriptions (Ponterotto, 2006), and to see any patterns that emerged in the classrooms concerning the impact of sociopolitical development. The impressionistic records were also analyzed and key to the iterative process of data collection. I used the impressionistic records as a way to make connections during each observation rather than waiting until after I left the classroom. In this way, I was able to begin the meaning-making process and connect to my own personal history as the observations were taking place.

Next, I transcribed my descriptive field notes and impressionistic records for initial emergent themes. Field notes were analyzed for emergent themes separate from the analysis of my impressionistic records, which were also analyzed for emergent themes. After all of the data had been collected and initially analyzed, I uploaded observation transcriptions and impressionistic records into Dedoose for a second round of coding and analysis. I also composed an analytic memo after each round of initial analysis of observations. The second round of codes were then collected into grander themes that spoke to the collective experience of the observations. Throughout this entire process of "engaged search for goodness" (Catone, 2014, p.40), I listened for repetitive refrains, metaphors, and rituals. In this way, I began the process of "tapestry-weaving" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997), focusing on the overall conception for the mural.

The data collected during the focus group was transcribed and went through two rounds of coding in the same manner of the kitchen table conversations. The only difference was that at this point in the data collection and analysis, themes had emerged which began to drive how I saw and heard the data. Also similar to earlier conversations, I did not take copious notes during the conversation, as I wanted to be truly engaged with the participants. As I listened to the audio recording of the focus group conversation, I utilized the transcription process as a first round of coding for emergent themes. At this point, I also composed an analytic memo based on my initial understanding of the themes that emerged from the conversation. Once the data was transcribed, I uploaded the document into Dedoose for a second round of coding and analysis. I then reviewed the analysis of the data and made connections to the kitchen table conversations *listening for*

the story the entire time, while also listening for any contradictions or confirmatory narratives.

Group Kitchen Table Gathering

Through a review the main ideas that occurred again and again, I began to understand, at a deeper level, the story of each participant as well as the collective story. I also made further connections to my personal life history, my teaching history, and my own critical consciousness and sociopolitical development. During the coding process, I also identified key quotations throughout the two hours of conversation that illustrated each theme and connected to prior comments during the kitchen table conversations.

Student Kitchen Table Gathering

Data from the two student gatherings was transcribed and analyzed in the same manner as the kitchen table conversations and the teacher focus group. The only major difference between prior collection and analysis was in relational. Although I had prior interactions with each of the five student participants, I had not built as close of a relationship with the students, as I had with the teacher participants. There was also a power dynamic during these two gatherings that was not as much of a factor as there was with my interactions with the teachers. No matter how safe of a space I tried to create for the students, the fact remains, that I am an adult and a colleague of their teachers. Having had the teachers select the students for the gatherings, there was at least some manner of embedded level of trust from what I could feel during the interactions with the students.

Significance

Through the act of engaging with others in a qualitative inquiry within a portraiture and mural methodology, this study sought to make the world in a particular context more visible by presenting the histories and experiences of 4 teacher practitioners in a specific context. The life stories of these teachers and the uncovering of the journeys of sociopolitical development can possibly describe how others can uncover and resist systems of oppression in their own school and personal contexts. As much as this study may not be generalizable, there remains a transformative possibility for teachers around the country and beyond. As with any research inquiry conducted through a critical lens, my hope remains to empower individuals (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011).

This study also hopes to show the importance of engaging in research that involves people as partners in research (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011). Therefore, one of the desired outcomes for this study is to describe the manner in which the participants and I act in collaboration to see more critically, think at a more critical level, and to critique traditional ways of conducting research. This proposed partnership can be used as a model for future research within the southern New Jersey regional context that explores additional ways we can partner in the struggle to resist and overcome systems of oppression and inequity in our schools and communities.

Presentation

The overall presentation of this study will be in the form of a written mural, as the purpose of this research inquiry is to familiarize the reader with the participants and the stories of the group as a whole (Creswell, 1998). Through this mural, the study sought to

articulate the "patterns of meaning articulated around events, processes, epiphanies, or themes" (p. 73). As this study is framed within a critical lens and is examining the sociopolitical development of teachers, data analysis and interpretation also took place within a critical paradigm. The analysis of the collected data was two-fold. For the interviews, group gatherings, and classrooms observations, a thematic coding process was utilized for each piece of data (Saldana, 2016).

Credibility and Transferability

There is an incredible amount of responsibility when attempting to create a representation of stories told by others. Therefore, when considering the reliability and validity of collected data, this study relied on "isomorphism between constructed realities of respondents and the reconstructions attributed to them" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 237). As stated earlier, this research study also relied on member-checking and peer debriefing to add credibility to the findings. Along with these measures, I also utilized other measures throughout the study such as "prolonged engagements", "persistent observations", and "progressive subjectivity" to build an adequacy of credibility to the data collection process (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A final member check prior to submission also added a layer of credibility to the overall study. Each participant had access to our shared folder throughout the study and was notified each time a draft was written. Everyone read through each chapter with a focus on their own portrait. At no time did any of the participants pushback or question the way in which their portrait or the overall mural was created. Throughout the entire research study, I remained in constant contact with each of the participants through individual and group emails and text messages. During these informal interactions, I was able to ask follow-up questions

to any findings that needed further clarification. Further, each member of this study was emailed a draft of each chapter of the dissertation to make any suggestions they thought necessary.

Reflexivity

As a father, a student, and an educator, an interest in issues of social justice and equity in schools for over a decade is what drove this research study. Through this process I gained understandings of and insights into the process teachers go through to develop sociopolitical awareness in themselves and their students. I was born and raised in a suburban, predominantly-white township, where issues of social justice were rarely, if ever, addressed, especially not in school. My personal journey towards sociopolitical development began at a much later date in life. By engaging with communities and colleagues who had strived to disrupt systems of oppression, I began to develop an awareness for systems and institutions that created inequities throughout the schools in which I worked. Because of feelings of dissonance, I started an ongoing journey of sociopolitical development that has led me to this current study. Many of the ingrained biases from my childhood and formative education are still within my consciousness and continue to manifest as daily contradictions.

I am not of an educational background. I am a North Jersey-born and bred son of manufacturing who witnessed his father work 44 years without missing a day on the job. I received a Bachelor of Arts, a Master of arts, and a Master of Fine Arts all outside of the educational sphere. I did not begin work in the field of Education until I was 28 years old, having spent the previous five years working in manufacturing. When I finally began

my teaching career, I served as a building substitute for two years as I completed an alternate route teacher certification course. I mention this as a way of positioning myself as an insider to the world of education, as well as an outsider to the traditional understanding of what an educator is and how they came to be.

Historically speaking, my family was never enslaved nor was decimated by colonists. My family has never been persecuted nor incarcerated beyond proportion. In fact, my Italian ancestors' criminal enterprises have been historically glorified and romanticized in the media. My family never had land given only to be taken back a few years later, nor experienced peonage. My family has never been removed or displaced from any geographic location by force nor been forcibly relocated. Finally, no laws have ever been made to separate my family from other families.

In the current context, as a male, I have been afforded opportunities beyond my abilities and skill set. Yes, I have a strong work ethic and have worked hard, but so have many others whose experiences do not match the accesses of my life. As a Christian-born American, I have never felt threatened based on my faith no matter the context. As an able-bodied person, I have never struggled to leave my house or enter an establishment, as my physical attributes reflect what is considered the norm. Having engaged in heteronormative acts all of my life, no one has ever questioned my sexual choices por pursuits. In fact, my sexual exploits have been glorified by men and women, alike. As an academic and emerging scholar, my presence has rarely been questioned in the spaces I have shared.

These are not only acknowledgments to be made for research purposes, although through this reflection, my hope was to overcome some of my own innate biases. Rather, they are acknowledgements of aspects of our current and historical societal ills that we must strive to resist and disrupt on a daily basis in all personal and professional spaces. With hope, the mural created during this study will add to a legacy of positive change at the local and regional levels, and beyond. Through the constant practice of critical reflection, I continue to challenge my own belief systems. These inherent biases certainly played a role in this study, with my interactions with the participants, engaging as an outsider in a new context (Zion & Blanchett, 2011) and with the creation of this mural. It was my hope that through the partnership and construction of knowledge with the four participants that my own biases, as well as those of the participants, were brought to light and challenged throughout the process and beyond.

Transferability

As with other studies that seek to trace the life histories and personal and professional journeys of educators towards a more reflexive identity, whether it be critical consciousness, sociopolitical development, or a white racial identity, an ability to transfer this new knowledge to another study will always be difficult. So much depends on the context of a study, the individuals who take part in the study, as well as the design of the study. Through decolonizing methods of inquiry that seek to relieve as many power issues as possible, there still remains questions of whose story is being told and who is telling the story. While examining and illuminating teachers' journeys towards deeper critical consciousness will be examined throughout this study with my hopes of reaching and transforming a greater audience, there will certainly be limitations that may

affect the amount of data collected, the breadth and depth of analysis, and a limited understanding of whether or not these teachers were effective in promoting social action in their classrooms. Additionally, by working within a methodology built from portraiture, the ultimate goal of the inquiry was to lead "toward new understandings and insights, as well as instigating change" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 5). Therefore, by focusing the individual stories, as well as the collective story, full of contradiction and nuance, this inquiry aimed to challenge "the tyranny of the academy" (p. 7). Therefore, we fully embrace the critiques of this model as one of hope and forward leanings.

The data collected in this study included transcripts from three kitchen table conversations from each participant and observational notes from several hours of classroom visits, as well as a transcript from a two-hour focus group held over brunch at the author's home. Each teacher had at least 180 minutes of transcribed conversational data, and somewhere between five to ten hours of classroom observational data. As a result, data about these teachers' journeys or their experiences of sociopolitical development was limited only to the data collected during the timespan of this study. Although some historical artifacts and reflections were analyzed and interpreted, one's own historical memory and bias of such memories limited the study's transferability.

With regards to sampling, all participants were teacher practitioners in the same local region from a school district I already had access to from professional partnerships and personal relationships. For example, I had met each of the participants at a Central Middle School community town hall meeting 9 months prior to the start of this study. From that day, I began to foster relationships with each of the participants through

various forms of equity work. Along with Jacqueline and William, we presented at my university's mini-conference focused on access, success, and equity in schools. I also partnered and continue to partner with Carter and Ruth on Central's school climate and culture committee. Through these various activities, our relationship continues to grow and foster new revelations about how we can be to teachers for positive change. As this may be seen as a sampling limitation, the importance of inquiry lies within the audience's ability to connect to universal themes through the individual stories told throughout the portraits. Although context may vary, the goal of this study is for the readers to connect with the "dynamic interaction of values, personality, structure, and history" of this particular context (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.11).

Finally, it was important throughout this study to keep in mind that all teachers have different histories and their own cultures before we ever have them participate in a research study. To that end, it is important, most of all, to consider the individual participant, to get to know them through their own words, reflections, and actions.

In the next four chapters, I present portraits of each participant, as well as an historical background of the context in which this study was conducted. The order of the portraits is significant to the manner in which the overall story was created. I begin the portraits with William's story because he was at the center of the incident that brought us all together. I then follow with Carter's portrait because he and William teach grade 8 Social studies together and much of their content is central to the overall mural that was created. Within each portrait, I include descriptions of classroom environment, classroom instruction, and narratives of our kitchen table conversations. I also focus on one of the main themes for each participant discussed in chapter 3 that I thought connects

most with them. This does not mean that each of the participants do not connect to each of the themes, rather, I chose to focus on the one theme for each participant that resonated most deeply to my experiences and time spent with them.

In each portrait in the following chapters, I focus on specific ways each participant enacted elements of advancing critical consciousness. In William's portrait in chapter 4, I focus on *Residue*. In Carter's portrait in Chapter 5, I focus on *Building Relationships*. In Jacqueline's portrait in Chapter 6, I focus on *Advocacy*. And in Ruth's portrait Chapter 7, I focus on *Coming from the Heart.* In Chapter 8, I provide a deeper analysis of how each participant connects to each of the main themes: Critical Social Analysis, Collective Identification, Political Self-Efficacy, and Sociopolitical Development. Finally, in Chapter 9, I discuss how each of these themes connect to the four elements of sociopolitical development that promotes and develops critical consciousness.

Chapter 4

Working our Way Through the Residue: William Devers

The Incident (Background)

I sat in the middle of the crowded multipurpose room at Central Middle School on a cold January evening, notebook in hand, slight fever crawling on my skin. A heaviness of anticipation and angst permeated throughout the large multipurpose room. Black and white faces were interspersed amongst the seats. Most people, few whom I knew at the time, sat upright, eyes fixated at the front stage, waiting for this unprecedented town hall meeting to begin. One of my colleagues sat to my left, as my advisor stood in front of the audience with microphone in hand. This was not the first time my advisor had called me to attend a meeting focused on a racialized incident, equity, and social justice, but it was the first time I felt she *needed* me there as much as *wanting* me there. My colleague to the left would later testify that exact feeling of *need*.

Nearly 75 bodies filled the multipurpose room that night. We had all been summoned to this *emergency* meeting to engage in dialogue around a student-created poster, a poster designed with great intent but even less context. A lesson we would all learn throughout the night.

I would later learn that all 4 of the participants in this study were in attendance, and I would have the opportunity to speak to each of them before leaving that historic meeting. The superintendent of schools, the Central Middle School principal, members of the council, police officers, and a representative of #BlackLivesMatter were all present. Former and present students, parents, teachers and community members all came to show

support or question the motives of the poster in question or the teacher who created the assignment. Also in attendance were the mother and sister of the student who had been negatively impacted by the poster in question, and the teacher who hung the student-created poster outside his classroom on one of the walls in a main hallway of the middle school, clear to all students and adults who traveled those halls.

The incident in question centered around a poster created by one of William's grade 8 students for a project called *The Freedom Project,* a culminating assignment at the end of a unit featuring lessons on emancipation, enslavement, the Civil War and the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, and the Civil Rights Era. All students in William's and Carter's classrooms are assigned this project. Students are asked to create a work of art, medium of their choice, that best exemplifies and symbolizes their learning throughout the unit. Students are tasked with creating the project, grading their own work, and presenting their work to their peers if they so choose. Students who do not present their final product to the class also have the option to display their work either in their teachers' classroom or in the hallway. Many students create posters, while others perform dances, songs, or poems that are presented to their classmates. Throughout the unit, students learn in various forms such as lectures, videos, research, and debates. Students also engage in a reading of Julius Lester's book *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*. It was this unit of study that I would eventually see in action during the research study a year later.

Along with Carter and William, Ruth and Jacqueline support the students as in-class resources teachers. Each of the four participants are active members of this small group of teachers that encourage their students to see their education as a place of social

action and learning beyond rote activities. In this way, each of their classrooms are sites in which critical consciousness is developed. They each see their students as future voters and jurors, and through this lens push their students to engage with and explore critical thinking about social issues in their ELA and SS classes. Within this context of learning, one of William's students made the critical decision to create a poster that would capture what they felt was the mindset of the white enslavers. The poster included an image of a shackle, a whip, the word, "crack" and four words: "Slavery Was A Choice". The student presented the poster to the class, and William asked if it would be okay to hang up the poster in the hallway. A day later, a Black 8th grade student who was not in William's class walked through the hallway where the poster hung and stopped when they saw the images and the four words. The student took a picture of the poster (see Figure 3) and the image went viral within a few hours:

Figure 3

Student Poster
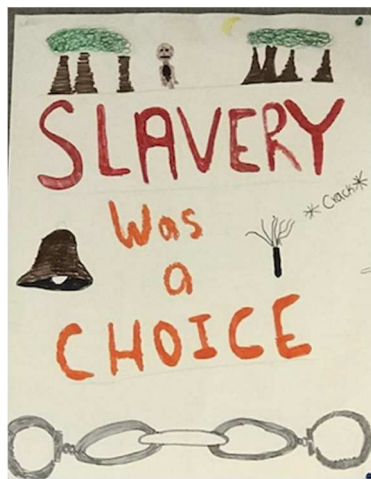
William, who had been incorporating this project in the unit for many years, was blindsided by all of the negative publicity. The school and district were flooded with phone calls, emails, and Facebook comments. Answers to why such an inappropriate poster was allowed to be created and hung up in a school hallway were demanded from all directions. ---Parents, former students, #BlackLivesMatter, and my advisor were only some of the people who wanted to know the rationale behind such a reckless decision.

It was a few nights later when my advisor called and asked me to join her at the Central Middle School town hall meeting. She had learned of the context in which the poster was created, what the student's reasoning for the poster was, and how much support William was receiving from students, parents, and colleagues about his classes, the unit, and his overall approach to teaching. I would come to feel the same way about William at the town hall meeting, and would later learn about Carter's, Ruth's, and Jacqueline's roles, as well.

My advisor opened the meeting with introductions to lower the tension brought in by all 70 participants whether they were there for answers or to show support. Next, William was introduced. He took the mic and addressed the audience. His apology was warm and convicted, as many in attendance nodded along to his message. He apologized for hanging up a poster that was created within the context of his classroom but was hung in a public space void of the lessons, conversations, videos, and classroom discussions centering on the topics of race, enslavement, residue, power and control, and the Civil Rights Movement. Void of the student-led dialogue around the historical and present use of the n-word. Void of any conversation about the countless white enslavers who made conscious, daily decisions to enslave humans as capital. Because of this void, the context

around white people choosing to enslave Africans and Blacks was not captured in that poster. For this, William apologized. He apologized for negatively impacting a Black student in his school, for anyone who saw that poster and felt the same pain that 8th grade students felt on that day. He apologized for not thinking about the implications of a message like, "Slavery Was A Choice", could have on a person outside of the context of his classroom community, most importantly a teenager. William apologized. He did not, however, apologize for the lesson nor the creation of the poster itself. He did not apologize, and in fact doubled-down, for the lessons taught in his class, the same lessons taught down the hallway in Carter's classroom, and he did not apologize for the topics covered during that unit and the units before and after. William believed wholeheartedly in what he was doing in the classroom, and he believed in the positive impact the lessons were having on all of his students, Black, white, Latinx, Asian, and Multi-race. William made that point clear, and he made clear his intent to keep on teaching, reflecting, and listening to the feedback of his students, his colleagues, and the families in this community.

After William's address, audience members had an opportunity to share their thoughts or ask follow-up questions. The microphone was passed to a few individuals while others chose to speak in the front of the room. The mother of the impacted student was one of the first to speak, and her message in defense of her son's feelings were clear. Other parents spoke out of concern, while others spoke in defense of William's character and his teaching. A few colleagues and a council person also addressed the community. Most knew William to be an amazing teacher whose approach to Black History and American History was a great benefit to the students at Central Middle School. A

representative from #BlackLivesMatter also spoke. She reminded us of the importance of centering the experience of the impacted student. To this point, no one raised any objection. Many others spoke throughout the 2-hour meeting, but the final voice was the one that resonated most deeply with me, the voice of one of William's current students. She took the microphone, standing next to her parents, and urged the audience to understand the positive impact William's class was having on her. She wanted us to know that had she not been William's student she may have never learned about people that looked like her, that brought attention to issues she faces in school as a Black student, and how her critical thinking skills have been ignited because of the lessons in William's classes. I sat in awe of the grace and power of this student's message. If I had any doubts about why my advisor wanted me to meet William before, they were certainly erased after hearing this student speak so passionately about her Social Studies class and her teacher.

When the meeting ended, I was formally introduced to William, who knew I would be in attendance that night. We embraced as if we knew each other for years. He immediately wanted to introduce me to his "partners", Carter, Jacqueline, and Ruth. We spoke briefly that night, but I knew it wouldn't be the last time I saw any of them. We had work to do, together.

The Setting of the Story (Background)

Central Middle School is home to 500 students grades 6-8 with aa racial makeup unlike most schools in the Southern New Jersey region. Here, at CMS, the student body is far less segregated than many of its peer districts, as well as many of the districts

throughout the state. The racial demographics are important to note within the context of the poster incident that took place in one of the grade 8 Social Studies classrooms, a classroom I came to know well throughout this study:

Table 6

Racial and Ethnic Student Breakdown

Racial and Ethnic Group	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
White	56.8%	53.0%	54.5%
Hispanic	10.4%	11.0%	10.1%
Black or African American	20.9%	23.5%	23.2%
Asian	6.2%	5.2%	4.4%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.4%	0.6%	0.2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%
Two or More Races	5.1%	6.6%	7.5%

Table 7

Economic and Demographic Student Breakdown

Student Group	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
Female	48.9%	48.6%	46.3%
Male	51.1%	51.4%	53.7%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	16.2%	18.7%	21.4%
Students with Disabilities	21.5%	20.7%	20.2%
English Learners	0.9%	1.4%	1.2%
Homeless Students	1.5%	1.4%	0.8%
Students in Foster Care	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Military-Connected Students	4.0%	4.8%	4.8%
Migrant Students	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Further, the economic breakdown of CMS adds a layer of complexity that adds to the nuanced intersectionality of the student body. In many school districts and

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municipalities throughout the state of New Jersey, students of color are many times also "Economically Disadvantaged". At CMS, there is also a large population of "Students with Disabilities". When taken into the larger context, CMS has a much more diverse student population than most schools in the region. For that reason, the impact of the poster resonated deeply with the community at-large, not only within the walls of the middle school.

One of the most striking things I noticed while attending the town hall meeting at CMS was the diversity in the auditorium that night. Within the southern New Jersey context, many school districts still operate within the de facto segregated communities that are divided across racial lines. At CMS, the story is rather different. As of the 2017 – 2018 school year, the Central student body includes 502 students in grades 6-8. Central's student population was approximately 23.5% Black or African American students, 11% Hispanic students, 5.2% Asian students, 6.6% of students who are two or more races, and 53% white students. 18% of Central's students are considered economically disadvantaged, and 20.7% are students with disabilities. Further, as the school is located near an Army base, there are also many families with ties to the military. Although white students still make up more than 50% of the total student body, the racial makeup of CMS is much more diverse than most schools in the region. This fact played and continues to play a critical role in how these four teachers approach teaching within their school context.

Introduction of Participants

As personally and professionally tied together as the four participants are, their time spent teaching and working together varies from year to year. Carter teaches two sections of grade 8 Science and two sections of grade 8 Social Studies. William, on the other hand, only teaches Social Studies to five classes. Ruth and Jacqueline are Special Education teachers who each have their own pull-out English Language Arts (ELA) classes. Both Ruth and Jacqueline push-in and serve as in-class support teachers to William and Carter at different times throughout the day.

During some school years, Ruth and Jacqueline exclusively support Carter's and William's classes. This year, however, Jacqueline only spends one class period with Carter during one of his 8th grade Science classes. On the other hand, she does share two Social Studies classes with William, one of which is when her pull-out ELA students are in his classroom. Ruth also splits her time between William and Carter by supporting one of their Social Studies classes. As with Jacqueline, Ruth has the opportunity to share a class with William while her pull-out ELA students are in his classroom.

Although William and Carter plan units and projects together, they do not plan individual Social Studies lessons together. The same can be said about Jacqueline and Ruth. Even though they spend a considerable amount of time together throughout the day, as their classrooms are next to each other, they do not plan their lessons together. All of the participants in this study share similar overall goals, but there are only a few explicit connections between classroom experiences. This is not uncommon in the schools I have worked in as well as the schools in which I partner. More often than not,

teachers remain in their own silos without an explicit connection to the larger school community.

Individual Stories (Middle Ground)

In the stories that follow, the four teachers all speak to their own critical consciousness and how that informs and continues to inform their perceptions of their processes of their own sociopolitical development and how that plays out in their classrooms and, in some cases, their personal lives. Further, the five students who engaged in the two kitchen table gatherings, all students of color, speak to the impact of the pedagogy and curriculum being enacted in their classrooms. In this chapter, I created individual portraits of each educator as well as the mural of my interactions with the teacher participants and some of their students. In presenting their stories from conversations and classroom visits, our mural will showcase the major themes that became visible throughout data collection and analysis. I will also present some of the responses of the students who sat with me during the two focus group sessions.

Finally, throughout this chapter and the final chapter of this dissertation, I will weave my own voice, stemming from my own personal and historical experiences, as well as my own impressionistic records composed throughout each stage of data collection, most notably during the five observations of each teacher. In their own voices, and in my voice, I will explore the themes that emerged during our conversations and eight themes that emerged during the observations. The themes came directly from the original questions I asked, as well as less formal questions that emerged from general comments made by teachers and students during our kitchen table gatherings and group

gatherings. The observations add to what was said during our conversations and focus group, although the weight of the observations cannot be understated. Same can be said for the student gatherings. Themes weren't necessarily generated from the student gatherings, but instead add more context to each of the themes pulled from the teacher interactions.

Teacher Participant #1: William and the Grappling with Residue

I meet William at the Starbucks near our house on a late July morning to discuss and give feedback on the grade 8 Social Studies curriculum revisions and additions he would like to make and get approved at the August board of education meeting. Earlier in the week, he had sent me an urgent email followed by an urgent text message; he *needed* to get these standards approved if he was to teach his classes the way he knew they needed to be taught. William had never shied away from teaching hard history, and he didn't plan on stopping now. After the prior year's incident with the student poster that raised concerns throughout the community, William wanted to ensure everyone in the district was aware of the topics that would be covered in his and Carter's grade 8 Social Studies classes. The standards below were preceded by a short and direct message:

> I'm revising the 8th curriculum this summer and it will be presented to the Board in August. I want these changes to be bold and clear and need the members of the board to back every word of it. I also need these objectives to clearly express what we do. This is what I have so far but would like to include practices that promote self-reflection in identifying our own racial and implicit biases. Can you please help me in this endeavor?

- Students will recognize that slavery existed around the world prior to the European settlement of North America.

- Students will be able to describe the slave trade from Africa to America.

- Students will describe daily life of enslaved individuals.

- Students will be able to discuss the labor and culture of enslaved people during the colonial era.

- Students will understand the growth of the abolitionist movement and the slave holding states' view of the movement as a physical, economic and political threat.

- Students will understand that enslaved people resisted slavery in ways that ranged from violence to smaller everyday means of asserting their humanity and opposing the wishes and interests of their enslavers.

- Students will be able to discuss the culture of enslaved Americans and its impact on American culture in general.

- Students will describe the ways that the Constitution and established laws provided direct and indirect protection to slavery and imbued enslavers and slave states with increased political power.

- Students will understand how free black and enslaved communities affected the Civil War.

- Students will examine the ways that people who were enslaved claimed their freedom after the Civil War.

- Students will examine the ways that government policies affected the lives of formerly enslaved people and women.

- Students will examine the ways that white Southerners attempted to define freedom for freed people.

- Students will examine the ways in which the legacies of slavery and white supremacy continue to affect life in the United States.

Over coffee and breakfast sandwiches, William and I discussed his plans for the coming school year, our project together, and the importance of getting these standards approved for the grade 8 Social Studies classes he and Carter would be lead teaching and Ruth and Jacqueline would be supporting . We also discussed these objectives, as well as why he was nervous some of these objectives might not be approved. When I brought up this question, he alluded to the past year's racially charged incident. William was still clear that he had made a mistake of not providing context to the student poster he chose to hang during the past school year, but he had also experienced pushback from some community members about the topics being covered and discussed in his classes, most notably, issues of police brutality. Although he had taken time to meet with various community members to discuss these issues, including the township police chief, William had received emails and phone calls condemning some of the topics raised during his classes with his students, topics that linked the historical racism in the United States to the current systems of racism in the United States. And one term would come to define not only the discussions I observed taking place in William's classes, but also throughout all of our kitchen table gatherings and informal interactions: *residue*.

Teacher Description

William Devers has taught middle school Social Studies for the past 24 years, 4 years at a school for students with behavioral exceptionalities, and the past 20 years at

Central Middle School. Since his years in high school, William has wanted to be a teacher and a coach. Like Carter and I, past teachers and coaches had a direct influence on the trajectory of his career path. William was also raised in southern Jersey in a neighborhood where White and Black children rarely lived or played together. His love for Social Studies stems from his mother's civic-minded passions, and endless pursuits for equality in his hometown. William labors over his pedagogy on a daily basis, but is passionate about teaching hard history, facilitating civil discourse around topics of race, gender, and oppression, and coaching baseball. William's teaching hangs tightly to the United States Constitution and stands firm in his belief that all people be treated equally and equitably. For this reason, he started three student activity clubs at Central Middle School: The Young Republic, the Gender-Sexuality Alliance, and a flag-football club.

Classroom Environment

Upon entering Williams's classroom, I am greeted with the strongest "bro-hug" of my life, as William's long and strong arms pull me close against his thick frame. He smiles and asks me how I am doing. He also asks about my mother who has been battling breast cancer for the past 9 months. He stares directly into my eyes and lets me know he and his family have been thinking about her. He greets each student with a similar greeting, except a hug is replaced by a hi-five or a fist bump. Each student is greeted warmly as they find their seats, drop their sacks to the ground, and open their Chromebooks as they quietly speak with one another. William is in no rush to quiet down the group of 25 students, as he is engaged in multiple conversations with students. He asks about weekend plans, sports games won or lost, and of course, as in every classroom I enter at CMS, there is conversation about this week's professional football game.

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I find an empty desk in the back of the room, set up my digital devices, and briefly scan the room. Today there are 15 male students and 10 female students seated in pairs, 10 of whom are Black, 3 Latinx, and 12 white students. As I would find out later in conversation with William, seating is by student choice, and next week, students will be in a café seating atmosphere. An essential question: is posted on the wall behind William's desk, "What is the history of the African Slave Trade, slavery, emancipation, the Jim Crow era, and the depth of their impact on our society?" A banner nearby stretches across the wall, "Mr. President how long must women wait for Liberty?" The walls and table-tops of William's each carry their own history lesson. "If you don't know the past…you don't know the future".

On the front board, the words "Power" and "Control" take center stage, words that remain in place on that board and in classroom discussions and conversations throughout my time in William's presence. In bold black letters on the front board just below "Power" and "Control" is the word "Residue", another term that is commonplace throughout my many visits. As the students begin to settle into the lesson, William walks to the front of the room where a podium rests in front of the entire class. The students' eyes rest on William's 6' 2'' presence. He is dressed in grey khakis and an untucked button-down plaid shirt. His attire fits his energy, and aside from his height, he and I share many physical attributes. We are both white, bald middle school teachers who are as passionate about our content as we are about building relationships with students. Carpe Diem is framed on the side wall, a message anyone who grew up watching *Dead Poets Society* certainly knows the meaning of the phrase.

The students in William's classes appear comfortable to ask questions and speak openly. William welcomes dialogue, and students' voices ring out each time I visit his classroom. Much like his approach to teaching where students engage in open discussions often, the walls of William's classroom represent what some might perceive as the goals and ideals of the United States. This is a social studies classroom to the max; William showcases that sentiment explicitly. Phrases such as "The Promise" and "The Fulfillment" outline the far wall, in direct reference to the Constitution. Images of Harry Truman and Abraham Lincoln add to the social studies vibe, as well as the famous message of "E Pluribus Unum" From Many – One that takes residency on the lower left corner of the front board. Along with these messages, other, less familiar messages also adorn the walls of the classroom, messaging that reminds me of why I am here. A large print of W.E.B. DuBois stares back at the students from the front wall, as well as a women's rights "We Can Do It" poster.

Each time I visit William's classroom, the energy is the same. He and his students are all eager to discuss the content being covered in class, most of which centers on the African Slave Trade, Slavery and resistance to slavery in the United States, The Civil Rights Movement, and current social issues that center on racism, sexism, and other issues of social injustice. William and his students work together, through what they call civil discourse. However, William also employs other strategies throughout class time to engage students. One particular moment was when William led the class, and me, in a 10-minute meditation session to begin class. After the brief meditation, William asked students to greet someone they were not sitting near and ask them about the events of

their weekend. William filtered around the room listening to students quietly share with one another.

On a freezing December morning, I visit one of William's classes I have observed a few times. I notice that students are all in new seats from the last two times I visited. As students begin their classwork, William quickly explains to me that he occasionally uses "Flippity", an online tool, which randomly selects students for his seating chart as a way to "mix things up". He also uses Flippity for conversation starters with students, like the opening activity he has planned for his students on this day. Students are assigned random partners and speak to one another about their weekends. William's hope is that his students will focus on conversation skills and how well they listen to one another. As he explains to me and his students, "It's also a way for us to get comfortable being uncomfortable."

As this particular lesson comes to a close, my eyes drift to a phrase posted on one of the walls I hadn't noticed until today. Is it a new poster or have I just not noticed it? On the far windows the singular word, "Undecided", is visible to all who enter the room. Also, of note today is the positioning of William's podium. Rather than standing tall in the front of the room, today, the podium is located in the middle of the classroom with students surrounding it from all angles. This would not be the last time the podium would be moved. As the bell rings and William departs with his students to head to the cafeteria, I scan the room one last time. On the front board are displays of Nat Turner and the *Amistad,* just below the word: Resistance.

Classroom Instruction

"That's it, ETH-NO-CENTRISM. We take control. The desire to get power and take control," William is center stage with 25 sets of eyes and ears upon him. Google Chromebooks open on each desk, fingertips hovering above keyboards, lights dimmed, and an image of one of the pages from Julius Lester's book, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road,* displayed on the smart board. Pages from this book will be displayed throughout the entire class, one page in particular.

Today, the 8th graders in William's social studies class will be discussing Slavery through Lester's text, and one page, a page that has become infamous in William's class, will be the focal point of discussion. The page in question contains one word that has been utilized throughout the past 400 years of United States history as a way of dehumanizing and demeaning Black people. The same word has also been utilized in some communities and by some individuals in ways that only Black people can understand. The word in question is, of course, the N-word.

Today, William's 8th graders will decide the fate of this word, and how, if at all, they will utilize it in class. William has proceeded with the discussion of this page and this word in a similar manner for the past few years, sharing space with students to make the ultimate decision to either read it silently to themselves, have one of their peers read it aloud, have another Black adult in the building read it, or completely skip over the page. Whatever the decision is, it must be unanimous, and each of William's five classes must make the decision for themselves. Today is that day, this is the moment. Some of

William's classes have discussed the issue for multiple days before deciding what they feel is the best course of action. Other classes have decided quickly.

In this class, today, the discussion around the N-word begins slowly, as students sit quietly, shifting in their seats, each scanning the room to see who might speak first. William encourages the students, "This involves all of us" and asks students how they think they should proceed with the page that includes the N-Word? Should they skip the page? Should they omit the word? Should they read it quietly to themselves? William reminds the class that before they can proceed, they will need to come to a consensus. "Please take some time to think about it, now."

The silence is palpable. From my view behind the entire class of 25 students, I can see their eyes peering around the room, some trying not to make eye contact, others eagerly waiting to see who might speak first. A white male student in the back raises his hand to respond. His is the first raised hand. William does not call on him. Two Black girls speak quietly to one another in the front of the room, I cannot hear what they are saying. Again, the white male in the back raises his hand to share. William calls on him after a few more moments of looking around the class to see who else might raise their hand. The white student in the back raises his hand, and asks, "who is 'eligible' to say the word" and that "maybe someone 'eligible' can read the word for the class."

A Black male student sitting in the same row as the white student who spoke first volunteers to read the page for the class, "I can read it for the class," he smiles. One of the other Black female students expresses to him that he "shouldn't be so excited to read that page". Another Black female student on the other side of the classroom states,

"Skipping over the page would be skipping over our past". A White male student sitting in the front near where William is standing references the quote in the front of the room about 'our past is our future". In hushed tones, students continue to discuss this subject with one another within their proximity. Some groups of two to three students speak cordially with each other, while a few pairs of students sit quietly shifting in their seats. Only a few moments remain in class. William leaves the class with the final thought: "This is our story to share". The bell rings. There will be no consensus, today. Students pack up their belongings and exit quietly on their way to lunch. Class ends.

On an early November morning, I find myself seated in the back of William's room, as he and his students are to continue their work about the African Slave Trade. On my way into the building, I take notice of the student Bill of Rights that William and his students in the Young Republic created that is displayed in the main hallway just outside the cafeteria and main entrance. One cannot enter the Central Middle School and not walk past these giant images. As this is one of the extra-curricular activities William engages in with students, I can see many of the connections between his daily lessons and the images that adorn the main hallway walls:

Figure 4

Student Bill of Rights #1

Figure 5

Student Bill of Rights #2

Figure 6

Student Bill of Rights #3
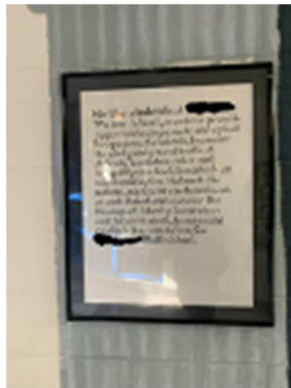
Figure 7

Student Bill of Rights #4
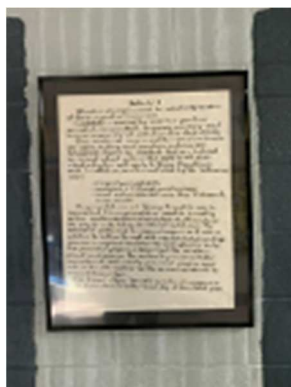
Figure 8

Student Bill of Rights #5

I do not know if the students in the class today are making explicit connections to those images, but in class, William asks the students a quick, off the cuff question, "Does anyone know who our state senators are?" Without being called on, a few students respond, "Cory Booker and Bob Menendez." William nods in agreement and reminds students about their projects and what the theme is for their projects: Freedom. Projects and presentations are due December 16th, I write the date down in my notebook.

William begins class formally, "We've been going over some heavy stuff – racism, tough stuff, that I'm still trying to understand myself, so please use exit cards for any lingering questions, as we may all handle this material differently – we'll try to find the answers together. What from this that makes you think, feel, takeaways, write it all down. Your reflection sheets are on Google Classroom – type on it whatever stays with you or resonates with you." Most students keep this reflection page open throughout class, as I can see their screens from my vantage point. Class begins with an open discussion.

"Are we going to watch Many Rivers?" a student in the back asks.

William tells the class, "No, we're actually going to move on from that. What was slavery based on? What did Henry Louis Gates tell us?"

One male student responds, "Color?"

"No, not yet. What was it based on in the beginning? How did they justify in their minds enslaving others?

"Money?" Another student responds

"That too, money and wealth had a lot to do with it," William weaves his body through the classroom as he speaks.

A Black female student near the front of the room adds one word to the discussion,

"Ethnocentrism."

"Yes," "William nods in agreement and points at the front board where the word ethnocentrism is posted. He then explains how racism transformed into something based on color.

Today, the students and William are continuing their work with the book, *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road*, by Julius Lester. William turns off the lights in the room and displays pages of the book on the smartboard. As he reads aloud pages from the book that is currently focusing on the African Slave Trade, students pose questions:

What if you have light skin?

What about Latinos or Hispanics?

Were there any revolts on slave ships?

Throughout class, students use terms such as "resistance" and "ethnocentrism" in conversation with one another and with William. This open forum of reading aloud and conversation continues for ten minutes. William turns the lights back on and asks the students to "get up and stretch, move around and talk to one another." Most of the students stand and talk with their peers. Some wander to the opposite side of the room to speak with one another, as others remain seated. William approaches one group of students and listens to their conversation. A few minutes pass, and William asks students to return to their seats.

At this point, William engages students more directly in the text, asking them to:

Go to the hulls of those ships. Use your heart, your soul, your spirit, to put yourself in the shoes of those enslaved, as well as those who enslaved people, to understand that psychology of how they could enslave people. This is our history - this isn't fiction. This is the dehumanization process - the stripping of names - maintain power and control – Physical and mentally.

A white male student in the middle of the room asks, "How much were they eating over the 3 months at sea?" William informs the class of the horrific eating and living conditions on the ships and continues to read the book aloud as he filters throughout the pairs of desks, as he adds his own parentheticals, "The smell was as thick as hatred. You

have memories of those Africans even if you're white. This is our history, not African-American history," William adds. "Reflect on how it would feel to be aboard that ship as I read to you. When you put it to words, you make it real. When you have an understanding, you can reflect."

The images from *From Slave Ship to Freedom* on the smartboard illuminate the classroom. William reminds students of, "Other means to control such as laws, Jim Crow, and he references "Control" and "Power" that are displayed prominently on the front board only inches from the smartboard. "This is a reflection on who we are as people, this is social studies, not just history, this is psychology. Not on some distant shore, here. Imagine our own capacity for evil". Students' Chromebooks are open and many are typing their reflections. Students have the option to utilize an exit card or the online reflection tool to use while reflecting. As they type, William reminds them of the NatGeo feature article that sits on his blackboard about "One Race, No Matter the Pigmentation". As students reflect, two white male students in the back of the room talk and giggle quietly with one another. Williams' final thought of the day is, "Evil happens when good people do nothing". The bell rings, signaling the students to move to their next period. The lights remain off, as the images from Lester's book shine the only light in the classroom. The students pack up their belongings and head for the door, emptying out into a bustling hallway full of teenage laughter.

On a later visit to one of William's classes, I have the opportunity to see Ruth work as the in-class support teacher alongside William. I immediately recognize the students from Ruth's ELA class; they do not acknowledge me as they do when I am in their ELA

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class. This is the first time I am seeing them or Ruth in a setting outside of their classroom.

At the beginning of class, William gives a brief overview of Power and Control and how these two concepts will be centered throughout the lesson. Ruth adds that she will be providing the woman's perspective with regards to the road on the right to vote and the power of the 15th amendment. Both teachers stand in the back of the room, and the 25 students have all swiveled in their seats to see Ruth speaking. She explains to the students that "not until 1920 did women have the right to vote". William then pulls up images on the front screen, images I am sure most grade 8 students have never seen. Images of lynchings throughout United States history. I have seen some of the images before during a presentation William, Jacqueline, and I created and presented together for an equity conference in the spring. William warns the students about the graphic nature of the images before displaying them on the smartboard. He reminds the students of the white southerners intent of control and maintaining power, the control during the Jim Crow era, "Violence and threats in public lynching's had a psychological effect on people of color and young people's feelings on race. What are all of your feelings about race? How do these images impact you're thinking?" No one responds. In the darkness of the room, with the only light coming from the gruesome images, William explains that these images tie into another word that is posted in this room, a word that has come up often throughout our many conversations: Residue. "The residue of this history, that is still part of our lives today, and that we must investigate the residue from this time in our history and why should we investigate the residue."

At this moment in class, four white students raise their hands to respond - to girls and two boys. One of the students states, "Resistance is one of the reasons why we must confess and talk about the residue from this time." Another student asks about the Little Rock Nine and its connection to all of this. William explains how all of these images, as well as the Little Rock Nine, still inform and impact our understandings of history. He asks again, "What kind of psychological impact is this residue, what impact does it have on all of us?" "So," he continues, "We need to know the story of Emmett Till."

After a brief summary of the story, William plays a short video about Emmett till from American Experience. During the short film, a Black female student raises her hand to her mouth as she realizes Emmett Till has been killed. Another Black female, sitting to her right, covers her eyes in her sweatshirt. William pauses the video after a few minutes and says, "So the world can see what racism had done to her son, that is the reason why his mother had the open casket. He then displays images of Emmett Till, one before and one after the horrific killing. The same student from earlier covers her mouth, again. Two Black males in the front of the room quickly speak to one another. I don't know what they say, but I can tell they are talking about the images. William remains silent for a few moments, allowing the students to take their time with the images, before stating, "Think about the psychological impact on people when they (the killers) got off Scott free. What did that mean about racism in our country?"

To end class, William plays a video of a group of young Philadelphia poets from the HBO slam poetry competition show *Brave New Voices*. In the video, the young poets express their views about Emmett Till and why it is so important to talk about Emmett Till, how everyone should know this history. Not one student in William's class takes

their eyes from the screen. As the video comes to a close, my eyes catch one Black

female to my left searching images on her Chromebook. The images are of Emmett Till.

William turns the lights back on in the class. One student raises his hand and asks how

the men were able to take Emmett? Another asks if Emmett Till's mom is still alive?

Students' hands begin to fly up all around the room. William answers as many questions

before their time together runs out. The students begin to pack up their belongings. Small

conversations persist all around the room. Before they leave, William reminds students

that their Freedom projects are due December 16.

The bell rings, class is over.

Residue

On a brisk evening in mid-November, William and I meet up at the local

Starbucks, less than a mile from each of our homes. We have met here multiple times

over the past 10 months to discuss school issues, personal issues, and many of the on-

going social issues, including the impending impeachment hearings of Donald Trump. It

was here, at this Starbucks, only a month after the incident with the poster in William's

class that our relationship began to take shape. We had discussed our views on education,

parenting, my mother's on-going cancer treatments, and the importance of teaching hard

history. From the beginning, William and I were candid with one another, but tonight, as

we sat down for our first in a series of kitchen table gatherings, William was more formal

than ever before in his responses.

William speaks fondly of his parents and his middle-class upbringing in a nearby

township, a childhood where being the youngest of six children allowed him the space to

explore and experiment more than his older siblings, "There were things you wouldn't ordinarily get along get away with and I was able to and there's, just, a lot of action, a lot of excitement in the household." He continues:

> At school I was extremely well-behaved, I was an angel. But being the young kid for some reason, I talked back. I had a little bit of an attitude. You know I wasn't the same person that I was with, at school. Eventually I matured. I think my parents were kind of desensitized to it, and they just kind of let me get away with certain things you know. My friends could sleep over. My brothers and sisters couldn't sleep over their friends' houses at the same young age. I was able to do that. I was able to take my bike farther than they could at a certain age. Just that sort of thing.

His mother was a civic minded person who, in a town where the train tracks actually separated Black people from white people, made it a point to build and sustain relationships with people outside of hers and William's immediate surroundings. He links his mother's actions to her own upbringing in Sandusky, Ohio:

> She was from a large family. Her father was well known in Sandusky Ohio. I think. She was raised in a way that empowered. She was a very confident woman, didn't go to college, education went as far as a high school education, but somehow, some way, she's just a compassionate person and stood up for people that couldn't stand up for themselves, just that type of person.

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William then adds that his mother passed away when he was only 19, during his sophomore year of college at West Virginia University. "I am who I am because of the women in my life," speaking of his mother, his two older sisters, his wife, and the two women in this study. I can't help but think of my mother as he speaks, as she is currently undergoing monthly chemotherapy sessions. At 74, my mother and I have spent 42 years together. I can't imagine the past 20 years without her in my life. When I ask about William's father, he informs me that he, too, passed six years earlier. Tears well in William's eyes; this is not the first time I have seen his tears. In this same Starbucks, William and I have had more than one conversation where our emotions overcame us.

He shares a similar fondness when speaking of his father, "He worked on the docks of the Delaware. He was a foreman. Right there under the bridge." He explains his father's work ethic as one to be modeled after, a work ethic that William has carried with him into the classroom and onto the ball fields where he coaches baseball. He also speaks of the impact the Catholic church had and continues to have on him, for better or worse, "I was raised in a catholic religion. I was very spiritual. At one point in my life, when I was younger, I thought about becoming a priest. It had a strong impact on me." William attended Catholic school as a child and remembers having mostly nuns as teachers. Although he does not attend church regularly now, his two boys attend Catechism, and William still considers himself a spiritual person, "I'm not a regular churchgoer. But I. I still think I might call it a spiritual transcendental. I don't know. But it's an important part of my life. The principles made a huge impact on me."

As Joni Mitchell and other typical coffee shop tunes fill the air, our conversation leads into a discussion of the influences in William's life beyond his immediate family.

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His upbringing was also greatly impacted by the many sports coaches in his life, particularly the football coaches at his high school that would eventually lead him on the path towards a career in education:

> Because I loved history and I was able to connect with these teachers. One because they were my coaches. Two, their personalities just really connected. And, as the youngest of six kids, they knew my older brothers, already knew my family, they knew my mom. I just felt like I could have a connection. They were good men; they were good people. And we didn't have a lot of money. My one history teacher bought me my football jacket, with my name and number on there. I just liked who he was as a person. Teaching history was kind of secondary, I wanted to have an impact on young people's lives, just like he had impacted mine.

William also speaks to one particular teacher who was very political in class, "During the presidential elections. He had signs up of the candidates that he supported. He was very comfortable sharing his position." William tells his students that he will never be like that teacher:

> I will never be that teacher. I'm not here to tell you or influence your decisions at all. I want you to make your own decisions, because I had teachers that did share that with me, and I think tried to sway our views, politically. I never, I didn't appreciate at the time it was, you know. I really listened to my parents more so than my teachers.

At the time I never really thought about it. Later on, I realized, I don't want to be

that teacher. And I pride myself on teaching kids to think for themselves. I even

say that on back-to-school night. Listen, we're gonna talk about politics. I don't

have an agenda. I'm not trying to sway your kid's opinion. I'm a not a Republican,

Democrat, liberal, or conservative. I just want them to think and come up with

their own conclusions.

When asked about his earliest memories of being socially conscious, William

builds off of the relationships with his coaches. He remembers one coach who introduced

and shared a book with him, called *The Edge*. This book contained famous athletes and

actors, as well as famous quotes about leadership about service. He remembers that book

having a profound effect on him. He also points to the poem, "The Man In The Mirror",

as something that he committed to memory. This is the same poem that he and Carter

utilize for their students' self-assessment on their Freedom Projects. William explains

why this poem is so central to his own life and why he thinks it is important to share with

his students:

That it is all about my character, it's about my inner voice that should drive me

and not my reputation and my integrity. It's a very important moment. It's doing

the right things because it's the right thing to do. So, that, you know, I think my

character started to take shape in high school and in college. As I got older my

awareness of my ego is very important and I have made every attempt to destroy

it. Sounds a little extreme. But I try to squash that. And I'm getting better and

better at it. But it's very important. That if I feel like I'm acting because I'm trying to defend my ego, I know I'm going down the wrong path.

Our conversation continues, and William mentions his love for Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Alice Paul as people who have inspired him. He speaks of the time in high school when he ran for class president. He also speaks of his love for films like *Glory* and his absolute favorite film, It's a Wonderful Life, a film that taught him the power one person can have on many lives. William is open and honest throughout our conversation, and if we had more time, he and I could sit and talk for hours. His love for Zen Buddhism speaks to his focus on transcendentalism, as well as his overall reflection on his own character and who he is trying to be inside and outside of the classroom, "When you walk down a certain path, understanding and wisdom that I think is timeless. Something I have been trying to incorporate into my life. They've already done it. They've probably thought it and so if they have, I can incorporate those same or these same principles and convictions in my life."

When asked how much his wife and children know of what he does in the classroom with his students, William struggles to find the right words to express his thoughts. He mentions that his wife, also an educator, is aware of what content William engages in with his students, especially after the issue of the poster last school year. However, beyond a few texts that William has engaged his older son with William does not speak with his children about the social issues he does with the students at CMS. This is an area where William believes he wants to do more within his own home. As he states, "There's nothing explicit in our home that speaks to social justice, but I want to do more." He mentions that his youngest son wants to watch the film *Glory* with him

because he has heard William and his older brother speaking about it. William wants to engage his children in these conversations, he just hasn't, yet.

As the evening turns into night, we begin to pack up our belongings, but William adds one story before we leave. He connects the history of the United States to his family's history. William has also shared this story with his students as a way of letting them know that he, too, has times and moments where he feels uneasy and needs to reset and calm down. William then shares how his father's father was an alcoholic who, during the Great Depression, walked out on the family and never returned. William didn't know this part of his family's story until much later in his life when his father sat him down and told him the full story. William looks at this moment as an incredibly important aspect of his life:

> Even though that's a dark part of our family's history, it's important that I know that. That he was an alcoholic. I need to understand that I could go down the same path that he did by not knowing that. And as a nation, we have a story, we have a history that's good and bad. And, we have to know the good and the bad to understand. what direction were going. That guides us, that makes us, you know.

He continues:

> You know it's just one of the stories, so sharing a story about my grandfather, how he bailed on his family, it's hard for me to know that that's in my family. But it's important that I know it, too. And I asked the kids (students) if I should share this knowledge with my sons. They never ask about the great grandfather, but should I tell them. But the kids tell me what I should, I should tell them.

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William's students implored him to tell his children about their great-grandfather and his struggles. They think William's sons will benefit from knowing the good and the bad about their family's history. And William sees this as an opportunity to link his family's history to that of the history of the United States:

> So, I said as a nation, we have good stuff and bad stuff. We could just focus on the good stuff, but we also have to focus on the bad stuff. As a nation, today we're dealing So I said as a nation. We have stuff we're dealing with. Issues that you know, so there is a connection. So, I tried to take it from a very personal level, and open up about my past, to try and help them understand that this is our shared story. That's my own individual story, that's a shared story. And there's good and bad.

What William says he wants more than anything for his students is that they all become independent thinkers. He tries each day, through curricular and instructional choices, to cultivate a shared environment where students can engage in civil discourse and grow together, to build relationships with one another. He says all of this on an early Saturday morning in mid-December at the same local Starbucks where our last conversation took place. Customers rush in and out of the coffee shop as William and I take up space at a brown wooden table near the front of the shop. Light Jazz plays through the speakers overhear, and I can pick up the familiar tones of Miles Davis's trumpet; Coltrane's saxophone fills the gaps. William and I speak to his teaching approach, the goals of teaching hard history, and how teaching has added to his own sociopolitical development. He also thinks back on the "mistake" of last year when he did

not provide the proper context with one of his student's Freedom projects. He speaks of the remorse he felt and continues to feel, as well as the ever-present apprehension about teaching certain content that sometimes gets in the way of his decision-making process:

> This whole thing that had been is the most important thing that's ever happened. It really has tested me in every possible way. My character, my outlook, evaluated my position as a teacher. Everything came out, my insecurities, In every possible way. I was challenged. You know, I reflected on everything. After that, it changed my world, changed my life forever. And I like to say in more positive ways than negative. But I also know, you know, the effect of social media. And it's just an uncontrollable monster. secret. Quick, quick, quick. It if they only knew me, you know, it's like, I'm not that person. I was painted quickly.

> You know, and it was something that was mostly out of my control. I mean, everything that happened before, it was in my control, that I could have done things differently and should have done things differently. But, once it happened it was, wow, it went viral. Now, here I am a year later, still feeling good about myself. Still seeing the value of it. And I thought that last year was my best year teaching.

William pauses briefly before continuing:

> But, I have a lot of work to do you know, and I'm still growing, still learning. Last year. I felt like that was my best year, even after going into that month of January. This is good, and then that happened. Then I had to really re-evaluate. But, then at

the end of the year, I reflected on, like I'm stronger because I did something better because of this. I'm more aware.

Although William shares his feelings about some of his apprehension in teaching hard history and having his students learn about and discuss issues like racism, gun control, and abortion, he still believes engaging his students in this content and these discussions is paramount to his social studies classes:

It's not just about slave it's not just about race it's about it's about gun control it's about abortion. It's about the role of government. Power, Control. Power and control. And they evaluate who should have power, who should have control? When can that power and control limit the rights of the people? When is that appropriate? Yeah, so, I mean I will present an opposing viewpoint even if it's very conservative.

William and I converse at length. We speak to William's love of the ideals laid out in the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. His love for creating living documents with his students in the Young Republic after-school club such as the Central Middle School Bill of Rights. He also speaks to the importance of building positive relationships with his students the way his teachers and coaches did during his time in high school. He speaks of his current students as jurors and voters in training. Students that one day will write the laws of the land, students who will one day, if not today, become activists:

I think the role is to learn how activism has played a part in our nation's history. And, you learn from those strategies that were implemented, and decide which ones are the most effective. And care enough to do something. So, it all comes back to ideals, goals, and those laws and those rights that are listed. And you're constantly evaluating, that is the government living up to this promise, and if not then we vote differently.

He continues:

You have to take action. Now it all comes back to that first amendment, about the civic responsibility. They have a duty, to be woke, to be aware of politics. When you don't care, it fails, democracy fails. To me, it's very simple, it's very clear. I mean it comes down to Franklin's quote, "What kind of government are you giving us? A republic, if you can keep it. You know and that's why I called our Student Government, the Young Republic. I'm trying to Empower them like you need to be aware. If you don't like what the school is doing, then you have a say, we should do something about it. Hopefully that civic responsibility in middle school carries over into high school and as a citizen when you're older. They're voters and they're jurors and training. I mean that's what they are. That's how I see it. And they can interpret the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence. any way they choose. But, if your conscience is saying something and there's a red flag then, it's your responsibility to do something. How you do that is entirely up to you.

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Our conversations never seem to end, we only run out of time, and pause until our next meeting. On this day, the sun is shining, and the air outside is crisp. We finish our coffees and head for the door. Before we leave, William asks one last time about my mother, and tells me to pass along his concern before pulling me in for a hug. William steps out into the brisk December air, and we each go our separate ways. The day is young, and I am full of hope.

Chapter 5

It's About Relationships: Carter Williams

Walking into Carter's Social Studies classroom I am immediately surprised to see students seated on tall metal stools around six large Science laboratory tables, the ones with the oversized sink in the middle of the table. Then, I remember, along with two sections of Grade 8 Social Studies, Carter also teaches two sections of Grade 8 Science. The other prominent fixture in Carter's classroom are the two massive bags of basketballs in tightly netted sacks, one for the boys team and the other for the girls team. Carter coaches both teams and has done so for almost 20 years. He is a fixture in the CMS culture and climate, a legend of the school some might say. He is experienced, collected, and understanding. He is also Black, one of the few Black teachers to grace these halls throughout the past two decades.

Classroom Environment

During each visit to Carter's classroom, I find a stool in the back of the classroom as to not cause too much of a commotion. Eventually, I am informally adopted by the group of students in the back who allow me to work with them and chat a bit as they complete a variety of tasks. I also take notice of the students sitting around the Science laboratory tables, and there doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason for a demographic pattern of the student seating chart. Black and white students sit interspersed throughout the classroom, boys and girls equally mixed. I learn later from Carter that students have a choice where to sit, but he occasionally mixes up the seating chart depending on the class. I also learn later in the semester that seating in the cafeteria takes on a more

segregated feel. As this room is designed as a Science lab, it doesn't take on the same feel of a typical Social Studies or ELA classroom. This is a much more sterile and colder, physical environment that is brought to life and comfort by Carter's lessons and general approach to teaching. One of the sounds that is persistent throughout my visits with Carter's class is the banging of cabinet doors. The students' knees constantly bang into the doors that don't shut properly any longer, but no one other than me seems to notice.

I feel welcome here immediately, even though I am clearly out of my element of an ELA classroom climate. I can tell the students feel at home here, as well. When students ask to get a drink of water or ask to go to the bathroom, there isn't even the slightest disruption to the classroom activities. Too often, I have seen insignificant requests such as these turn into a battle of power and control between student and teacher that inevitably leads to some sort of disciplinary action on the student. That is never the case here in Carter's classroom.

Today, Carter is "yelling" at his students about their performance on last Friday's assessment. Yelling, as far as Carter is concerned, takes on a new meaning in this context, "This is me yelling at you guys" Carter says in a very soft tone. This is easily the quietest scolding I have ever heard. One student adds, "You never yell, you're a good teacher". Carter is, however, disappointed not only in their overall performance on the assessment, but, more importantly, in the students' lack of preparation. The respect and rapport between students and teacher is visceral, and I have to remind myself that this is only the second month of the school year. The climate and culture in this classroom, I would learn later, has been cultivated through years of getting to know the students and their families, building relationships with individual students, and displaying a genuine

care for each students' well-being inside and out of the classroom setting. Here, the classroom environment is one of high expectations and calm; the students know they have let down Carter and want to make the situation right.

Before giving the students a few extra minutes to "fix" their assessments, he briefly lectures them on the importance of study habits and study skills as a life skill that will lead them to future success. I can tell this isn't a rehearsed speech, rather a message he must have delivered time and time again over the 25 years he has spent in public education. As I sit and listen, I think back to my own student history. I was the student that didn't have great study skills, and I procrastinated more often than not. I believe this began in middle school because as a student in elementary school I succeeded without having to try very hard. During my middle school years, particularly seventh grade advanced mathematics, I began to struggle because I wasn't putting in the effort, and I just kind of gave up on a lot of academic achievement, doing the least I could to perform at a B or C level.

Looking around the room, I take notice of the professional football team and collegiate pennants on the front wall. As with many schools I visit in the southern New Jersey region, the Philadelphia Eagles take a prominent role in the culture of the school community. Whether through pennants like the one hanging in Carter's room, or the Christmas hats many of the students will wear throughout the month of December, or the "green" Fridays where most staff and students wear as much of their Eagle regalia as possible, Eagles pride is a phenomenon unlike any other I have seen. Having been raised only a few miles outside New York City, I understand the passion many people hold for their hometown sports teams, but nothing matches the fervor of the Philadelphia sports

fans. This was a lesson well-learned when my family and I moved to Cherry Hill, a suburb of Philadelphia during the Eagles' run to their first Superbowl championship. Many of the local school districts closed schools on the day of the celebratory parade in Philadelphia. During the 38 years I called North Jersey my home, the Yankees, Devils, Rangers, and Giants each won multiple championships, and schools never once considered closing for a celebration parade. This certainly wasn't the case here at CMS, where Eagles pride was as strong as I had ever seen, and Carter and many of his students were some of their most loyal fans I have encountered.

Above my head where I sit in the back of the classroom, a word wall covers the cabinets that stretch the length of the room, above which a header reads "What will we bring to this class?" On individual strips of paper, students have written words in various colored markers such as "kindness" "creativity" "compassion" and "collaboration". I am not sure how often the students look back on this word wall as a reference point, but having these words hang above my head as I visit each time makes me wonder about how I might enact each of these words in my day-to-day interactions. Maybe some of the students wonder the same thing? I do know that students feel at ease and are comfortable asking questions while they are here, sharing their thoughts and concerns about their classwork and personal lives. Each time I visit on a Monday, Carter asks students if there is anything they'd like to share with the class about their weekends. Many students share personal stories about playing on the local football team or visiting a friend's house for a sleepover or spending time with their families. Through these informal conversations, I can see how well Carter knows his students and their families, and how he applies that information to the classroom.

In one such instance, he knew one of his students played goalie for his lacrosse

team and as the student shared-out a story about his game over the week, the student used

the pronoun "I" to describe why his team lost the game. To which Carter responded "we"

referring to the student's team. Carter's coaching mentality obviously plays a role in how

he engages with students in the classroom, and this example shows his consistent

reminders to the students of the collaborative and community mentality of his classroom.

These small but important interactions with students directly translate into the way Carter

is able to interact and connect with his students during classroom activities that involve

class discussions centering on hard history and other potentially tense moments of

instruction.

Classroom Instruction

Near the end of my first visit to Carter's classroom, he introduces the unit of study

students will be engaging with over the next two months. From the first question I know

exactly what unit Carter is referring to, ""When I say hard history, what do you think I

mean?". This is the unit that culminates with the Freedom Project, the project that led me

to CMS and this study. A Black male student responds, "Harsh reality of what our

country was before?". Carter remains silent as the students continue to think and squirm

in their seats. After a few tense moments, Carter adds, "race and racism is a topic a lot of

people are uncomfortable talking about." He pauses again briefly before continuing,

"Have any of you ever experienced racism?". Silence for a few more moments. Another

Black male student shares a story about playing in the playground and being called the n-

word by a white kid. Another Black male student in the back gives an example of

shopping at Walmart with his family, and explains that when they left the store, the

Walmart employee asked to see their receipt as they left the store. The student noticed that the employee was only checking the receipts of Black people, while not checking the receipts of the white customers. In that moment I reflect on my experiences at Walmart and how I have been asked to show my receipt often when I leave that store. However, I also understand that my experiences may be quite different from that of this student and his family within a particular context. I also know that my perceptions of "often" may also be skewed, as I may not have remembered all the times I was able to leave the store without having to show a receipt and within what context I was asked to show a receipt.

Carter's instruction is closely tied to the classroom environment. His coaching sense can be seen in the collaborative environment of most student learning activities. Carter left time for a few more students to share before the period ended, and before leaving explained to students that the next few weeks they would be engaging with some important but difficult topics and would be watching some disturbing videos about this country's history. He also asked, "How many of you have ever heard of Black Wall Street?" One student said they had heard of it. Carter's final note for the day, "I love our country, but our history is not the best", a sentiment we would revisit throughout the next few months.

One of the most important aspects of this study is the work Carter and William have done together to collaborate and create units of study, objectives, and authentic assessments for the grade 8 Social Studies classes. Combined, Carter and William teach every grade 8 student at CMS, so the influence of their instruction has the possibility to resonate throughout the school climate. It is within this context, that this study grows its roots, specifically within the unit of study Carter and William have created that centers of

Slavery, Emancipation, Civil Rights, Black History, and how that residue directly

connects to current social issues. When Carter introduced the topic of "hard history" by

asking them what they know about racism, this is not only a pedagogical question, but a

question of teacher positionality. Through the creation of objectives explicitly tied to the

Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards (2019), Carter and William have made it

clear to their school community, the students, and their families that they are deliberately

choosing not to shy away from difficult conversations about race, equality, and issues of

social justice. Through many lines of communication to their students' families, these two

teachers ensure all families know what will be discussed in their classrooms. This does

not mean, however, that there is no pushback. In the past, family members who have ties

to or who are local police officers have sent William emails of concern about speaking

with students about police brutality and the historical significance of these injustices.

Carter and William are firm in their stance that what they teach is not only necessary, but

it is also board approved. Either way, Carter does not and will not stop teaching what he

believes his students need to know to make them the best citizens they can be.

Specifically, Carter has introduced and read with his students Julius Lester's book

From Slave Ship to Freedom Road and had the students watch a 15-minute clip from the

1997 film, *Amistad.* The clip from the film that students watched was one of the more

graphic scenes that shows the horrific journey across the middle passage. Carter asked the

students to get their parents signatures on a permission slip to watch the scene. All but

one of the students brought back their permission slips.

Carter stands in the back of the room, arms folded across his chest, and casually

speaks with students. Carter is laid-back. Still, the content and the importance of the

lesson is still very evident, as can be seen through the students' questions and insights around the material they have been covering, specifically, the Julius Lester book, the clip from *Amistad*, and a three-part docuseries, *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* (2013), hosted by Dr. Henry Louis Gates.

Carter then opens up the discussion to the students to hear about some of their thoughts and feelings about the book and about what they've seen in the films, thus far. At first, students seem to struggle with how to word some of their feelings and all stare at each other across the room as if hoping someone else might speak first. I can't imagine being 13 or 14 years old and trying to articulate what I think about *that* clip from *Amistad.* A Black female student in the front of the room begins, "I'm trying to word it right" before hesitating. Carter responds, "Why does it matter, does it matter? Just say what's on your mind." I love this. I was not expecting him to respond in that way, but I love how that simple sentiment exemplifies Carter's overall approach to and motivation for teaching hard history. The student continues to speak about how she almost cried throughout the reading of the book because of how the experience of slavery was worded in the book. Carter asks, "What about the pictures?" More than one student says the pictures in the book impacted them greatly, and one student said "the use of the N-word added to the intensity of the book. Finally, a white Female student in the front of the room expresses how she was moved by all the sadness of seeing the parents being forced to stand on the auction block. Seeing the parents standing naked in front of their children stuck with her very much and "hurt me to see that, to hear about that." Carter shook his head in agreement, as the students and I sat solemnly quiet.

I think to myself at this point, if Carter hadn't provided space in the beginning of class for students to voice their thoughts and opinions, I'm not sure they would truly be connected to this work. Carter understands the value of the students' voices, their experiences with the various texts, and the opportunity to put words to their inner monologues.

After about 15 minutes of conversation, Carter informs the class they will be watching more of the docuseries *Many Rivers* today, and as students focus on the film, Carter walks over to briefly discuss with me how the study is going thus far. While we speak, Carter notices that a few students have their heads down and asks the students to keep up their heads. At one point, the word castration is used, and a few small groups of students begin to speak quietly to one another. Carter takes notice and stops the video, "What do you all think about castration?" A few of the students tell their peers who don't know what castration means, and Carter explains that castration was one of the penalties for running away repeatedly from their enslavers. With the lights turned off, the room seems even quieter than during the discussion earlier in the class about *Amistad*. Since Carter asked students to keep their heads raised, their eyes have been locked on the screen rarely looking away at any point. I, too, am transfixed and have to remind myself that I am observing the classroom not the docuseries. The content delivered by Henry Louis gates is so rich and informational that I have a hard time focusing on the environment rather than what is being discussed in the video, even though I have already seen this series multiple times.

At this moment, I think back to the time I saw *Amistad* for the first time, in 1997 when the movie was originally released at the Montclair Clearview Cinemas, which is a

small indie movie house where each theater has no more than 30 seats. I was debating

with one of my best friends, Henock, who is Ethiopian which movie to go see, and he

begged me to not go see *Amistad*. I didn't know what the movie was about at the time,

and I urged him to go. He finally acquiesced, and we went to the movie together. For

over two hours, I could sense the discomfort of my friend sitting next to me in that tiny

theater. Afterward, and to this day, I still feel the pain of regret for putting my foot down

so hard to go see that movie with Henock. I really only wanted to see *Amistad* because

Djimon Hounsou had a lead role. I didn't understand, then, the impact that it might have

on my friend, and that feeling has never left me. I wonder if any of the students in this

class feel the same way Henock did that night?

With only a few minutes left in the class period, Henry Louis Gates explains that

control was what slavery was all about, control for the body and psyche of the mind. I

begin to see how *power* and *control* are topics that continually arise through all the

lessons and classroom activities. Carter stops and asks the students one final question

before the bell rings for dismissal, "Where are we today, as a people, in terms of race,

power and control?" The bell rings, stools are pushed back under the tables, and I sit

quietly, contemplating Carter's question.

Later in the month, I visit this same class again. Students work in small groups on

a Civil Rights timeline activity where they research laws, cases, people and events. When

Carter says partner, he means partner, individual work, or in small groups, he gives the

students the freedom to choose how they will work. Students move seats, some move to

other tables, and a few students remain where they are. Students all open up their

Chromebooks and begin their work. As always, Carter filters around the classroom

supporting students when needed but never hovers in one spot for too long. Most of the groups work consistently throughout the class. Some of the boys in the back of the room get off-track, briefly arguing about the Redskins and Eagles, reminding me of my time in eighth grade Social Studies with my best friend, Bruce. We would get off-track on a daily occurrence, although I do not remember ever engaging with hard history or content related to what is being taught in Carter's class. I remember learning about laws and the Constitution, but I do not remember learning about oppression or power and control related to slavery of the Civil Rights movement during my days in Social Studies. In fact, the only time the word oppression was used was when we learned about the Holocaust. Very little of my 8th grade Social Studies class held my attention beyond memorizing dates and names for weekly quizzes.

I sit with the group in the back of the room whom I have become friendly with over the course of my visits. The students are friendly and welcome me to their group. They have completed most of the questions but ask me if I know the official date of when the Civil Rights movement began. Before, I can respond, one of the students finds the answer and shares it with the group. I scan the room to see how the other groups are proceeding with the activity and wonder how deeply the students are invested in the content. Are they just completing the assignments, or do they really feel the impact and residue of the hard history? This question will be answered later in the semester when I see how they express their learning with their Freedom Projects.

Carter checks in with all of the groups to see how far they've gotten with their work, and students begin to pack up their materials. The bell rings and another day of learning comes to a close.

Building Relationships

Carter's life has been built upon strong relationships. The relationships with his family, his coaches and teachers, his colleagues, and his students and players have all impacted the way he enters the world, personally and professionally. This can be seen each time I visit CMS through the various people I see Carter come in contact with.

Growing up as a mixed-race child in a predominantly white suburban town, Carter learned the meaning and negative impact of racism at an early age. Carter shares these experiences with his students in a way that helps some students relate and other students learn. In one of his earliest memories, Carter shares the following story with me:

> I was telling the kids, I wasn't Black enough to one group, and I wasn't Japanese enough for the other. So, where was I supposed to go? Fortunately for me it's a military town, too. So, there were a lot of bi-racial kids that fit into that can. You kind of tend to gravitate towards each other. So, you know we're there but I can think back to a moment when I was about, they say can't really think back or remember things when you're you know, but just three years old we just moved into the town, and I can to this day, I still see them where the kids in the neighborhood lining our yard, backyard, yelling epitaph after epitaph.

Carter's words flow matter-of-factly, as if he has told this story many times, still the emotion of that moment in time fresh in his mind. His story is part of the curriculum of his classroom, one experience that speaks to such grander themes in the classroom and in this study. As Carter's town was becoming more diverse with an influx specifically of

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Black families, he can remember race being a visceral aspect of his upbringing. He also

recounts a time later in his childhood that remains ever clearer in his mind:

> That was my first being aware of race and racism as I was twelve. I swam, the
>
> first time I swam for Wahoos. The very first swim meet, I was actually called
>
> "nigger" in the locker room by a kid who said, 'I didn't think "niggers" could
>
> swim'. That was the first time ever, you know, like that I could remember being
>
> confronted with that.

> So yeah it kind of burns in your mind a little bit. Just growing up and just seeing
>
> different ways people live, you know wanting to make sure that I found my place
>
> somehow. Which I think I did, and you know the political part of it just being fair
>
> justice making sure everybody was treated fairly.

These racial incidents certainly had a profound impact on Carter; however, he also looks

back upon these times also with great admiration and joy. As more Black families began

to move into town, the diversity of the neighborhood had a positive effect on his life and

the relationships he would soon form. He remembers forming strong bonds with friends

from various racial backgrounds and learning early on not to ignore race but to

understand it and find common bonds with people:

> I mean I don't use the word color blind, but if you want to say pretty much, the
>
> group of friends that we had, it didn't matter who you were because we were all
>
> athletes and we played sports together. So, we just hung out with each other. You
>
> know, we have that common bond between sports, I guess that helped a lot. I was

a swimmer, too, so that put me in another circle of friends you know where I think I should do that.

He also came to an understanding, through the help of his mother, to be proud of his identity, no matter what others said about him:

> And I mean that was my reality for quite a few years. You know, I would always be the only person of color in a certain group and mostly run the swimming pool, I would be the only person. I mean I didn't let it bother me because my mom always told me that you know you are who you are. Be proud of who you are. So, you know no matter what situation you're in just be yourself.

> And that's what I do, no matter where I go, even to this day. I still, I can still hear the words ,you know, just be yourself. My mother had, obviously, a tremendous impact on that more so than my dad. My dad was military. So, I guess he retired when I was about 10, but even so, he was in and out. You know, he's being whoever, you know, but Mom's always the constant there, and she's the matriarch of the family.

As the years progressed, Carter developed positive relationships with several teachers and coaches, most notably his swimming coach "who was a second mother" to him and a computer science teacher "who kind of straightened me out a little bit." Within these relationships, Carter learned the meaning of a good work ethic, fairness, and the importance of helping students not only with schoolwork but also with everyday issues.

By the time he entered high school, "there were those teachers that had great influence over me because you know they took you under their wing, a lot of the phys ed teachers." Interestingly, because of these relationships, Carter was invited into the world of teaching and coaching, where he ended up coaching with a few of his former teachers and coaches. This foundation laid the roadmap for the way in which Carter approaches teaching and how he views his students.

Similar to my road to the field of education, Carter went through an alternative route program to earn his teaching certificate. While standard teacher education programs have many benefits that alternate route programs may not be able to offer, such as various field observations and courses with veteran professors of education, many of the best teachers I have ever met completed an alternative route program. Carter is certainly one of those teachers. Because he didn't have formal training as a teacher, he relied heavily on emulating the teachers and coaches he admired:

> I think it's all about relationships, so I think a good teacher has a good balance of relationships with the kids. The expectation from the kids, kids are showing respect, the respect is mutual. I think that's where good teaching starts.

> So basically, I just try to copy what some of the teachers I had left a good impression on me, what they did, how they did it, and when I look back on it, it was the teachers had a relationship with the students.

Carter doesn't view the classroom as the only place where building relationships take place. He takes advantage of each and every opportunity to meet and speak with all

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students in the school. Whether in the auditorium, hallway, on the playground, or during lunch in the Cafeteria, Carter engages with the students at CMS in a meaningful way:

> You know I might spend three quarters of my lunch talking to the kids in the lunchroom and having to woof down a sandwich because that's what I did on my prep this period. If I wasn't in here, I would be in the consumer science room to speak with students. Two weeks ago, I made a batch of cookies to give the students in another teacher's class. The kids look forward to my stop and that's her. So, I mean so that's what I do.

This doesn't mean that Carter is a pushover or only about baked goods. Carter engages all students through a very give-and-take relationship bounded by an understanding of mutual respect. Through his actions and words, he models these behaviors and treats students as masters of their own fate. Few rules, if any are posted in his room, yet the culture and climate is developed and sustained through this mutualistic understanding built over time:

> But I'm only fun if you allow me to be. You know if you do what you're supposed to, if you do what you're supposed to do in this class, then we can do what we do. You know we can have fun in the class and that's all I say. I don't have no; you don't see any rules. I got my own. I have one rule and it's respect. You know because respect goes a lot of ways, you respect the classroom as a learning environment, you respect your classmates as your classmates. People that want to learn, you respect me, because I'd, no matter what, I'll always respect you.

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Referring back to how he came to be a teacher, Carter reminds me, "Well I didn't go the traditional route either from teaching so I kind of fell into it and I just took what some of my favorite teachers you know that my favorite teachers always built relationships with their students."

Carter's approach to teaching, his focus on building relationships stems from life experiences inside and outside of the classroom. Within relationships with friends and family, as well as relationships with colleagues and his neighbors. Carter also understands that his approach to teaching and building relationships with students through a mutualism built upon respect and the sustaining of each individual's culture and identity does not always jive with the culture of schools and society. His personal life has taught him many lessons that someone like me, a white male, will never learn through experience. Carter's life is full of positive and negative relationships that have informed his way of teaching and engagement with students and colleagues. He does not separate his personal life from his professional Rather, he utilizes his countless life lessons to build respect and rapport with his school community in the classroom, in the hallways, and on the courts. At times, this has been a weight he has carried on his own, a weight many Black educators throughout this country carry on a daily basis. To this point, CMS has learned from Carter and needs to continue to learn. Carter's experiences and messages have rarely been centered in faculty meetings and professional development sessions, even when he was deliberately speaking to issues that were negatively impacting him and the Black students at CMS. Still, Carter has remained and has continued to build relationships through teaching, coaching, equity committees, and

school climate committees. His commitment to the betterment of all students in his

school community has never ceased:

> When you're in a situation where you experience the social injustice it's just in
>
> yourself to strive for that social justice, to see that other people are being treated, you
>
> know the proper way. Because you've already been through that. And so, you want to
>
> make sure that no one else has to deal with that injustice or, you know, any situation
>
> like that. That's where I'm coming from.

Chapter 6

Advocating for Self and Others: Jacqueline Williams

Waiting to be buzzed into Central Middle School, on a chilly, beautiful October morning, anticipation rushes through my head. I visit various public schools throughout my day-to-day, but today, I am set to begin my work with the four teachers who I have come to know and respect. My mind wonders if I am going to get in the way of a Jacqueline as she prepares for her first period class. I want to make sure that I balance my own priorities with the priorities of the school, the students at CMS, and the four teachers in this study with me. Although Jacqueline has sent texts and emails expressing how excited she is for me to visit, I can't shake the sense of intrusion. Maybe, it stems from my years teaching in a district where state and district officials streamed through my classroom at a dizzying rate, peeking into my students' portfolios or checking to see if my three-part objective was written *correctly*? Either way, walking through the halls of CMS, all I can think is that my presence is an interruption.

Classroom Environment

Jacqueline welcomes me to her classroom as students enter their first class of the day, only moments after they left their brief homeroom. It's 8:00 a.m. on a Friday morning. She welcomes each student at the door, 6 Black students, 3 white, 7 male and 2 female students. As the students settle into their seats, Jacqueline sits atop a student desk to begin class and briefly introduces me to the 9 students. Jacqueline's classroom is designed with care and love, posters hanging with inspirational messages - some unique others standard - and rich literary aspects all over the room. Countless young adult novels

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written by authors from backgrounds not traditionally found in middle school classrooms are displayed in visual places - on bookshelves, stacked on the teacher's desk, and leaning against the whiteboard in front of classroom: *The Hate U Give* (*THUG), The Places You'll Go, Persisted (Women), Tar Paper School, Hero, Tupac, Gay & Lesbian History, Ghost Boys, Odd Girl Out, Girls Against Girls, Brown Girl Dreaming, Now In Your Time, The Other Side, 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens, Daring Greatly, The Secret, Overcoming Bias, Night John, Chasing King's Killer, Lean In, Ugly.* This mix of books incorporates some critical texts, some multicultural books, as well as some "self-help" guidance books. The visual alone speaks loudly about what kind of teacher Jacqueline is, but I also wonder if and how often the students read these books. I know one Black female student in Jacqueline's class is currently reading *THUG*. I told her that my daughter also read that book and the follow-up, *On the Come Up.* This particular student "reads a lot", Jacqueline informs me later, but that she also struggles with mental health issues. Jacqueline is currently collaborating with this student and another of her students on presenting a lesson on "Implicit Bias" to their classmates in William's Social Studies class in mid-December.

At times throughout the few months, I spent with Jacqueline and the students, I witnessed students sitting at random desks, tables in the back of the room, bean bag chairs, and even lying on carpets to read or watch a classroom film. Jacqueline understands and supports her students' needs by creating and sharing a space of flexibility while also maintaining structure. Students know when they are expected to sit at their desks and when they can find a place of their own to work on their writing or independent reading. Jacqueline posts reminders on the white board about their writing

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assignments and other activities like the Secret Santa gifts they are to bring in later in the semester. She has also utilized the wall and cabinet space to hang images and messages of inspiration, as well as the benefits of meditation: reduce stress and anxiety, better focus and attention, greater peace, better emotional health, improved heart, improve school performance, and self-awareness. Jacqueline is intentional in the atmosphere she is trying to create with her students, a sense of peace and compassion mixed with a literature-rich environment where students are treated as thinkers and writers.

During each visit my eyes drift to the cabinets where images of women leaders are posted. Such women as Tony Morrison, Michelle Obama, Kamala Harris, Jennifer Everhart Mary MacLeod Bethune, and Jacqueline Woodson stare back at the students and adults on a daily basis. A constant counter-story to the narratives told in so many classes throughout public schools. Narratives told of and by *old white men*. Jacqueline's deliberate choices build a classroom environment that challenges the status quo and dominant ways of knowing and educating our students. This is also evident in her classroom instruction and during our many everyday conversations.

Classroom Instruction

Jacqueline's expectations for students in her class are high. She uses verbal positive reinforcement to engage students in critical thinking and make connections throughout the lesson: "That's good thinking work", "Thank you for that insight, I like the way you think", "That's a good question", "All this thinking work is really good". Jacqueline builds from her students' responses and takes time to work with each student on an individual level. Like many schools throughout New Jersey, Jacqueline's students

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independent reading is a dystopian novel, specifically, Lois Lowry's, *The Giver*. On an easel in the front of the room, Jacqueline has written words the tenets of dystopian stories. In a bulleted list, the main points of dystopian literature were presented:

- Uniformity/sameness
- No free will/independent thought
- Corrupt government or propaganda
- Segregation/unequal power
- Perfect exterior or hiding evil secret
- Unexpected hero

This is very interesting to me as I connect directly to the lessons taking place in William's and Carter's Social Studies classes. Power and control are constant topics discussed and made visual throughout each Social Studies lesson, which link directly to the foundations of dystopian literature. However, there has been no mention of any connection between the ELA and Social Studies classes thus far in our everyday conversations. For me there is a direct and explicit connection between dystopian novels and themes of power and control that are being covered throughout the eighth grade Social Studies unit. I wonder if this disconnect is a result of not planning together or of an intrinsic method of keeping ELA and Social Studies content separate. However, in very nuanced ways, such as engaging students with writing topics that question issues of power and control in society, I can tell Jacqueline speaks very similar language to that of what is being covered in both social studies classrooms.

During most visits, Jacqueline would read aloud to the students for 10 minutes. One day, the read aloud was from *The Outsiders,* one of the class novels. Jacqueline also

read an excerpt from *Feathers*, by Jacqueline Woodson. The passage focused on Black and white people living on different sides of the tracks. Students were not clear what that metaphor meant. Jacqueline stopped to engage with students in a short discussion about the connection to white and Black people living on different sides of the highway. As I had prior knowledge that students were also reading *The Outsiders*, I wondered if this was an implicit connection to that novel, as well. I also wondered if students would make connections to any social issues or their Social Studies lessons. Jacqueline had discussed with the students on multiple occasions about the residue that "lies within people or in characters' minds" and how it is important for us, as readers, to think about it and figure out why that residue exists, as it relates to how "characters cope". The discussion related to residue continues:

> Exceptional thinking work, especially as it relates to "residue", Jacqueline adds.
>
> Student #1 responds, "Something that's left over".
>
> Student #2 adds, "feelings that are left over".
>
> "We can see when we are reading books that there's maybe some residue in what we're reading about or in the characters that we're reading about. The book is our tool – learn about characters, coping in situations, struggle, insight. Books give us opportunity – take our thinking into the world – dissect, try to think about what's going on – these are life skills", Jacqueline adds.

At this point Jacqueline asked students to take out their reading jots notebooks to take notes as she read *Feathers* aloud to the class:

> Jacqueline Woodson is known for taking on hard topics – talking about race, characters that have to deal with things, cope.

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Did she have to deal with things? Student #3 asks.

That's a good question, Jacqueline adds.

Jacqueline had insight on this and tells students that Jacqueline Woodson wants young people to think about this and talk about this, and yes, some of this is pulled from her personal experiences. These read alouds reminded me of my time teaching at Union Avenue Middle School in Irvington, NJ, particularly of when I was teaching the alternative program. The students loved when I would read aloud to them, especially Sharon Draper's, *Forged By Fire.* One student in particular, Stephon, would sit on his knees and beg me not to stop. Our classroom was an oversized closet and each student would sit at a testing cubicle, separating them from each other. I would stand and walk around the room reading to the 8-10 students depending on how many were present on a given day. Stephon was always in trouble with teachers, staff, and administration, but when we would read *Forged By Fire*, Stephon never missed a word.

One Black female student gasped and had an epiphany as she listened to Jacqueline reading the text and asked Jacqueline to reread a passage. She then made an explicit connection to the book she was reading, *The Hate U Give*, by Angie Thomas. Jacqueline asked the student to share about her book and why she made that connection. So far, this class has had multiple opportunities to openly speak about race, and Jacqueline reminded students about the shooting in Texas of young Black males that the students had discussed earlier in the year. Further, a line from *Feathers* stated, "Wish I looked more like him", and Jacqueline asked the students why that line was important? Students speculate about whether or not the father in the story is white or black. Listening to the students' responses, I wonder if either of my children wish the same about me or

Chereese about their own racial identity growing up mixed race in a predominantly white neighborhood.

Jacqueline's positive affirmations continue throughout the class period into the independent writing session, and I listen and watch her interactions with each student. Students work individually during this time period, as Jacqueline filters through the room supporting individual students with their thinking through dialogue, i.e., "Why, why do you think that way", "I had never thought about it that way", "I respect your thinking, so keep it up". All of these comments affirm and sustain students' ways of knowing and expressing their learning. Jacqueline does this with the ease of an experienced teacher, but one who genuinely understands her power as a teacher. She will express these actions later during one of our everyday conversations.

I had wondered at one point if this is the norm in Jacqueline's class, or is this a bit of a *performance* because an outsider is in the room? Oftentimes, in my career, when district or representatives from the State would visit our schools to conduct walkthroughs, most of the teachers (including myself) would pull out our "best" lessons. Will this aspect of the data collection dissipate to an extent as the project proceeds? Will I begin to "blend" in more?

I wondered how many books each student is reading presently? Does each student have their own independent reading book in addition to *Feathers* and *The Outsiders?*

During each visit, I see a lot of *goodness* as issues of race and gender are openly spoken about and students feel free to speak about them (Black and white students) at multiple instances throughout the class period. So, the question becomes, could this

lesson have been even *better*? Does *better* exist? If so, what does *better* look like? Or is this an example of the equitable educational experience that so many parents and theorists are looking for children of color and economically disadvantaged backgrounds? Also, why are there so many Black students in the pull-out support class, so many boys? How is this in relation to the total student body? It reflects the public statistics on the NJ School Report Card, but none of this is the doing of Jacqueline, but is there anything we can do to change this fact?

Advocacy: Self and Others

When Jacqueline and I meet for our first kitchen table talk, she is waiting outside of the school to walk me into the building. Jacqueline is a tall woman with bright blonde hair whose presence is typified by the glowing smile that stretches across her face each time I see her. Having spent some time last spring creating a presentation with Jacqueline and William for a University Equity Mini-Conference, we began a relationship built upon a goal of sustaining the lived experiences of our students. Her sense of fairness and justice is evident throughout conversations, but what I did not know was how these constructs were connected to her personal life, a story Jacqueline would share with tears in her eyes and strength and passion in her words.

Upon entering her classroom, I was greeted by a full table setting, with a sushi platter, chopsticks, a small bottle of soy sauce, and a bottle of water. Jacqueline and I would share in a moveable feast a few more times in the coming months, but this first meal made me feel welcomed and viewed as a partner in this inquiry rather than an outsider. We had met once before informally over salads from a local pizza parlor, but

this was different. This time we had a partially structured topic to discuss, most notably Jacqueline's personal history and how she became a teacher.

Jacqueline grew up in a predominantly white, middle class town not far from CMS, and currently lives in an upper-class town not from the school. Like many white, middle class families, Jacqueline did not spend a great deal of time with non-white families. She looks back on her parents as caregivers and "were and are just super, super loving people. And my mom really deliberately raised us all to see the good in all people.." Her mother died a few years back and remembers how she doesn't think she "ever heard her say anything negative about anybody ever." However, Jacqueline also reflects on the impact of the years watching her "disabled" brother, Gary, grew up during a time when her parents and the schools did not understand how to support him:

> I have a younger brother, younger sister, older brother, older sister. And my older brother Gary, is disabled, and I was talking about this earlier with my class about how my whole childhood, I was always defending his honor. People would be mean to him, tease him bully him, take advantage of him. And I was always, always defending his honor. And I even have some memories of as good as my parents were, I don't think there was a lot of rights on the books for people with disabilities. I do kind of remember him going in and out of like a trailer for extra help at school. But not only do I not think schools understood Gary's issues, but I also have distinct memories of my parents not really understanding.

Jacqueline continues:

> And I remember explaining to my parents, it's not Gary's fault. And I didn't totally
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> know what was going on either, but I just knew it wasn't his fault. So, when he
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> took lumps or caught shit for something it bothered me, because I just knew, he
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> shouldn't have to. And I have a distinct memory of one time Gary cut school. He
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> was in high school, and he cut school to go to church.

Listening to these stories, I think about the bravery of Jacqueline sharing these memories,

and also the bravery of Gary and the bravery of Jacqueline's current classified students

who enter educational, private, and public spaces where bullying and discrimination can

be hiding around any corner. I also can begin to see Jacqueline's trajectory towards her

current profession and focus on dismantling inequities in the classroom. Her sense of

advocacy was born from her years defending Gary:

> I know, and I remember him getting in trouble at home. And my mom had him
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> doing these chores and stuff. And I remember saying to my parents, he should not
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> have to do chores for that. That was important to him to like to give it some kind
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> of holy day or whatever. And it was important to him to be at church. And I could
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> tell my parents don't understand how Gary thinks, and they don't understand that
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> it's not his fault. That was something distinct that I really remember from my
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> upbringing. And I think because of the way I always defended Gary, like I
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> always, always had a thing for an underdog. someone that I thought had it tough
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> and they shouldn't.

Jacqueline understood at an early age that her brother needed an advocate, and that her parents may not have understood her brother's needs. This relationship is one that would eventually play out in her classroom as she advocates for her students, and also in her personal life, as she was forced to advocate for the safety of herself and her children.

Jacqueline met her ex-husband when she was 18 years old, her first "real" relationship. In time, they had two children together, but their marriage ended up being a very unhealthy, oppressive, controlling kind of a relationship. She speaks of this time in her life as having a great deal of impact on the person she is today. When she finally made the decision to leave the relationship, it was a decisive moment, contrary to how she describes herself, "I'm not an impulsive kind of a person, I am a thinker, I am highly reflective. That's probably one of the big words I would use to describe myself. But when I made the decision to go, it was definitive. This is it I'm going." Serious threats followed, a year's worth of her doctoral research destroyed, and restraining orders were put in place. However, Jacqueline says this was not the worst of it:

> But the most one of the most significant parts to this story was how difficult and contentious this divorce was. And our divorce eventually went to a trial that lasted about a year. He was represented by an attorney, and I represented myself. And it was the most empowering, vindicating triumphs of my life. And I don't think I could ever really explain to anybody how powerful, how formative that was for me. Because I put him on the stand, I questioned him, I cross examined him.

> It was just such a powerful time in my life. And at the time that I was dealing with all this, I was teaching full time. I was a full-time student. I was a kick ass mom.

And my kids I was really raising them, and they would go to bed at night. And I would start my studies and it would start at nine o'clock at night and I had nights where I was up till three four in the morning doing my studies. And it was so hard. It was one of the hardest times of my life, but I felt so freaking bad ass and powerful. That look, in spite of all of this I am making myself better, stronger, wiser look at what my kids are saying from their mom. Not only was I such an advocate for me and them, it was just such a powerful time in my life.

Jacqueline's candid stories took me by surprise, and I began to see her in a new light. Originally, I only looked at Jacqueline as a professional teacher who wanted best for her students. Now, I can see the layers behind her decisions, and I wonder how much of her personal life plays into the way she approaches education and supports her students.

As Jacqueline battled her ex-husband in court, she continued to immerse herself in her studies. This process changed her lens in how she viewed the world, as she began to learn to think in a vastly different way. This process made her thinking change and evolve. Through daily reflective practice, Jacqueline "learned how to look at myself critically and think about my own thinking and like to make decisions about myself in the way I was interacting with my own children." She translated this reflection to her interactions with her students and began to examine the way she was interacting with kids here at CMS. She did some "hardcore looking at myself and looking at the way I conducted myself with kids here." One thing that stood out to Jacqueline "really, really clearly" was during that same year when she co-taught in an English Language Arts inclusion class. Jacqueline was the special ed teacher, but she and the ELA teacher co-

taught the English class. Each of the teachers had specific students to conference with, and one particular student, Nyomi, found a special place in Jacqueline's heart:

I just loved this girl Nyomi. And we had time to conference, I felt that I was completely lifting this girl up. Because I could see the stuff we talked about, and the stuff she wrote about it was so inspiring to me, I couldn't wait to read Nyomi's work. And I could see the level of coaching and the way I was lifting Nyomi up was better or different, I should say than what I was doing for other kids. I Really evaluated that, if I looked at the time spent with Nyomi.

Compared to the other kids, Nyomi had so much of my time and attention, but also the quality of the coaching wisdom. I step back and really, really looked at that. And I thank the work I was doing in my program, that really I was being taught to think that way, but I totally bought into it. And I sat back and I thought, I connect so much with her because her and I are so culturally similar, and she still reminded me of my daughter. I realized about myself, yes, Nyomi deserves this kind of work. But so does every other kid, and I had to do some hard work on myself.

This type of reflection became the way Jacqueline began advocating for all students, not only the ones who sought out her support. She began to see that although some students may not seek out her support, they may want that from her and need that, too. So, there was a big shift in the way she interacted with kids. Not that there aren't Nyomi's in her life and world, because there are, but she deliberately after that, would seek out the kids

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that were not culturally similar to her. She continues to explain that she really tries to have those kinds of exchanges and moments with all students and build on rapport and create that rapport. She also strives not to listen and find common ground, and really reach out and try and pull for those connections. "And sometimes you get them and sometimes you just don't."

These stories provide a glimpse into what I see during classroom visits with Jacqueline. The way she filters throughout the room, the way she asks students if she can sit and work with them, the way she shares her own personal stories all build relationships with students and allow Jacqueline to advocate for the individuals in her room. From what Jacqueline has shared with me, this is her approach to her personal and professional life. This reflective practice does not separate the two existences which translates into a very authentic presentation in the classroom and in the hallways of CMS.

Chapter 7

Coming from the Heart: Ruth Gilbert

Walking into Ruth's room for the first, I am greeted by a Black male student who

stands at least three inches taller than me. He says "hello" but does not smile. He walks to

the back of the room and takes a seat at a table with an incomplete puzzle spread across

the top. I follow his lead and take a seat against the back wall only a few feet away from

where he is seated. I look at the completed border of the puzzle and wonder who has been

working on completing the puzzle and for how long? In a later conversation, Ruth

informs me that anyone in her classes, including her homeroom students and the one-on-

one aide, Ms. Jefferson, can work on the puzzle at their leisure. I stare at the puzzle for

another moment before taking out my notebook and phone to record this visit. I am

fascinated by the image of this incomplete puzzle and the feeling I get from watching

students and adults randomly walk past the puzzle and add individual pieces throughout

the few weeks I visit Ruth's classroom. Eventually, one student would purposely destroy

the collective work of so many individuals by pulling apart the puzzle, one of Ruth's

homeroom students with little connection to the community built by Ruth and the

students in her pull-out ELA class.

Classroom Environment

Ruth stands in the doorway and greets each student as they enter the room. On

this November, Monday morning, a lethargy also enters the room. The 10 students in this

pull-out resource ELA class, 8 of whom are students of color (3 girls and 5 boys), find

seats scattered throughout the room. The three girls in the class sit side-by-side in the

front row, while only 2 of the boys sit side-by-side. The floors, tables, and desks are spotless, as if they had been cleaned with Lysol wipes prior to class. Young adult novels line the shelves of the multiple bookshelves. Well-crafted messages hang on each of the four walls, and each of the bulletin boards in the room provide further evidence of a conscientious teacher. Ruth's classroom reminds me of one of the veteran teachers I worked with in North Jersey for 8 years. Everything from the pencils to the document camera to the whiteboard markers were always meticulously placed with the utmost deliberation. Looking around I realize it would take Ruth a long time and many hands to move out of this classroom.

While I sit and observe, the classroom environment is relaxed, focused, and calm. Students speak in leveled tones and feel comfortable asking Ruth if they can go to their lockers or use the bathroom. There are no antagonistic moments, and each of the students smile often throughout class. Only a few times did I observe Ruth redirect the students, one in particular. One student in the back of the room, who constantly had his nose in a book each time I visited, chuckled as another male student struggled during a read aloud.

Student, "You are so…"

Before he could even get the insult to form in his mouth, Ruth cut him off and asked, "You lifting up or putting down?" That was all Ruth needed to say. I'm not even sure if she looked in the student's direction when she spoke to him. My initial thoughts were that this is a natural reaction from Ruth, rather than a show, a veteran teacher who seems to know exactly what to say and do when a moment of antagonism arises. Ruth uses read alouds and whole group discussions to keep all students engaged, all the while

showering students with positive affirmations. "I like the way you said that." "Can you please read for us, I love listening to you read." "Your insight is really enlightening for our class." Along with Ruth's verbal affirmations, the walls are covered with messages that Ruth points to and references throughout the day. "Make Today Amazing" is posted above the front board. The "Are You Lifting Up or Putting Down?" banner referenced earlier hangs over the far windows, a refrain used by Ruth during three of my classroom visits. Of all the messages posted in the room, the one that Ruth references most and resonates deeply with me is "Encourage Each Other & Build Each Other Up" which is posted on the back wall.

The idea of building each other up is a concept I hold dear to my heart. Throughout my years teaching at all levels in North Jersey, not only did my students lift up one another, but many of my colleagues and I found our greatest levels of success when we worked together and lifted up one another. One of the most memorable moments for me was during my second year of teaching when I was asked to teach in the informal *alternative* program for our 8th grade students. The small group of students I was assigned to work with had been identified by the rest of the staff as students who were incorrigible, students who did not "value" education, students who would be dead or in jail within a few years, ten Black boys who were already deemed a danger to society, ten Black boys, during NCLB, who had been cast aside and left behind, ten Black boys who would change my life forever for the better.

As a novice alternate route teacher who was working with a provisional certificate in teaching, I had nothing to offer these students pedagogically beyond my own experiences and gut instincts and intuition. The first few months together proved to be

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one of the greatest and most rewarding challenges of my life. The students, ages ranging from 13 – 16, knew why they had been placed in my class, and already had internalized what the world around them was telling them: they were bad. Plain and simple, just bad. Whatever that meant. I, too, looked at the boys that way when they first entered the classroom. I, too, had been conditioned to view these Black boys, and most Black boys, as dangerous. And these were 10 Black boys from one of the most violent cities in America, in a middle school of nearly 900 students where they had been deemed the ten "worst". Had it not been for the other teacher who was placed with me at the end of the long hallway in that tiny classroom segregated from the "general population" of students, I would have never looked at these boys any differently. The other teacher, now one of my dear friends, was a Black male who had grown up in a nearby neighborhood and had lived many similar experiences to the students in our class. He had been a teacher's aide for 3 years and knew a few creative pedagogical strategies that became the basis for how we would work with these 10 boys. His patience and support towards me was and continues to be one of the great gifts ever bestowed upon me. From day one, he lifted up the students and me at every chance he could. His ability to affirm and reaffirm positivity amazes me to this day. His way of *being* in the classroom was a model of behavior for me and the students and slowly became the trademark for how we all grew to love one another in our small section of that building.

We read books together daily. We ate lunch together daily. Shared mid-afternoon snacks together. Sometimes we cried together. Reflected together. Played basketball on Friday afternoons together. Went to Sunday Pop Warner football games together. And, most importantly, shared in our small successes together. Small honor roll celebrations.

Positive calls home to parents together. On the day before the winter break, my parents visited the school and brought pizzas, soda, and cookies. Together, we shared in this moveable feast and grew as a small community. Through a shared vision of possibility, we built and sustained a small community of hope grounded in love. That school year, more than any other since, informed me and continues to inform me as who I want to be in this world. What I learned in that classroom is not taught in preservice classrooms, nor is it written in any teacher manifesto. What I learned cannot be replicated beyond one's ability to build and sustain relationships from the heart, the way I see Ruth and her students building relationships with one another.

In a typed-out calligraphy, the words, "In a World Where You Can Be Anything, Be Nice", stretches across the front wall. This simple phrase, along-side a poster that states, "Be the Change You Want to See in the World ", are constant positive visual reminders that Ruth utilizes each time I visit her classroom. Seeing these phrases are reflected in the actions I observe during my visits. Students smile at one another, use calm tones with one another, and rarely disrespect one another. Only on one occasion did I observe a student speak unkindly towards another student, at which time, Ruth reminded the student about "lifting up" rather than "putting down". In fact, one introductory lesson for the Charles Dickens' play, *Christmas Carol*, was specifically focused on the concept of "what does kindness look like?"

Many other positive phrases are arranged throughout the room. "Nothing will work unless you do" is posted on one of the side walls. "Never Give Up" is also posted on the front board. A bulletin board with the word "Be" is posted on the back wall with many positive examples of what we can "Be". "Amazing Things Happen Here"

highlights the back wall in the classroom, and the Maya Angelou quote, "Be a Rainbow in Someone Else's Cloud" is in sight of each student desk. Although many classrooms I have visited have all had positive messages posted in their classrooms, rarely have I seen such concrete examples of how these phrases can be used to build a positive classroom environment the way they are used and displayed in Ruth's classroom. It's as if she has curated a very specific overall themed message based on what she knows her students might need or want to see and hear throughout their day-to-day activities. Alone, these messages do not show a great deal of criticality, however, in practice and through sustained action, a collective relationship built upon lifting up one another results in a classroom experience where students feel valued. This value translates into the beginnings and foundations of critical pedagogy.

The positive messages are not the only messages displayed in Ruth's classroom, however. Throughout the room, a wide variety of diverse young adult novels are ever present. Authors from Jacqueline Woodson to Nicola Yoon to Sharon G. Flake line the books shelves and sit atop empty desks and tables. This classroom is literature rich to the point that it almost has the feel of a library annex. The students are each currently reading multiple novels, and there doesn't seem to be a shortage of novel choices in Ruth's classroom. Finally, as I observed in Jacqueline's and Carter's rooms, the word "Power" is written across the center of the white board in the front of the classroom, followed by the phrase - Some characters: Seek it, Resist it, Exert it, Submit it. Power, as I am coming to better understand, is one of the explicit messages being presented in each classroom.

With each visit to Ruth's classroom, I can *feel* the positivity of being translated through her verbal messaging and the messaging presented on the walls, desks, and

bookshelves. I carry that messaging with me as I go about my days. When I leave Ruth's classroom for the last time on the final day before the holiday break, my eyes zoom in on the words, "Do Something Amazing", posted above the door. I tell myself to not let Ruth down, as I feel her smile on the back of my head.

Classroom Instruction

As with most effective teachers I have observed, their instructional practices overlap and are directly tied to the elements of their classroom environment. This is certainly the case when speaking about Ruth's approach to ELA instruction. During the days spent visiting her ELA classes, students spend most of the time engaging in either independent reading and writing or whole group reading and discussion. During this beginning part of class, it is normal to observe students ask Ruth to visit the library to either return a book or select a new book. Students also peruse the shelves and tables with books stacked atop them. One male student in the back who I have gotten to know pretty well through conversing about books is reading the Nicola Yoon novel, *The Sun Is Also a Star*. I recently completed a novel study of that book with 14 high school students who attended the Urban Teacher Academy that I co-directed over the summer. The novel, focused on social and racial topics and how they affect young adults, was also recently made into a film. I am happily surprised to see this 8th grade white male turning the pages and making comments about what he hopes and expects to come next in the novel.

A Black male student sitting two rows in front of me has his eyes fixed on the pages of Jason Reynolds' critically acclaimed young adult novel, *Ghost*. Across from that student, another Black male is reading Kwame Alexander's *Crossover*. I note to myself

that most of the novels in Ruth's class, even though she is an older, veteran teacher, are culturally relevant and critical novels that do not shy away from social issues that may or may not connect to the lived experiences of the students in her class. I also note that most of these novels are at least on grade level, if not above a grade 8 reading level. The students stay focused on their individual texts each time I visit and are always eager to speak with me about their texts. This is one aspect of teaching that I never accomplished during my time in North Jersey. I had always hoped to engage students with critical and demanding books, but the closest I ever got to that level was a few of the Sharon Draper novels. Even then, the novels were typically below grade level, and did not demand any critical reflection on the part of my students.

During most of my visits, Ruth starts class with a short informal conversation with her students before beginning any formal lesson. On this particular day, the conversation centers around the upcoming NFL game between the Eagles and the Giants. It is well known throughout the school that Ruth is a diehard Giants fan, evidenced by the Giants lanyard that is always hanging around her neck and the loads of paraphernalia adorning the walls of the classroom. In Eagles country, Giants fans are few and far between. This aspect of Ruth's life only adds to the classroom environment she has cultivated over the years. A playful banter between Ruth and the students ensues. Ruth is completely confident and unashamed of her Giants fandom in one of the most entrenched territories of Eagles fans. She and the students enjoy every moment of their playful banter, as do I.

Written across the front white board in blue dry erase marker is a question, "What does kindness look like, feel like, and how do you know it's happening?" Ruth reads the

question aloud to the class and asks the students to jot down three words that answer the question. As students ponder the question, I watch as some of the students sit quietly thinking, while some students are writing down their three words. After two minutes, Ruth asks the students if they would like to share their responses. A Black male student shares out that, "It means to take the time to help someone else or just to smile." A quiet Black male student sitting next to me shares next, "Caring". Ruth smiles and asks the student, "What does caring look like?" He responds very softly, "Somebody try to help you with stuff." This was the first time I heard this particular student speak. He always sits in the back of the room paying attention without participating in any of the classroom discussions. However, every time Ruth assigns a reading or writing assignment, this student begins his work immediately. He is the type of student I have traditionally wanted to get to know more personally. I wish I could be here in Ruth's class more often. I wish I had more time for this project to get to know everyone at a deeper level.

The white male student sitting at the table on the left side of me, who is reading the novel *The Sun is Also a Star*, jumps in and says, "It comes from the heart, it manifests everywhere." After hearing him use the word "manifests" I am eager to speak to him more about kindness and the independent reading book he is currently reading. This is not the first time I witnessed this particular student utilizing high level vocabulary, nor would be it the last. In the hallways, in the main office, and in other classroom settings, I have seen this student fully engaged in classroom discussions. However, Ruth also has to remind this student more than any other that he needs to "Lift up, not put down".

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Another Black male student sitting at a desk against the side wall adds, "It means having a positive attitude towards someone." Then, the first student jumps back into the conversation, excited about what he is hearing from his classmates, and states, "It's lifting up somebody having a bad day." As the words enter the classroom air, my eyes immediately search the walls for the poster about "Lifting up" one another. I am not certain that the students are making an explicit connection to the classroom environment, but the relationship of environment to instruction is evident. I am not certain how this aspect of the lesson will directly tie into any content, but I know that its impact has a broader goal. The discussion continues for a few more minutes before Ruth eventually says, "Kindness is difficult to define, but we know it when we see it. Sometimes we can be confused or conflicted when people show us kindness after they have wronged us." My eyes search the room again finally landing at the front board where the word kindness is written on the board. Ruth continues, "This time of year, people seem to be in a better mood, we tend to feel the magic of that kind feeling. There's an ease of kindness during this time of year.

I think to myself for a moment before nodding in agreement. During the holiday season most of the people I encounter are more cheerful and act kind during the holiday season. I would also note that the holidays can also be a time of discomfort for some people, it can be a time of sadness for some. However, in the years I have spent in schools, there is an air of kindness that just seems to come easier as we approach the holiday break. It is at this moment that Ruth begins to hand out copies of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

As Ruth passes out thin pamphlet copies of the story, she also speaks to the class, "As we travel through this time in eighth grade, right now, I want you to keep this kind of theme of kindness in mind. There's a pleasure and ease in being kind." Ruth slides through the classroom as if she's traced this route 1,000 time. She doesn't hand me a copy at first, but then the instructional aide walks over and hands me a copy. Ruth explains to the students that "this is a really old story". The male student seated next to me on my right says, "These books are old like the story." I can't help but chuckle quietly to myself, as I flip through my copy hoping the pages don't fall out of the binding. Ruth asks the students to examine the cover of their books.

One of the girls in the front row asks, "Why does the guy on the cover look grumpy?" I think to myself that that is a great question. None of the students mention that they have read or watched *A Christmas Carol*, which surprises me. At this point, my assumption is that most people have seen at least one of the renditions of the story during the holiday season. After a brief introduction to the story, Ruth reads the introduction:

> Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to.
>
> Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail.

The students all read along with each word and look up from their pages when Ruth stops reading. Ruth smiles and asks if any of the students want to continue reading where she left off in the story. A Black male sitting against the side wall raises his hand

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immediately, and Ruth asks him to continue the story. I scan the room as the story continues. All of the students' eyes are locked on the pages except one female student. She scans the room, as well, watching the other students read. I wonder what she might be thinking about at that moment. Is she disinterested? Is she a struggling reader? Has she read this story before today? Is this her way of following along with the story?

Ruth stops the story after a few paragraphs to ask the class, "Does Scrooge have any more friends?" One student calls out, "I think Marley was his only friend." I think back to the opening activity about kindness, and ask myself, are the students making the same connection right now? Another student picks up where the last student left off in the story. I scan the room again and wonder how or why the desks are placed where they are. I try not to make too many assumptions about seating arrangements because I know that classrooms have very individually-based settings. However, for this reading I wondered if moving the seats into a circle might engage the students more in the story, so students could look at one another and interact directly with one another.

A Black male student sitting against the side wall of the classroom reads most of the pages during this class period. He is eager to read, and the other students seem to enjoy his fluid reading. Ruth stops the reading periodically to bring up key points and to ask basic comprehension questions about some of the events in the story. From the responses, most students have not read or watched *A Christmas Carol* prior to this moment. As the reading continues, I watch as students flip the pages of the small books in unison, their eyes following the words as the one student continues to read until the class period ends. I walk out with the students and smile at the student who has read the bulk of the pages. He smiles back and walks out of the room.

A final note on the use of *A Christmas Carol.* Although any text can be used to engage students in critical literacy, during my visits to Ruth's classroom, I only observed conversation focused on the overt messages of isolation, greed, and forgiveness. I did not, however, observe any critical literacies that questioned the use of text nor the topics or messages in the text.

Coming from the Heart

In my time visiting and speaking with Ruth, I consistently write down the phrase "coming from the heart". Whether explicitly stated in conversation with Ruth or implicitly messaged in the classroom, Ruth presents herself at all times as a compassionate, strong, and honest person. Having served as the teacher's union president for the past 19 years – longer than anyone I have ever met – Ruth states that no matter the issue, large or small, she defends the rights of the teacher as best she can, even if it is someone she may not have a strong relationship with at the school. With the students, I observed Ruth treat them with kindness, understanding, and discipline. Always reminding students to "lift one another up", Ruth models by example, constantly finding ways to promote caring and positivity throughout the class period and in the hallways during informal interactions. A quick smile or "hello" and an eagerness to address students in conversations about women's rights and other issues of social justice. I feel comfortable around Ruth, safe, as if I am in the care of someone who would never let me get hurt. The intangible qualities she presents seem to arise from years of cultivation that can only manifest from a place of goodness, coming from the heart.

I wonder how Ruth came to be this way. How someone from a conservative, Midwest upbringing came to care about issues of social justice and actively pursuing an antiracist pedagogy? As our conversations continue, I learn much about Ruth's upbringing. Much like Jacqueline, Ruth cared for a sibling with a disability. Ruth describes in great detail the archaic manner in which her younger sister was treated in and out of schools:

> First of all, she was born very, very cross-eyed. I mean that's what I remember as a child. So, I was 5 when she was born. She had to have multiple surgeries to correct her, her vision. But, then she, she's had many classifications over her lifetime because she was born in 1970, and this is before we were really dealing and before that people go into like you know institutions versus public school. And I give my parents credit for not that my mother is an activist by any stretch, but she did push really hard for my sister to be able to stay in public school.

> So, she was originally classified as EMR - that's educationally mentally retarded. She's got an IQ of about 70. But she also had a communications issue where she would, I'm sure there's a term for it, but she would repeat the same word. She would say like, "What time is it, it it." You know like that kind of thing. And she was very difficult to understand, like we could, you know, would understand her because we lived with her.

As Ruth describes her relationship with her sister, her tone becomes softer and more paced, and her words through a smile stretching across her face. This is the same smile I have seen as she works with her students. She continues:

> But, you know just to have conversations with her, it was it was kind of hard. You always had to feel like you had to explain what she was saying to them, to the other person. The most beautiful person ever is my sister. I mean she is kind to everyone; she has never said a mean thing to anybody. She only gives, she's always happy. She's this epitome of, just a kind spirit, my sister. So, she's just this fabulous human.

I have a strong relationship with my brother, but I can't remember a time when he or I have ever spoken about one another the way Ruth speaks about her sister. This is pure love, and she wears this love like a shining star. I imagine she carries this bond with her all day every day in the forefront of her mind and decision-making. I feel her love just listening to the words falling from her mouth.

Ironically, this relationship with her sister was not the ultimate reason why Ruth entered the teaching profession. Originally, Ruth planned on utilizing her love for athletics to become an athletic trainer, but she tells me all of that changed during her first experience with adaptive physical education in college:

> Moving forward I never was gonna be a teacher. That was not my thing. But I think growing up being the older sibling especially the sister to the sister I had to kind of nurture her and do things with her. So, I probably taught her without

thinking I was teaching just to help her navigate through the world a little bit. So, I went to college, and I was gonna be an athletic trainer. That's what I went to school for.

And, two years in we had to take an adaptive P.E. class, and they actually brought in students. They were actually adults that were severely disabled. They had a variety of disabilities but very low functioning adults, and we, we would instruct them. We would work with them, and as soon as I had that experience, I said yes, I'm going to be a teacher because working with these people was, it just gave me purpose.

This shift, maybe even an epiphany is one that continues to play out in Ruth's day-to-day interactions as an educator, a labor leader, and as a friend. One can easily link her relationship and experiences with her sister to her choice to become a teacher. However, Ruth's roles in this school are not strictly bound to interactions with students. Her purpose casts a wider net, one that is not separated from her personal life. Still, that time in her life working with the adults with disabilities changed the trajectory of her career path:

It was just like, this is what I need to do. So, I shifted. And got my degree in Adaptive P.E. But I didn't want to just be in the gym. That was not going to be like, it wasn't enough for me, like you know it's fun. But I felt like there was so much more to do than just do the physical piece. So, then I went and got my Masters in Special Education right after, back-to-back, and then I got my job here.

Yeah, it was just, yeah it's just funny that, it just, I don't know, that connection with people. I still think you know 18, 19, you know, 20 years old, and still just trying to navigate like what am I doing in this world. But then you run into something that just feels right. And it was just, it just it shifted my whole life. And I have to believe that my sister's influence on me was there saying, you know, you're going to, you don't need to wrap someone's ankle to play football you're gonna be better suited, you know changing somebody's life.

And this is where Ruth has been for the past 29 years, educating students, and, for the past 19 years, advocating for her colleagues as the teacher's association president. All from the heart, changing somebody's life. I know the field of education has plenty of *saviors* who want to change lives, but watching Ruth teach and hearing her personal stories leaves no doubt that her motives are honest and explicit. I have watched Ruth engage with colleagues at Climate Team and Equity Council meetings, witnessed her engage students in the hallways and in the classroom, and I have conversed with her on many occasions. She is the same person in each environment: strong, honest, and full of love. Her energy is palpable, a mixture of high expectations and compassion. This is no show, this is the only way she knows how to be.

Chapter 8

Thematic Analysis: Mural as Revolution

This study focused on how four teachers' sociopolitical development led them each to a deeper level of Critical Consciousness (Freire, 1970/1996). By focusing on four central tenets of advancing Critical Consciousness (CC) - Critical Social Analysis, Collective Identification, Political Self-Efficacy, and Sociopolitical Action (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015) – I hoped to uncover how each individual participant, as well as the collective group, describe their journey towards Sociopolitical Development, to what extent the middle school teachers' practices incorporate and enact sociopolitical development in their classrooms, how did each of these teachers explain coming to "know" (about) and talk about social justice, what they have done differently, and who has influenced them?

More specifically, through this critical analysis, I sought to examine and illuminate how each participant came to know themselves and to live/enact? their values. I also sought to uncover how each participant was or was not shaped by either privilege or oppression throughout their lives. Beyond understanding themselves, this study hoped to uncover how each participant understood the systems at play in their personal and professional lives, how the systems in which we operate impact their lives in relation to structure, as well as whose values serve as the foundation for these structures. Through conversations and observations, this study questioned how each participant understood how the systems in which we operate could create or deny opportunity to the students in their classrooms.

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Finally, with regards to sociopolitical action, this study examined to what extent each participant on an individual and collective level has the skills to take action. Through kitchen table conversations, group gatherings, and student gatherings, I entered and immersed myself into the world of the participants to explore to what extent their individual and collective identities were developed. Through dialogue and critical reflection, the aim of this study was to uncover how this small group of educator's individual and collective identities informed their ways of knowing and taking action within one particular context. Table 8 shows the connections that I made between the ways in which each participant enacted the core tenets of advancing CC and how the collected analysis builds the middle ground of the mural. Following this analysis is the foreground that is mostly derived from the reflexive journals I composed throughout the time spent with the four participants and their students.

Table 8

How Each Participant Enacted Elements of Advancing Critical Consciousness

Theme	Element	Participant	Moments
Coming from the Heart	• Critical social analysis • Collective identification • Sociopolitical action	• Carter • William • Jacqueline • Ruth	• Kitchen table conversations • Classroom instruction • Interactions
Building Relationships	• Critical social analysis • Collective identification • Sociopolitical action	• Carter • William • Jacqueline • Ruth	• Kitchen table conversations • Classroom instruction • Interactions

Theme	Element	Participant	Moments
Residue	• Critical social analysis • Collective identification	• Carter • William • Jacqueline	• Kitchen table conversations • Classroom instruction • Difficult conversations • Interactions
Power & Control	• Critical social analysis • Collective identification • Sociopolitical action	• Carter • William • Jacqueline • Ruth	• Kitchen table conversations • Classroom Instruction • Difficult conversations • Interactions
Advocacy	• Critical social • Political self-efficacy • Sociopolitical action	• Carter • William • Jacqueline • Ruth	• Kitchen table conversations • Extracurricular activities • Interactions

What follows is a critical analysis of how each of the themes in the prior chapter connect to or do not connect to the key tenets of sociopolitical development that develops one's critical consciousness.

Critical Social Analysis

The background of this mural is built from the broader sociopolitical context of public schooling in the US with its capitalist, patriarchal, and racist origins, as well as how "The Incident" brought me in contact with the participants. Built upon this

background is the personal stories of our coming to be, the ongoing process of sociopolitical development towards a deeper critical consciousness. How did these journeys begin? How did each of us progress? To what extent have each of us examined not only our own lives, but also investigated the way in which our lives are shaped by society? Other than Carter, each of us grew up in predominantly white, middle class spaces where our racialized bodies were never called into question. To a great extent, William and I never had to examine or analyze the way our bodies fit into society, as our lives were equally constructed within the framing of a white network of beings. Jacqueline and Ruth, albeit white women, each had that to reflect on their own positions in the social world to some degree with each having a sibling with a disability, as well as navigating a social world built upon patriarchal foundations. Carter's experiences growing up as a Black male had many implications for how he would come to know his place in this world.

As I think back to the moment when Carter shared with me the story of when his new neighbors "welcomed" he and his family to the neighborhood by lining their yard and throwing eggs at their house, I can't help but wonder how that experience would have shaped me as a person, as a child. Just imagining Carter as a three-year-old boy witnessing such overt and outward hate brings me to tears, yet when he relayed that story to me, it was through such leveled tones and mannerisms that I had no way of knowing his feelings. Maybe, that all comes from repeating the story so many times as he has done with his students, or maybe time has healed some of those wounds, but I can be sure that story still impacts Carter, as he states, "I can still see their faces and hear their voices" when referring to the people who committed that vile act of hate.

That was the first time Carter experienced outward hatred toward him based on his race, but it was not the last. These are experiences neither Jacqueline, Ruth, William, nor I have ever or will ever experience. Still, we have each engaged in critical social analysis and continue to do so on a very consistent basis. This can be evidenced by the fact that each of us engage and support such endeavors such as equity committees, school climate teams, curricular reform teams, as well as the various extracurricular clubs we are involved with like the Gender and Sexuality Alliance and the Girls in Action club.

As white, cis-gendered adults, our focus on more equitable conditions and outcomes for all of our students is one that has come from a continued critical social analysis. What ignited that flame in each of us? How did we come to be? As I listened to each participants' story and watched them interact with each other and their students, my mind continually focused on the way in which each of the participants took on the role of advocate at a young age in their lives. For Jacqueline, I see her holding tightly to her brother, shielding him as best as a younger sister can from the evils he encountered throughout his childhood, knowing that her family did not completely understand her brother's individual needs. Ruth took on a similar role, one that would guide her for the rest of her life. Watching over her sister with a protective eye, making sure she received the individualized attention she deserved. This advocacy for each of their siblings with disabilities had a profound effect on how each of them sees the world and how they believe people of all situations and backgrounds should be treated equitably and with kindness.

For William, he did not have a sibling with a disability, but he did have a mother who instilled in him the values not only of acceptance but that of civic responsibility. As

he spent the first few years of his life working at a school for students with disabilities and continues this work during each summer at a camp for children with disabilities, William's critical social analysis continues on a daily basis. What sticks out most to me is the image of William standing tall in front of a captive audience of 75 community members at CMS on a cold January 2019 night apologizing for his actions. At that moment, with a microphone in hand, holding back tears of regret for the negative harm he had caused a young Black student in his school, William chase to grips with the way in which his existence as a white male teacher in the United States carries with it a power and privilege than needs to be critically analyzed as often as possible. His actions did not intend to harm any of the students at CMS.

In fact, that poster, the result of the Freedom Projects in his class, was intended to dismantle the exact systems of oppression that he himself enacted by hanging the poster in the hallway outside of the context of his classroom. Could he have foreseen the negative impact of his decision to hang that poster ahead of time? In my estimation, he could not have. That is the power of whiteness, the power of colonization, and the power of the hegemonic codes in which schools and individuals like William and me operate within on a daily basis. Should William have been left off the hook for his actions? Absolutely not. Should he have handled the situation as he did by apologizing sincerely in front of a room filled with colleagues and community members? Absolutely. And I hope that if and when I do something similar, I will have the courage to behave as William did in that situation on that January night.

For each of us, there were triggering events that brought each of us into this space to do critical social analysis. For Carter, it was the incident at his home with the eggs,

being called the N-word at various moments in his life and being the only Black kid in many spaces throughout his childhood, specifically at swim meets. For Ruth and Jacqueline, having siblings with disabilities and acting as their protector for many years were experiences that forced them to critical analyze their social worlds. For, William, there was no clear triggering event, but rather a culmination of events that set him on this path towards critical social analysis. For me, the many people, including my parents and Dr. Marshall, exposed me to moments and conversations throughout my life that brought upon a deep need to critical analyze my social world. In this way, each of the members of this study, including myself, each chose to take this road towards a state of constant becoming, rather than the easier one of complicity and conformity.

Collective Identification

In schools, teachers' exist within silos all too often. To an extent, the same can be said about their existence as a team does not manifest in the ways most traditional school teams do, as a grade level or subject-based professional learning community. In fact, the four of these teachers comprise a team based on experience in the classroom, commitment to the betterment of society, and to supporting one another inside and outside the classroom walls. At times, Ruth and Jacqueline act as in-class support teachers for Carter and William, and at other times, act as supporters in a more meaningful manner as friends, colleagues, union members, or a sounding board. This is evident in the way Ruth and Jacqueline's kitchen table conversations evolved into a group effort. This was based on scheduling time with me, but also based on a fluid organic approach to our on-going conversations, as well as our understanding of the nature of the work we were doing together. Ruth and Jacqueline had a lot to say, and a lot

to say, together.

As two of the most veteran female teachers in the building, Ruth and Jacqueline embody the process of collective identification, as it "entails redefining one's social identity - a reclamation or redefinition that is collectively empowering" (Watts & Hipólito-Delgado, 2015, p. 849). Along with their work inside and outside of the classroom, Ruth and Jacqueline have often been called the "Queen Bees" of the school by their colleagues, a term that can be perceived as endearing or condescending, as they continue to advocate for more equitable practices at CMS. This sense of bettering the collective environment at CMS is what binds these four educators together, as they fight for more student voice, more equitable student outcomes, and less disproportionately of students of color in Special Education courses and in discipline rates at CMS. This collective work can be seen in the curricular planning efforts of William and Carter in their approach to teaching hard history in their social studies classes. This can also be seen in the Ruth's and Jacqueline's ELA courses throughout their discussions centering on power and control. Together and individually, these four teachers seek "to inspire action or change, not only for oneself, but also for the betterment of the collective" (p. 849).

Political Self-Efficacy

The contradiction that was consistent throughout this study was the lack of collective action. Although there was certainly a sense of collective identification and each member of the study took individual action and spoke about individual actions, I did not observe any collective action. Each participant in this study speaks with one another

on a daily basis and collaborates on lesson plans together. Their collective commitment to change is evident in every aspect of their educator identities. Yet, there were only few examples of collective action that I was able to observe throughout the study. In their planning of the Freedom Unit, Carter and William certainly acted together to ensure the best outcomes for their students, which was also supported by Jacqueline and Ruth in their own classrooms, as well as when they were the in-class support teacher for either Carter or William. Although, this may not seem like a true act of political self-efficacy, the planning for this unit is one that is not part of the standardized curriculum. Rather, this unit, and the final project that accompanies this unit was created by William and Carter as a way to change not only the culture and political landscape of their classrooms, but also with the hopes of having a long-term positive impact on the local community and beyond. Furthermore, William and Carter have a "Throw-Back" event at the end of the school year each year, which is a triumphant student-led display of taking action against the residue and power and control of oppressive systems. Sadly, I was not able to see this event in action, as COVID-19 disrupted the final few months of the school year.

Further, during data collection there was never an explicit mention of revolution. Each educator in this study strives to make their school and their classroom a place of equity and social justice-centered, but when asked if they saw themselves as teacher activists, not one of them stated explicitly that they saw themselves in that light. They did, however, hope that their classrooms were places where their students would take on the role of a social justice activist through the building of relationships and focus on advocacy. In this way, the collective acts of the educators in this study, their commitment to caring, to building relationships, to making pedagogical and curricular decisions are all

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driven by their commitment to the bettering of our society through the betterment of their students. Although this does not speak directly to an explicit mention of teaching as a revolutionary act, the end result is one that may, one day, change the way teachers and communities view the possibilities of classroom sites as nothing short of transformative.

Sociopolitical Action

At the core of myself and each of the participants is a profound "promotion of change in social and institutional policies or practices that maintain an inferior status for members of marginalized groups (Watts & Hipólito-Delgado, 2015, p. 850) This behavioral component of critical consciousness was captured throughout this study in many ways, but never so clearly than during the final kitchen table talk with William. We sat together on a Tuesday night in mid-January, nearly a year after the town hall meeting at CMS. We were nearing the end of our conversation when William became emotional while thinking about the hardest part of teaching and what drives him to do what he does in the classroom everyday:

> Meeting the emotional needs of my students meeting, their socioemotional needs. So there's a lot going on in their brains. A lot of it is completely unrelated to content and academics.

> I mean it's we all, I mean there's, we have emotional needs. And each one is completely unique to those students. And if you have a hundred and some students, and they're all, their brains are wired differently and they have these, It's overwhelming to me to think how am I going to reach them on an emotional level. It keeps me up at night. It does.

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All. Right. There's just so many things that are outside of my control. I feel like I can only control what I can do in that 48 minutes and. Whatever other time with my students outside the classroom. But when you have students coming up to you and saying I want to hurt myself. They open up to me. I mean that's, I think we we're talking about this at your house. I mean, being this way, kids have a tendency to open up to you. And because they do, you take on that responsibility of trying to help them on an emotional level. And my lack of preparedness and just self-doubt weighs on me. And I always go home on a Friday hoping you're gonna get all these kids back on Monday.

It's heavy. That's the most difficult part about teaching, man.

For William, this is one of the main reasons he advocated to have a Gender and Sexuality Alliance at CMS. He also understood that he may have some shortfalls and gaps in his knowledge around LGBTQ+ issues, so he asked the school counselor, a Black woman, to assist him in running the GSA. As I do as well, William views the GSA as a possible life-saving alliance that needs to grow and become a more integral part of the school community. Along with the Girls in Action program that Jacqueline advises, the GSA and Young Republic are places where student voice is centered, valued, and sustained. These are sites of healing in an educational system that perpetuates symbolic and physical violence on a daily basis.

The themes that emerged from the data collection are the middle and foreground of the mural. Either from specific moments, such as the poster incident, or a collective effort such as advocating for colleagues. These moments become the way in which each

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of our critical consciousness becomes actionable and impacts the world we live in. These are all ways that the themes of Critical Social Analysis, Collective Identification, Political Self-Efficacy, and Sociopolitical Development seek to diminish power and control, as well as disrupt the residue of racism and oppression that continues to exist, manifest and permeate the fabrics of our communities and educational spaces.

Taking action at CMS is nothing new for Ruth and Carter. 9 years ago, they attempted to shed light on the racism in their school community. Together, they provided professional development and a space for dialogue around racism. The staff and leadership at CMS was not open to what Carter and Ruth were proposing, and their efforts were quickly ignored. Carter still has the training module he created but has not reengaged in that kind of work until recently when my advisor began to consult with the district in which CMS is located. Carter is still skeptical that any real change will take place, but as he has always done, Carter remains cautiously hopeful and supports the lives of his students above all else. If there is anything he can do to promote more equitable outcomes for his students, Carter will be there and ready.

One of the ways Ruth has consistently taken action over the past 20 years is in examining and advocating for students of color to be placed in the honors courses. Ever since she was assigned as the in-class support teacher for William's first honors social studies class 20 years earlier, Ruth has advocated for change. Each year, Ruth takes notice of which students are placed in her special education classes while also taking note of which students are represented in the honors courses at CMS. Although, there is still an issue of students of color being overrepresented in the pullout resource classes and underrepresented in the honors courses, Ruth and Jacqueline do not view their students

any differently than how they would any students. They are well aware of their students' individual needs, but their expectations do not change based on their student population. Highly engaging novels are tailored to meet the reading levels of their students, and assignments and conversations are centered around historical and current social issues. However, as stated by Ruth and Jacqueline more than once, the dynamic of their students shifts when they are in Carter's and William's classes. I, too, observed this, as the students who are friendly to me in Ruth's and Jacqueline's classes as well as when I see them in the hallways, are quiet and avoidant of me in the larger setting, almost trying to blend in and remain unnoticed. The only time I saw something different was when some of their students were presenting their Freedom Project in small groups in Williams' class alongside a peer.

Ruth and Jacqueline continue to advocate for their students no matter the placement, however, they also continue to take action against the systems at play that perpetuate these issues of disproportionality that plague CMS. One clear example is when they audited the overrepresentation of students of color placed in their special education classes compared to the lack of students of color placed in gifted and talented settings. Then, they presented the data to school administration to examine and analyze these inequitable practices as a starting point of disruption. In this and other ways, all four participants arrive at CMS each day, ready to take action where inequity persists.

Finally, there is a question of purpose. A question that may not have been answered throughout this study, a question that certainly lies deep within the context of social studies and current events. It is a question of purpose. What is the purpose of teaching Hard History? What goals do these teachers have in mind when engaging their

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students in topics that some may seem as unfit for the classroom, as radical, or as biased? I recently listened to the *1619 Project*, and I thought of the four teachers in this study. I asked myself, are Williams's and Carter's lessons geared towards Black students? White students? Or all students? Are the lessons truly striving for liberation for all students, or might the lessons be (re)harming some of the Black students in their classrooms? Further, what is the impact of (re)writing curriculum? What was William's intent with rewriting some of the social studies objectives over the summer? Who do they want to reach with these objectives, and what is the overall goal of all this history?

As I spoke with some of their students and observed student interactions during class time, specifically, during the Freedom Project presentations, most students expressed a deep love and gratitude for the opportunity to be exposed to this knowledge and to engage with their peers in discussions about these topics. Like the students who spoke on William's behalf at the town hall meeting a year earlier, most students attached their own lives and experiences to what they were learning in class, and many expressed a better understanding of who they were and who they wanted to be, a clear indication of sociopolitical growth and a deeper critical consciousness. However, the one Black student who played the saxophone for his presentation later expressed to William that he was "tired of learning about all of this oppression" and was looking forward to moving on from this unit. In one of our follow-up conversations, William expressed a disconnect he felt with this particular student, and that it was his goal to cultivate a stronger relationship with this student through further dialogue. I am not sure if that ever happened, as our world was shaken up by the COVID-19 outbreak shortly thereafter.

This interaction did, however, speak to the shaky ground upon which this unit of study sits upon in both William's and Carter's classrooms. I wonder if this student would have a similar or different outlook on this unit if he had been in Carter's class rather than William's? Does the racial background of the teacher make a difference in what is being taught? Or is the content itself causing the (re)harming of this student? These are the questions I have asked myself, William and Carter have asked themselves, and are questions being asked by the National Teaching Black History Consortium based out of the CARTER Woodson Center in the School of Education at the University of Missouri. They are questions that will be asked moving forward, and questions worthy of further investigation and discussion.

Foreground

In Chapter 1, I provided the background for this study, which is also the background for this mural. Then, in Chapters 4-7 I have created portraits of each individual participant. The foreground, here, has been created from the analysis of the two 60 minutes student kitchen table gatherings, as well as the 14 reflexive journal entries I composed throughout the data collection period. These data pieces have been used to accentuate the pictures of the individual portraits and to provide more detail into each of the participants.

What struck me most in meeting with the small group of students, all of whom were students of color, is that at no point did any of them mention the race of their teachers, specifically when speaking about their experiences with Carter and William. At times, they did mention some of Carter's experiences as a Black male in this society, but

they never made any mention of William's race. It was clear to me that these students look to William and Carter as models of character and critical influencers in their educational lives.

In these classroom settings, supported by Jacqueline and Ruth, the students and teachers have built an atmosphere of respect and civil discourse. This was the feeling I had each time I visited, but I also know that when a visitor is in the classroom, they can sometimes change the regular dynamics of that experience. Therefore, when conversing with the students about their experiences in William's and Carter's classrooms, I was interested to see if my perceptions matched the actual experiences of these students. I was particularly interested to hear how these students of color, felt about the content that focused on enslavement, the Jim Crow-era, and the continued battle for civil and equal rights. Having seen many of the students present their Freedom Projects, I was also interested to gain a better understanding of how they felt about the overall experience of the unit. With great ease and grace, the students shared openly during both gatherings.

During one of the more eye-opening moments of the first focus group, one Black female student shared that she is inspired by William's approach to teaching about Emmitt Till:

> It's the way he teaches. He teaches, in like, a way that like, everyone can learn and understand. And it was like really emotional that day. But we learned a lot.

> I think that it was so impactful because, if like, it's important to know about this that we know about our past.

I was present the day students learned about the tragic events leading up and including the murder of Emmitt Till in William's class. He did not sugar-coat the events, nor did he hide any of the images from the students. As each student in CMS carries a laptop with them from class to class, during William's and Carter's classes, these laptops are always open for students to conduct their own research in relation to the learning objectives of the day. This community of inquiry allows students to deepen their understandings on their own terms. I did, however, wonder if learning about these difficult topics might reinscribe trauma or feelings of victimization. To this point, the students expressed feelings of empowerment in their growing knowledge-base:

> Mr. Devers said, "If you don't know the past and you don't know the future". So, it was important to learn about this because everyone should know about this. If we keep learning about these things then we can grow up and people can be a lot nicer in the world.

Other students expressed their feelings about seeing their peers engage in these difficult conversations and how that further informed them of the social context that is connected to their lives at school, as well as the importance of everyone's collective experience with these topics:

> I think I was kind of eye opening for some people. It's like trying to change. I feel like a lot of kids learn about this kind of stuff, then, they're like our generation can grow up. To learn better, I guess. Because if we're never taught these kinds of things then we'll never. People just stay the same.

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While listening to these students converse and in my subsequent reflections on my time spent with these students, it brought me back to my time with Dr. Ian Marshall. I never once had a single experience in middle or high school that even came close to the experiences of these students in Social Studies. I never once had to question my way of knowing the world. Everything I did or learned about was always seen through the context of my own experiences as white, middle class male. Not until my graduate studies as a late-twenties adult did my way of knowing the world ever come into question, and that was only because of my fortuitous meeting with Dr. Marshall. I wonder what my life might have been like or may look like now had I experienced a class like William's or Carter's. This is not to say that I think their Social Studies classes or any one class can act as a panacea for our worldly issues, however, I do agree with the students in this study that by learning about topics such as racism and sexism in an 8th grade Social Studies class can be an excellent starting point to making our world more harmonious.

As I walked to my car after the second student focus group on a crisp and clear blue-sky afternoon, I was even more impressed than I had been after the first student focus group. having I bumped into Jacqueline on my way out of the building and shared with her how I felt. I told her how inspired and validated I was to hear from the students about their experiences in these classes, especially about the way they feel in their classes and how they feel valued and trusted. I went on and told her how they expressed their honest beliefs on the self-assessment of their Freedom Projects and how that leads to their deep engagement and their learning in Social Studies. I also expressed to Jacqueline how I think it's important, and I know that Jacqueline would value that because she and Ruth

have verbalized to me multiple times that the thing they care about most is their students themselves and making sure that their students feel cared for and valued, My time speaking with these students affirmed and validated the approach that the four participants take to education, to schooling, and into their way of *being* in this world. For me, that speaks to social justice, it speaks to activism and ethics, and it speaks to equity. It speaks to culturally responsive and sustaining practices. It speaks to anti-racist teaching, in certain moments, maybe not always explicitly, but certainly at the core of valuing the experiences and identities of their students. It speaks to what these four teachers do on a daily basis in the classroom, in the lunchroom, on the basketball court, on the baseball field, in the *Young Republic*, in the *Girls in Action Club*, in their *Climate and Culture Committee*, in their Teacher's Association, and in their Equity Council.

These sentiments culminated for me on a blustery morning on the final day of instruction of 2019. I observed William's students present their Freedom Projects during the first two periods of the school day. One of William's students requested to have class in the all-purpose room, a request William was happy to manage for the student. As I sat behind a row of students and watched each student present, I was blown away, not only by the content that was presented but, more importantly, by the medium the students chose to express their learning and experiences with the unit. The deep thoughts and connections each student made during these projects and the conversations that took place following each presentation captured, for me, the true essence of being a student in these 8th grade Social Studies classes. Witnessing students perform songs on guitar or the saxophone, singing a-cappella, or sharing spoken-word while making connections to slavery, oppression, Jim Crow, *residue*, resistance, and *power* and *control* was one of the

more incredible moments in my academic and professional career. In one of the more memorable moments, the female student who had requested the use of the all-purpose room carried a speaker to the stage and performed a two-minute ballet piece to express her understandings of this unit of study.

During the post-dance Q & A session, the student revealed she had to compose a musical selection to accompany the dance, as she could not find the "right" music to fully express how she came to understand the Jim Crow character. Along with every student in the audience, William and I were visibly moved by the performance. Having observed and interacted with various 8th grade Social Studies classes, I found this particular performance to capture the full picture of why the participants in this study approach education and teaching the way they do. In this one project, along with many other projects, I was able to see how these students, as well as the teachers, engaged in critical social analysis and sociopolitical action. In doing so, I felt a connection to and growth of my own political self-efficacy, as well as a growing sense of collective identity with the students, as well as with William and myself.

What I have come to know in analyzing all of the data, including my own reflexive journals, is that the approach to teaching and working with students I observed is not perfect, nor did I expect it to be. What I do understand, however, is that these classrooms are sites of possibility, and the more I got to know each teacher and their classrooms, the more I understood the connection the four of them have to and with one another. The students understood this, as well. The four teachers are caring teachers who show up every day trying to do something with their teaching. As I debriefed with William after his two classes on that cold December morning and listened to how moved

by and proud of his students he truly was, I was sure that I would have liked the opportunity to teach with these folx and do things with these folx.

Further, after observing those projects on that day solidified for me that engaging in *good* teaching and *good* work likely will not have a clear roadmap. Oftentimes, we teach in silos and rarely get to observe one another, collaborate with one another, or experience the joys of teaching together. Therefore, it can feel, at times, that there are few teachers engaging in this work. It is through this experience and experiences such as these that hope, possibility, and liberation come into greater focus.

In the final chapter, I discuss how each of these themes connect to the ways each participant was inspired to advance their own critical consciousness, and at times, that of their collective group.

Chapter 9

Discussion of Findings, Limitations, and Implications

In speaking with each member of this research project and observing their teacher practice, I gained a greater understanding of each individual, as well as the collective force these four teachers bring to their school environment. I also gained a greater understanding of myself, professionally and personally. Throughout the entire data collection and analysis, my own story was interwoven with that of the other members of this study. Although we each have individual stories and experiences, many of the same themes arose in their understandings of and journeys towards critical consciousness. As discussed earlier in chapter 3, the main themes emerged from the hours of observations, kitchen table conversations, and kitchen table gatherings. These themes did not only manifest through conversations and observations of each member of this study, but also through the observations and conversations with some of the students at CMS. As an outside member of the CMS, my interactions with the other members of this study and the students at LMS still carried a level of power that I tried to remove from each situation.

However, I must admit that in the beginning of this study, I felt a "space" between myself and the other members of this study, as well as the students. In time, we were able to shorten the distance between, but as a researcher, that space will always exist. Our hope was to lessen that space between us as much as possible throughout the data collection period. Furthermore, by sharing all of the written information in this inquiry with each member of the study throughout the process and by having questions from each

kitchen table talk drive further conversations in an iterative manner, we hoped to create an environment of "everyday talk" as often as possible (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015).

The members of this study, along with myself, have shown and expressed moments of critical consciousness that stem from our experiences and sociopolitical development towards a deeper level of critical consciousness. However, we are not without contradictions. The mural that follows seeks to tell a full story, full of the "goodness" that was observed as well as some of the contradictions that inevitably showed up in our complicated and flawed lives.

Much can and should be said about the deep connection between the four participants. Their professional lives, and to a great extent, their personal lives, intersect and inform one another in various and meaningful ways. Further, the ways in which their collective personal and professional lives come together has been taking place throughout the past 20 years. Many examples of this were articulated to me from each individual participant throughout our conversations, but also during more informal interactions, as well as during our group gatherings.

In the pages to follow in this chapter, I will describe how each of the four participants' actions connects to aspects of sociopolitical development and critical consciousness. Through the analysis and meaning making of classroom observations, conversations, the teacher and students gatherings, as well as my own reflections, I will highlight how each of the participants enacted at least one more element of advancing critical consciousness.

Lessons in Pedagogy

In 2007, my advisor and mentor, Dr. Shelley Zion wrote, "Much has been done in the way of school reform in efforts to address issues of inequity in our school systems, yet we have not seen sustainable, scalable reforms that result in equity for all students" (Zion, 2007, p. 5). I wonder if anything has changed since then? If so, how? Are we better off or worse? With all that has taken place since 2007 - the "doubling down" on high stakes testing during the Obama-era, the growth of choice and charter schools, an increased focus on evidence-based practices, and the adoption of the common core standards, we have tried and failed at countless education initiatives - we still have not resolved or even managed to fully understand issues of inequity in any of the measurable gaps. That means none of the initiatives we tried have worked, and unless we address the core issues, that schools have historically and continue to be set up to track and sort bodies, we will continue to perpetuate the same inequities each of the failed initiatives set out to disrupt. Unless we shift our entire way of thinking about school so that they become places of liberation and emancipation, through a critical consciousness and sociopolitical development process, we never will end the harm being done to our students, specifically those who have historically been marginalized.

As I entered into various educational spaces in the southern New Jersey context with Dr. Zion over the past four years, I have encountered a few examples of potential sites that seek to sustain students' ways of knowing and experiencing the world while also attempting to challenge and disrupt the status quo. One of those examples is this group of four teachers at Central Middle School. Although this study did not seek to uncover the potential for school-wide reform, the study did seek to uncover, from the

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perspectives of educators and students, how classroom sites can be a place of liberation, and to suggest new possibilities for the ways we do public education in the United States that will allow us to live up to the promise of equitable educational opportunities and outcomes for all students. Each participant had their own drive or inspiration for advancing their own and a collective critical consciousness. Five primary categories emerged from the data analysis: *Coming from the Heart*, *Building Relationships*, *Residue*, *Power and Control,* and *Advocacy.*

What follows is a discussion of how each of these inspirations connect to or do not connect to the key tenets of sociopolitical development that develops one's critical consciousness. In some instances, the participants shared in what inspired their development, while at other times, the reason behind their drive was solely an individual endeavor.

Coming from the Heart

Each of the five categories had unique characteristics that manifested throughout the study, with each interacting with one another at various levels, to varying degrees, and times and in various spaces. For example, although *Coming from the Heart* was observed in the classroom environments of each teacher participating in the study, that particular theme was much more prevalent during the kitchen table conversations and group gatherings. Most importantly, through personal stories and through the stories told by the students during the group gatherings, the theme of *Coming from the Heart* became apparent. A quick description of what I mean here is that each teacher expressed to me on more than one occasion that the way they interact with students, the manner in which they set expectations for their students, and the way they work with another is all built

from a place within each of them that can only be expressed through compassion, love, and sincerity. These aspects of each individual in the study was apparent in every interaction I observed as well as in the way they explained their own sociopolitical development. To them, coming from the heart is a deep understanding of how they are and what roles they play in the school based on their individual and collective critical social analysis.

Specifically, Carter pointed at his chest multiple times when asked to explain his teaching style. Like me, he did not go through a traditional teacher preparation process, so his understanding of the theoretical "heroes" such as Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky is limited. What he does understand, to a great extent, is the importance of being genuine with his students. This does not mean that he is a push-over in the classroom. On the contrary, Carter expects a great deal from all of his students. He does, however, show a respect and love for his students that is undeniable. This was evident each and every time I visited his classroom or witnessed his interactions with students in the hallway or cafeteria. I was even lucky enough to have been present when a former student of his, a parent to a 1st grade student in the district, came to visit Carter at the end of the day on one of my visits. The manner in which Carter and this former student interacted was nothing short of how I have always hoped I would interact with my former students one day down the road.

Carter was not the only participant to explicitly mention *Coming from the Heart*. In many formal and informal interactions with each of the participants, explicit mention of the importance of love, respect, and genuine interactions was paramount in their collective approach to teaching. This explicit connection to critical consciousness and

sociopolitical development is easy to trace within this example. This approach to how each of the participants enter their educational spaces is the foundation of the next theme that was uncovered in the study.

Building Relationships

Without question, the theme that was most apparent throughout this study was the *Building of Relationships*, not only between teachers and students but also between each of the participants. Whether in the classroom, through the advising of extra-curricular activities, or in the way students expressed their beliefs about these adults, building relationships was an explicit theme from day one of the study. Beyond building relationships with students, each of the participants made countless references to the importance of working closely with one another inside the classroom, during professional learning communities, and in their personal spheres. Ruth was a confidant to Jacqueline through her divorce proceedings, and William found unending support from each of the other three participants during the incident with the poster last school year. Their support never once swayed, as a result of the relationships they had cultivated for over 20 years.

With specific regards to building positive student relationships, Carter's involvement with both basketball teams, as well as his ability to bond with students in some of the lower grades, has a direct correlation to the manner in which his classroom functions. The level of respect exemplified by Carter to and from his students is a reflection of the daily interactions and long-term relationships he has built. Furthermore, during the student gatherings, students made explicit mention how they are treated in their classrooms and why that has such a positive effect on how they perceive teachers like Carter and William:

Mr. Devers challenges us so that we can really think. And he teaches in a way that everyone feels open and safe.

I don't even have him, but I know he cares about us.

Without this class, I wouldn't know any of the things I've learned.

Everyone needs Mr. Devers or Mr. Williams for Social Studies.

I feel that Mr. Devers and Mr. Williams put so much effort and time into what we learn in class.

They don't just talk about stuff from the past, they talk about current things.

Yeah, I watched the news this morning.

Me, too.

In this class, it's different because they actually care about what we think. We engage in debates. In past classes, all we did was just listen to what the teachers said.

It must be noted that Carter's approach to relationship building with many of the students of color, particularly the Black students, at CMS also stems from his candor about his own childhood experiences with racism. As one student noted, "Yeah that story is impactful for me as well, because in my mind I think about Mississippi and Alabama. Yeah, like it's not New Jersey. It seemed it didn't seem real." The students had a difficult time coming to grips that racism can and does exist in New Jersey the same way it manifests in the south. They also felt a deeper connection to Carter after hearing these stories because they "felt" the pain he must have felt as a child seeing eggs being thrown at his home and being called the n-word. In this way, Carter was enacting critical pedagogies, specifically culturally sustaining pedagogies, as he was opening up to his

students in a way that he hoped they might open up to him and their peers. With showing such vulnerabilities with his students, Carter was not asking them to do anything he was not willing to do himself. This culturally sustaining way of building relationships with his students is what I believed has led to such a strong and powerful community of learners.

As I listened to the students speak about Carter the way they did, I could feel their pain, the same way I felt the pain of the white student in Carter's class the day she expressed her feelings about seeing the enslaved parents being stripped on the auction block. These feelings stem from another theme the persisted throughout the study, a theme that each participant explicitly and implicitly touched on more than once: *Residue*

Residue

Although residue might be understood as something small that is left over after a major event or happening, within the context of this study, residue can be best understood as everything that remains within our collective experience as it relates to issues of racism, social injustice, and oppression. Upon entering any of the participants' rooms as well as the halls of CMS, it would not take long to feel the presence of the theme of residue, however explicit or implicit the messaging. Just as most schools throughout the country embody hegemonic codes of being and knowing, CMS is no different than the rest. Students and staff are ruled by many of the same norms and hidden curriculum that have been manufactured through the status quo. The status quo of schools and society is part of the residue from our collective pasts. Standards-based teaching and assessment are evident in each of the classrooms I have encountered, however, when visiting the four participants room, each of their classroom practices and classroom environments challenge the residue of the status quo to varying degrees.

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As described in the portraits of each educator in this study, implicit and explicit challenges to the residue of our pasts were apparent and integral to the curriculum being enacted. In Ruth's and Jacqueline's classroom, there was a focus on disrupting the patriarchal systems that continues to dominate our society. By displaying images of historical and present female leaders, writers, and activists, as well as discussing these women's' lives throughout classroom instruction, Ruth and Jacqueline are deliberately disrupting the narrative of patriarchy and creating the counter narrative of female empowerment. The students in their classrooms, females and males, all engaged in learning about the ways in which women have been treated throughout history and how that narrative needs to change. Furthermore, both Jacqueline and Ruth openly share stories from their personal experiences of how they have been marginalized as women and what they did and continue to do to challenge and erase the negative residue of how women have been perceived throughout history.

Carter and William enter into conversation about residue in many ways throughout their instruction. By engaging students in open discussion and cultivating an open forum of civil discourse, William and Carter's classrooms become sites of disruption that seek to mitigate some of the residue that continues to negatively impact students who have been traditionally marginalized. One of the most powerful ways in which this takes place is by including historical content of this country's history that has been left out as part of the null curriculum. Two specific moments of challenging the null curriculum is the inclusion and focus of the story of Emmet Till and the story of the *Amistad*. By including each of these historical events into the social studies curriculum, Carter and William are choosing to incorporate stories that tell a larger story about the

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history of this country. In doing so, students are presented with not only the triumphs of the United States, but also the history that most people never want to acknowledge or speak about in public spaces. Although painful to endure, without shining a light on the painful stories of our collective past, the evil residue that continues to negatively impact our country will continue to manifest and maintain power and control for a select few.

In each of their classrooms, these conversations played out similarly in that they were a place where students felt safe to enter into dialogue with their peers and their teachers, while also feeling safe enough to conduct further inquiries into some of the evilest aspects of United States history. Further, students in both teachers' classes felt safe enough to create projects and express themselves through varying forms of presentation. However, I observed differing nuances throughout the time I spent in each of the classrooms. Whenever I spent time in Carter's classroom, there was an easiness in the air that was not always present in William's classroom. Obviously, as a Black male, Carter's incorporation of his personal experiences through verbal narratives added a sense of authority that was not present in William's class. This is not to say that William's instruction and classroom environment did not have a similar impact on his students' learning and personal sociopolitical development because it did. In fact, the instruction in William's classroom felt more intentional in content and delivery, where Carter's often times seemed to come from his connections to history, United States history and his own. In an ideal situation, every grade 8 student would be able to experience both approaches to this unit of study.

In understanding our individual journeys towards sociopolitical development, one of the most powerful threads is knowing who we are at our core. In that way each of the

participants exhibited aspects of sociopolitical development to varying degrees, with emphasis on different but intersecting aspects of their development. William has spent a great deal of time and energy on understanding systems, as observed in his highlighting and connections to *residue,* where examining and knowing himself comes next. In this way, it is clear William has spent a great deal of time and energy examining and analyzing his own racial identity in a way that seeks to counter, disrupt and shed some of the aspects of whiteness that permeate any biases he may still be working through. For Carter, the focus has really been about knowing himself first, followed by critiquing systems and taking actions. Depending on our personal backgrounds and our experiences navigating our social worlds, certain aspects of sociopolitical development may be prioritized or forced to the forefront throughout different times in our lives. This is what is meant by the *journey.*

Power & Control

From the first conversation I ever had with William to every single conversation I had with each of the participants, the theme of power and control arose. Also, within each classroom's environment there was explicit messaging of how issues of power and control are central to classroom activities. From the classroom novels in the ELA classes to the events covered in the social studies classrooms, power and control played a pivotal role in the overall discourse. However, as mentioned earlier, the connections between classrooms and content areas of how the theme of power and control manifests was never made even though it was central within each classroom. Further, power and control also played a role in how students perceived their teachers. As the students shared their feelings of freedom to speak their minds within their eighth-grade social studies classes,

this freedom had not been the norm in their prior educational years. The messaging of power and control from the adults onto the students is an ongoing struggle that manifests each day and is one of the reasons why this team of teachers struggles to diminish the negative effects of such systems of power and control. Therefore, as seen with each of the four participants, sharing of power with students is a crucial element in developing student critical consciousness.

Again, by adding personal narratives and narratives of center historical and current advocates such as Greta Thunberg, these educators impress upon their students the importance of challenging all systems of dominance. This and other examples of practice are how this group of teachers chose to teach for social justice. Depending on the classroom and the day of the week, the lessons may vary, but the overall intent of each classroom is focused on an ethos of social justice and liberatory practice. What was missed was the chance to connect a novel like *The Giver,* which was being read and discussed in the ELA classrooms, with what was being covered and focused on in the social studies classrooms. A more explicit connection of power and control across content areas can lead students to a deeper understanding of how this theme directly impacts their own lives on a daily basis and will empower them to challenge such structures. In doing so, the students will become the change agents and self-advocates all four educators hope their students will be.

Advocacy

Throughout each visit to CMS with each participant and in each of the kitchen table conversations and group gatherings, there were explicit and implicit examples of advocacy. *Advocacy*, in this context, was seen in the way each teacher listened to their

students with empathy and compassion. However, the advocacy did not rest upon listening. Examples of taking action on the behalf of their students was commonplace on a small and large scale. Through the formation of the Young Republic, a student government group, and the Gender and Sexuality Alliance, William shares space with students so they can amplify their voices and representation while at CMS. Similarly, Jacqueline advocates for female students with the Girls in Action after school club that focuses on current issues facing women in society. These clubs each serve a similar purpose of advocating for more student voice at CMS.

Each of the four educators in this study also advocate in the way they teach, by inviting civil discourse in their classrooms, designing debates, and having students self-assess some of their work. They also advocate for students throughout the day in various ways. On more than one occasion, I witnessed each of the participants engage in discussions with students around disciplinary issues from administrators or other teachers. In one particular instance, William invited me to be a part of an informal conversation with two of he and Jacqueline's students about their desire to wear pajama pants to school. Although considered a violation of the student dress-code policy, William took the time to speak with these two students to address the policy and their decisions in a way that might lead to a more equitable outcome for the students. Although William did not speak on their behalf, instead, he spoke with the students about how they may want to present their side of the argument to the administrators who deemed their clothing inappropriate for school. In this way, William advocated for the students by empowering them to advocate for themselves. As with discussions of power and control, it is through examples such as these that each of the four participants take up and enact

educating for social justice.

A similar example took place early on in the study during my first visit to Carter's classroom. On this particular Monday, Carter had been disappointed in the results from the past Friday's assessment. Although students did not perform well nor did they prepare well for the assessment, Carter did listen to some of the students who chose to advocate for themselves. One student took the initiative to email Carter over the weekend asking for an extended period of time to complete the assessment on Monday. Due to that student's self-advocating, Carter decided to grant all students in that class the opportunity to go back to their assessments and either complete their work or revise some of what they had completed. Carter made it clear that the only reason he was giving the students more time was because their peer had advocated for herself. This is one of the messages Carter wanted to make clear during our first kitchen table talk, that he will treat his students as adults. He will respect them, and work with them, as long as they take responsibility for their own actions. In this way, each of the participants strive to do the same, by advocating for their students with the end goal that each student will learn to advocate for themselves. This does not mean that each of the participants eventually absolves themselves from advocating for their students when needed, however, they each have a goal in mind that all of their students will be empowered to advocate for themselves by the time they leave 8th grade.

Thinking back to the analysis of each theme, I would be remiss not re-acknowledge the roles Ruth and Jacqueline played in their siblings' lives during their childhoods. As stated in the last chapter, this advocacy for each of their siblings with disabilities had a profound effect on how each of them sees the world and how they

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believe people of all situations and backgrounds should be treated equitably and with kindness.

Limitations of the Study

As stated earlier in the reflexivity section of this dissertation, there will certainly be limitations that may affect the amount of data collected, the breadth and depth of analysis, and a limited understanding of whether or not these teachers were effective in promoting social action in their classrooms. Additionally, because such a small sample (n = 4) was used, it may be difficult to generalize any of these findings to any large population, which portraiture does not claim to do. In fact, by working within the portraiture framework, the ultimate goal of the inquiry is to hopefully lead "toward new understandings and insights, as well as instigating change" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 5). Therefore, by focusing on individual stories full of contradiction and nuance, this inquiry aims to challenge "the tyranny of the academy" (p. 7).

The data collected in this study includes transcripts from three kitchen table conversations from each participant and observational field notes from several hours of classroom visits, as well as transcripts from group gatherings. For each participant there is at least 180 minutes of transcribed data, and at least between six hours of classroom observational data. As a result, evidence about these teachers' journeys or their experiences of sociopolitical development was limited only to the data collected during the timespan of this study. Further, our own historical memory and bias of memories may factor into the way each of us in this study see the world.

The more time I spent with each participant, through formal and informal interactions, I came to a conclusion that with more time and resources, there is the possibility for a longer study that might provide deeper insights, not only into each individual's lives but also deeper insights into the school community.

One of the highlights of this research study was the time spent with students during classroom visits, various informal interactions, and during the two gatherings that took place near the end of the study. During these conversations with students, many of the themes discussed in the data analysis section of this study were confirmed through the experiences and voices of the students who participated in the gatherings. However, due to the limited number of students who agreed to participate in the study, the overall perspectives of students in grade 8 was limited. For future studies, I would like to engage more current students as well as some past students to gain further insights, not only into their experiences with grade 8 social studies and ELA, but also if and how that gained knowledge and experiences inform and impact their lives moving forward through high school.

One of the more specific aspects of this study that could have been developed to a greater extent was that of the interactions outside of the traditional classroom setting (i.e. extracurricular, coaching, personal). Each of the participants is embedded in the culture and climate at CMS in various ways beyond the classroom. As mentioned earlier, Carter has coached the girls and boys basketball teams for many years. William advises the GSA, the Young Republic, coaches the boys baseball team, and started a flag football club. Jacqueline advises the Girls in Action club, and Ruth has served as the Teacher's Association President for the past 19 years. With more time, this study could have

benefited greatly from seeing each of the participants interact in these settings to a much greater extent to create a more vivid portrait of each individual.

There is also the question of perceptions and perspectives. One of the major voices left out of this study were that of the families in the community. Although two parents agreed to speak with me about the grade 8 social studies curriculum and the experiences of their children in these classes, unfortunately, the family members did not get back to me to finalize a meeting time. The only evidence of family perceptions throughout this study was that of what the four participants expressed to me in a second-hand nature, as well as my field notes from the town hall meeting. An added layer of data of family perceptions is one way that a future study could benefit greatly. Further, as this study only included the perspectives of 4 educators who have worked closely with one another for the past 20+ years, I wonder how this study may have benefited from more staff perceptions beyond the informal interactions I had with some staff members during my visits?

Implications and Recommendations

This study was conceptualized to develop a deeper understanding, through the experiences and practices of four veteran educators, of the impact of their own sociopolitical development on their teacher practices. Further, this study sought to uncover how each of these teachers explain coming to "know" (about) and talk about social justice. The data showed that the teachers are committed to building positive relationships with students and challenging them to take action against systems of oppression. Not only was this captured in the conversations and classroom visits, but it

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was also confirmed during multiple student gatherings. Each participant was also able to trace some of the more significant moments in their lives that led them to various degrees of critical consciousness, however, few explicit connections were made to claiming themselves as social justice activists. To that end, the implications of this study fall along multiple lines. I will first discuss five practice-focused implications:

- How districts and school leaders assign teachers in their schools

- The need to rethink how teachers are perceived and evaluated in their school contexts

- How we can (re)imagine curriculum

- How professional development of in-service teachers is approached

- Overall goals and intentions of teacher preparation programs

I will then discuss three implications for future research:

- Making connections between personal and professional existence

- Making critical consciousness actionable

- How can sociopolitical development impact educational systems and policies

Implications for Practice

Breaking the Silos of Teachers

As much conversation now centers on equity in schools, there needs to be more conversation that focuses on how to best design schools as sites of collaboration between teachers. The four teachers in this study, particularly Carter and William, are viewed by

their students as two of only a handful of educators who not only build positive relationships with their students, but also take the initiative to create learning environments in their classrooms that sustain and value the voices and ways of knowing of their students. District leaders, equity committees, and climate teams who wish to transform their schools into more equitable and safe environments for their students and their families could begin by tapping into the resources already in their buildings, such as the four teachers in this study. With over 80 years of effective teaching experience, not one of the participants in this study has ever mentored a novice or student teacher at CMS. These four teachers, other than when they share a classroom or planning space, each act as individual change agents who exist, for the most part, within silos.

Professional Development of In-Service Teachers

To that end, educators who want to take more of an activist approach to teaching can begin to imagine how their inside and outside of school actions do not always intersect, and if this is the case, examine and reflect on why that is. Educators who are now becoming more aware of the social landscape that impacts our students' lives should begin to question not only the systems and policies in place at their school site but also examine and question their own roles in perpetuating any systems that create inequitable outcomes for our students. In fact, schools can become sites where systematic intentional reflection is promoted and supported on a regular basis, rather than relying on random acts of individual reflection and examination. In essence, teacher training in critical pedagogies, such as culturally sustaining pedagogy, can be one of a few measures taken by a district to assist in building capacity in staff members as it relates to understanding the importance of building authentic relationships with the student body and their families.

We can also begin to (re)imagine how we view educator roles in our schools beyond the traditional naming of teachers as "math teacher" or "social studies teacher". Rather, we can begin to see our educators for the full persons they are throughout the school day. In this way, we value each aspect of their teacher-identities in ways that center their overall impact on the school culture and climate, rather than dismissing these additional roles as something "extra". In doing so, we can also create an environment where extracurricular activities such as the Young Republic and the GSA are no longer viewed outside of the traditional school curriculum but as integral aspects of the learning goals of the overall school experience.

Perception and Evaluation of Teachers in School

One of the most important results of this study is a clearer picture of what it means to be a teacher and to enact *good* teaching. As an educator, I have been evaluated through various measures from checkoff lists, to the Danielson method, to peer narratives and student inventory reports. I have mixed emotions and critiques about each method of teacher evaluation. In the case of the educators that invited me into their lives at Central Middle School, as well as countless public educators throughout the United States, there is little to be desired in the way they are evaluated. If this study tells us anything, it is that most of what teachers do on a daily basis is *not* captured in teacher evaluation tools. As standards of teaching effectiveness have shifted towards a more "data collection" approach as it is with the Danielson tool - that is also utilized for edTPA purposes - evaluations are strictly focused on the small moments of "evidence collected during 2-3 40-minute observations. Of course, pre and post conferences with the evaluee may add some qualitative and anecdotal evidence to the overall score of the evaluations, many

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school districts weigh domains 2 and 3 which places a higher emphasis on what takes place in the classroom only during the observations. Although this may seem equitable to an untrained or inexperienced person, a teacher such as Carter or Jacqueline does so much more than what could ever be captured in or calculated within the four domains of the Danielson evaluation tool.

What is needed is a policy shift towards a more qualitative and holistic approach to teacher evaluations that not only considers what takes place in the classroom but all aspects of a teacher's existence in a school environment. As we saw in this study, each participant engages in various roles throughout the school year that add value to the overall school climate, as well as individual student's lives. Carter's involvement with both basketball teams is a key component to the overall climate in the school. William advises students in the Gender and Sexuality Alliance as well as the Young Republic. Imagine what the school climate would look and sound like without these two extracurricular activities. Ruth's role as an advocate for her colleagues is critical in how the school functions on a daily basis, and Jacqueline's role in the Girls in Action club sets an example of how students can take action on local and global issues. Although these activities do not explicitly speak to teacher pedagogy, these endeavors have a positive exponential impact on what takes place within the school on a daily basis. Rather than being a small anecdotal moment in a teacher's overall evaluation, these positive relationship building activities should have a much larger consideration in how administrators determine whether a teacher embodies *goodness* or not.

(Re)Imagining Curriculum

When we reimagine the roles of the teachers and staff in our buildings, the implementation of a more transformational curriculum across all disciplines and content areas will be much more authentic beyond a contributory or additive approach to curriculum reform (Banks, 1994). This study showed the potential of curriculum when teachers feel confident in what they teach. Yes, these are veteran teachers, but the terrain they and their students are encountering is one that the traditional curriculum has never sought to go. If we are to truly engage students in critical literacy and develop their critical consciousness, then we must challenge what we have always done in the past. We must question and uncover the null and hidden curriculum, and ask some of the following questions when examining and evaluating curriculum:

- Whose perspective does the information we use represent?

- Who writes the texts? What is the relationship of our understanding of truth and who holds the power?

- What other perspectives of the same event might exist? How would you uncover other perspectives?

- What are the assumptions about the value and importance of health issues?

- What the assumptions about the value and importance of the experiences of different group? How might you help students uncover that?

By engaging teachers and administrators with questions like these as they evaluate the curricula in place, schools can be reimagined as a site of shared power between teachers

and students, as well as seeking to center the lived experiences of the students in the building. This is what the four teachers in this study have strived to do. I think back to the time spent with William over the summer assisting him with revising the objectives for the 8th grade social studies curriculum. Only months after the incident that led to William's questioning of his classroom practices, he knew the only way to truly make change at CMS was to double-down on what he knew was the right thing to do and create objectives that would open up possibilities for his students in the classroom. This is the work that can be done and needs to be done.

Goals of Teacher Preparation Programs

Through the data collected in this study and my own perceptions, pre- and in-service teacher education programs have the potential to be more than what they are now. Rather than only focusing on the standard approaches to teacher preparation with a standards-based focus only on mastering the edTPA teacher assessment, a more critical approach is needed. By including a focus on shared practice through various forms of mentoring and reflective practices, teacher prep programs can be transformed into sites that examine one's sociopolitical development as a tool that can lead to more equitable and liberatory teacher practices.

As teacher preparation programs hopefully begin to include more critical education classes beyond the standard inclusive education and multicultural education courses, a more explicit focus on critical literacy training is needed. By expecting our teacher preparation candidates to examine how power and privilege plays out in our schools and curriculum, movie teachers can be better prepared for some of the necessary

and inevitable conversations that will take place in their classrooms around issues of racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and other issues of social injustice. Specifically, one way teacher preparation programs can engage with a Critical Civic Inquiry (Zion, Allen, & Jean, 2015) with their novice teachers, as a more meaningful way to mentor teachers in their first year in the classroom. By supporting pre-service and novice teachers in implementing critical pedagogy and reflecting on their own sociopolitical development, these candidates can begin to understand the importance of and value student voice in their classrooms. Of all the points made in this conclusion, this may be the most important and the most realistic approach to classroom transformation.

Implications for Research

Connecting the Personal and Professional

Throughout this study, each of the participants showcased an individual purpose or mission that they each enacted with the students they came into contact with throughout the year. The question remains, does that have anything to do with a larger purpose or vision that speaks to a change in systems? This is a possible gap in sociopolitical development, in that maybe one level of taking action is changing our own self and behavior, that which we can control. At another level, what needs to be examined is how these aspects of sociopolitical development could impact a changing of systems. Quite possibly, we may ask is one more important or more *advanced* than another? Does true liberation need both the change in individuals, as well as those individuals actively trying to make change at the system level? If so,

what do those actions look like? The following two implications connect directly to some of the questions I have posed here.

Making Critical Consciousness Actionable

Building from what Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) call "thinking ourselves to liberation"? what we need is to explicitly address how teachers need to not only create spaces for the development of a critical consciousness but need to move towards sociopolitical development by explicitly developing the skills in themselves and in their students, to take action. Further, they need to make taking action part of the curricular work beyond the settling for presentations of what a good curriculum looks like. Even in classrooms like the four in this study, sociopolitical development remained within the school walls whether during formal class settings or extracurricular activities. The question becomes, how do we make that *good* work actionable to the greater social community? How do we take the content-knowledge and skills built to make a larger positive impact for liberation?

Impacting Educational Systems and Policies

In terms of implications for further study, further exploration into the connection between teachers' sociopolitical development and how that informs their teacher practices across a particular region of schools can lead to a deeper understanding of how and why teachers choose to view their classrooms as sites of social action or as apolitical venues where teachers merely impart prescribed information onto their students. Sociopolitical development is a long-term process that can be unique to each participant. However, as we see in this study, there were a few connections across each of the participants. Further

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exploration into these connections across the region may lead to a deeper understanding of how certain teachers develop critical consciousness. Further and more specific exploration can also be conducted to examine any connections across grade levels or content areas.

As stated in the implications for practice section, further studies can also interrogate how   adopting a more qualitative and holistic approach to teacher evaluations that considers all aspects of a teacher's existence within a school environment can change perceptions of what it truly means to be an educator in the 21st century. As we saw in this study and see across the United States, educators take on many roles throughout a day and throughout the school. In these varied roles, school culture and climate can be transformed into a more healing-centered environment, but this type of work takes time and energy from teachers. If we do not value this work as a major part of a teachers' evaluations, then what message are we sending not only to teachers, but to the students, families, and community, as well. By researching the impact of the educator's role in extracurricular activities and equity-focused teams, we can begin to (re)imagine what is valued in the educators in our communities.

Conclusion

Through the act of engaging with others in a qualitative inquiry within a mural methodology, this study sought to make the world more visible in a particular context by presenting the histories and experiences of 4 teacher practitioners in a specific context. The life stories of these educators and the uncovering of the journeys of sociopolitical development describes how others can uncover and resist systems of oppression in their

own school and personal contexts. With this study there is a transformative possibility for teachers around the country and beyond. As with any research inquiry conducted through a critical lens, my hope remains to empower individuals (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011).

This study also hopes to show the importance of engaging in research that involves people as partners in research (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011). Therefore, one of the desired outcomes for this study was to describe the manner in which the participants and I act in collaboration to see more critically, think at a more critical level, and to critique traditional ways of conducting research (Darder, 2019). In this manner, we attempted to engage in critical literacy practices as they examine and analyze classroom practices. This proposed partnership can be used as a model for future research within the south Jersey regional context that explores additional ways we can partner in the struggle to resist and overcome systems of oppression and inequity.

As a white male researcher telling the individual and collective stories of four educators, one of whom is a Black male and two of whom identify themselves as women, I tried to remind myself of this each day I spent visiting CMS and analyzing data. My worldview is one that was born with patriarchal roots and through a white supremacist lens. Therefore, without continual reflection of who I am and how I came to be, the telling of these stories would only perpetuate and lift up the status quo without attempting to "dismantle oppressive theories and practices, in an effort to transform existing conditions" (Darder, 2019, p. 11). By tracing not only the sociopolitical development of the four members of this study, but also reflecting on my own sociopolitical development, I am reminded through the work of scholars such as Paulo Freire, bell

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hooks, Rodrick Watts, and Shelley Zion that this work requires and demands an on-going examination of my own positionality as a interact with the world. By attempting to enter into conversations with scholars such as these, my hope for this mural is to add to the ever-evolving knowledge of our educational landscape and to transform teacher practice in a more culturally sustaining manner. By doing so, my hope is that students from all backgrounds and cultures will be valued and will experience a school environment that values their identities, ways of knowing, and ways of interacting with this world.

As this study came to a close, I could not stop thinking back to the many meetings I was lucky enough to spend with Dr. Ian Marshall during my years in graduate school. I had never met anyone like Dr. Marshall before entering that program, and I was certain I never would again. The light he ignited in me - and I am sure in many others – is one that will never burn out nor dim. In working with my advisor, Dr. Shelley Zion, and each of the four participants in this study, I was reminded of the moments I shared with Dr. Marshall and how two concepts always remained at the foreground of our conversations: *hope* and *possibility*. I hope through the creation of this mural, educators, like the ones in this study, may feel that same flame of possibility (re)ignited within themselves to begin their own journey of a deeper commitment towards critical consciousness, sociopolitical development, and liberation for all.

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Appendix

Questions and Prompts

Kitchen Table Conversations will be semi-structured, with each talk exploring themes and focusing on some of the questions that follow. Follow-up and probing questions might vary from talk to talk based upon the responses and revealed in each talk.

(*Adapted from: Catone, K. 2014. *The Pedagogy of Teacher Activism: Four Portraits of Becoming and Being Teacher Activists*.)

Kitchen Table Talk # 1: Life histories regarding teaching and sociopolitical development

Our first talk will focus on personal histories. We will engage with some of the following questions about our experiences growing up, our educational experiences, and how we connect society and politics to education.

Growing up

- First, can you talk to me a bit about your experiences growing up?

- Where did you grow up?

- What was it like there?

- How would you describe your hometown/neighborhood/block?

Family

- Tell me about what your family was like growing up.

- What did your parents do? Siblings?

- Was your family involved in any way with the community? How?

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- Were they politically involved?

Educational experiences

- How would you describe your own schooling as a child?

- Who was your best teacher from elementary through high school?

- What made her/him the best?

- Do you remember any of your teachers ever being explicitly political? How?

- What did they do?

- What did you think about it?

Sociopolitical Development

- There are lots of ways of taking a stand and/or getting involved in what you care about socially and politically. In what ways have you done this over the course of your life?

- What brought you to that moment(s)?

- What is most memorable from that moment?

- How would you describe your own development of a political consciousness?

- What/who were some influences?

- What else has been important to your sociopolitical development?

Teaching

- Why did you become a teacher?

- How would you describe your teaching experience?

- Your teaching practices?

Kitchen Table Talk #2: Reflections upon what it means to be a teacher and reflecting on their sociopolitical development.

Teaching

- How you would you define good teaching?

- What does good teaching accomplish?

- When are you happiest with your teaching? When are you most dissatisfied?

- What is it like teaching/working in your current school?

Sociopolitical Development

- How do you define social justice?

- Name someone you consider to be a social justice activist? What makes her/him a social justice activist?

- How would you describe the ways in which you might consider yourself a social justice activist?

- Do you see activism and teaching as related? If so, how? If not, why? Has it always been this way or has this relationship developed in some way over time? Please explain.

- Have you ever experienced an epiphany as a teacher, a moment of clarity, realization, and/or growth? Multiple epiphanies? How did these moments affect your teaching practice and/or sociopolitical development?

- What, if any, tensions exist between your teacher life and your personal life?

- What do you like about teaching? What is frustrating?

- Do your family members and/or close friends know much about your teaching?

Kitchen Table Talk #3

Questions listed here will form the basis of the remaining Kitchen Table Conversations but each individual talk may vary by participant in focus and depth. Questions here will build off of themes identified and explored in analysis of the first two Kitchen Table Conversations.

Political purpose

- Reflecting back on your life, what do you think has led you to these beliefs? (For context, read back quotes from previous life history interview.)
- How do these beliefs actually impact what you do in the classroom and as an activist?
- Have you ever felt conflicted about your politically driven purpose as it relates to your teaching or activism? Relationships with students
- Have there been any new developments in your role at school or your role in the activist groups you work with? What sparked any of these changes?
- Has the current climate impacted your teaching and your sociopolitical development?

Teaching as relationship building

- Can you describe your relationships with your students?
- How do these relationships form?
- Do you think they are similar or different from your colleagues? How so?
- What do you believe is the students' role when it comes to activism and social justice? How does this view of students affect the way you teach or do activism?

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Teaching as social action

- How would you describe your own teaching pedagogy?

- If you see teaching as activist work, how does this shape your teaching?

- How do you address the issue of power in your classroom? (i.e., your power vs. your students' power vs. other forms of power)

- What makes teaching hard for you?

Focus Group Protocols

Focus Group #1 - Guiding Questions

- If anything were going to prevent you from teaching the way you want to and your sociopolitical development, what do you think it would be?

- What challenges do you face in doing your work?

- What critiques do you hear about the work that you do?

- How do you respond to challenges and critiques?

- What do teachers need to continue doing "good" work?

- How often do you work with others around your teaching and sociopolitical development?

- What kinds of things do you do to work with them?

- On a spectrum of isolation to full camaraderie, where do you fall with respect to your own school community?

- How does this impact your teaching and sociopolitical development at a school level?

- If teachers are in search of support and camaraderie around their social justice

teaching, where should they look?

- How would they get involved?

- Do you really think the work you do in the classroom and with others makes a difference? How?

- What obstacles and barriers do you face in doing work with others?

Focus Group Protocol for Grade 8 Students (60 minutes)

- Please tell us a story about something that was awesome in your History class this year.

- What is your favorite aspect of your History class?

- Do you feel challenged in your classes?

- Do you feel engaged in your classes?

- Do you believe your teacher has high-expectations for you? Why or why not?

- When do you feel respected in your classes?

- When do you feel disrespected in your classes?

- Are multiple ethnic groups, histories, and cultures represented in the texts read during class and in class discussions? If so, how often and do you think this is effectively done in class?

- Describe some of the speaking or presenting activities you do in your classes.

- Do teachers at your school work together? How do you know?

- When and in what ways do your teachers communicate with your parents?

- How is the community involved in your school?

- Critical Literacy, as a theoretical framework, allows students to begin their educational experiences with their own identity and develop a lens to critically

analyze the world around them. It challenges educators to facilitate rigorous learning opportunities for their students, and with them, the tools to ask questions about the contextual meaning of texts and how they speak to their immediate surroundings, and as it relates to the world around them.

● Do you believe this type of practice takes place in your classes? Why or why not?