Examining Black Educators' Equity Leadership and Implications for Critical Professional Development Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ASIA S. IVEY

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Approved:

Jacob Hibel, Chair

Orly Clerge

Faheemah N. Mustafaa

Committee in Charge

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted and transformed public education and revealed deeply embedded inequities within educational systems. The unpredictable shift to virtual learning exposed these disparities, illuminating the need for innovative, student-centered educational approaches. This dissertation examines how Black educators who adhere to progressive values navigate the relationship between race, pedagogy, and democratic education to develop and maintain their praxis. Employing a qualitative methodology, this study involved preliminary data collection through three *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* in 2020-2021, which analytically functioned as focus groups and shaped the developed research questions and research design. In-depth semi-structured interviews with Black progressive educators were conducted via Zoom and analyzed using a grounded thematic approach. The *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* data included a thematic content analysis of guiding session materials and the participant dialogue in the Zoom chat. This data was further supplemented by reflection surveys completed via Qualtrics. The methodological framework enabled a comprehensive exploration of how Black educators' motivations for progressive practices are deeply embedded in their racialized K-12 experiences while acknowledging that they engage in a standard set of progressive values – remaining student-centered, developing familial relationships, and prioritizing community engagement – which are adoptable by any educator committed to equity. Moreover, this work identifies gaps in progressive educators' professional development (PD) and illuminates their leadership capacity to employ their expertise to mitigate gaps in their growth. This highlights the importance of school districts and administrations considering internal candidates with the expertise to mentor and develop educators dedicated to progressive practices. Furthermore, this study indicates that progressive educators need additional opportunities for critical professional development and desire the freedom to select PD programs to enhance their praxis. As the public education system transitions back to in-person learning and prepares for future disruptions, this work serves as a timely and substantive insight, offering practical recommendations and toolkits for developing leadership capacities and fostering collective action despite unprecedented obstacles.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic wrought profound transformations upon the institution of public education, unearthing deep-seating inequities and challenges within educational systems. The widespread shift to virtual learning revealed pre-existing disparities, magnifying the urgent need for innovative, equity-focused approaches. Central to navigating this unprecedented crisis were progressive educators, particularly Black progressive educators, who occupied a crucial role in safeguarding equity amidst adversity. The pandemic's impact on public education presents a pivotal area of research, offering valuable insights that can inform future responses to national crises necessitating significant educational adaptations. By spotlighting the crucial role and pedagogical strategies of progressive Black educators, who understand that education goes beyond academic training and involves the democratic cultivation of future generations, this dissertation delves into how their racial identity shapes and fortifies their pedagogical approaches, providing critical insights into the preservation of progressive praxis during unprecedented challenges.

The evolution of public education in the United States embodies a dynamic story of resilience, resistance, and transformation. Following the Civil War, newly emancipated peoples of African descent seized control over their educational destinies by founding their own schools. In recognizing education as a liberatory practice, their schools focused on leadership development, political awareness, and cultural preservation. Despite symbolic gains like the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, which aimed to desegregate schools, resistance to the national mandate underscored persistent inequities across educational systems. Throughout this historical narrative, Black educators emerge as vital figures, fostering communities of learning and empower-

ment through their commitment to nurturing relationships, setting high standards, and promoting critical engagement. Despite the durability of structural barriers, Black educators remain on the frontlines of equity advocacy. By examining the experiences and pedagogical practices of Black educators operating within a progressive praxis during the COVID-19 pandemic, this work aims to illuminate the relationship between race, pedagogy, and democratic education – the moral and ethical discourse surrounding marginalized groups (Giroux and McLaren, 1986).

Examining the racialization of organizations reveals how racial ideologies permeate institutional practices, shaping outcomes for marginalized groups. Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations highlights meso-level organizations like schools as critical sites for understanding the racializing process, centralizing the role of organizations in transforming and reproducing inequality. In arguing for a more nuanced understanding of how organizations mediate racial meanings and inequitably distribute resources, this dissertation delves into the unique challenges faced by progressive Black educators in navigating racialized organizational structures as students within the public education system and contemporarily as educators.

Drawing on scholarship by Giroux and McLaren (1986) and Collins (2009), this dissertation illuminates education's essential but often overlooked responsibility in cultivating future generations committed to democratic principles. The conceptual framework posits educators as critical intellectuals (Giroux and McLaren, 1986) and facilitators of democratic discourse (Collins, 2009), emphasizing the transformative potential of a progressive praxis. Central to this work is the critique of traditional schooling policies and practices that undermine democratic values (Apple and Beane, 1995; Apple, 1988), highlighting the need for a curriculum that authentically showcases diverse cultures and challenges dominant epistemologies (Chang, Liang, and Tsai, 2020; Colombo, Rebughini, et al., 2022). This dissertation explores the resistance faced by progressive educators advocating for democratic learning environments and the complexities of implementing alternative pedagogies in mainstream educational systems.

Furthermore, through a critical lens informed by scholars like Freire (1996) and Blakeney (2005), this dissertation seeks to examine teacher preparation and ongoing professional development to empower educators to foster equity and social justice across diverse educational contexts. It argues for the need to value educators' autonomy and expertise as they navigate the organizational complexities of a progressive praxis and challenge prevailing educational paradigms that perpetuate

inequities.

Given the nation's recent return to in-person schooling, this work serves as a timely contribution to the literature concerning the impact of COVID-19 and virtual learning on educators' teaching experiences, curriculum development, and professional growth. Although the changes catalyzed by the pandemic were unforeseen, much can be learned from the mistakes and successes in preparation for any significant shifts in public schooling in the future. Three research questions guide this dissertation: 1). How do race and racism in public schools shape Black educators' progressive identities? 2). What resources did progressive educators use to maintain their praxis during the COVID-19 pandemic? 3). How did progressive educators utilize informal resources to mitigate gaps in their progressive education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The implications of this work offer tangible insights for understanding the leadership potential of progressive Black educators and the need for school districts and administrations to look inward when seeking qualified educators with the expertise to guide and train other educators seeking progressive approaches. Additionally, this work suggests that progressive educators require access to more critical professional development (PD) opportunities and desire the autonomy to choose PDs they believe will benefit their praxis. The societal impact of more Black educators in leadership, equipped with the tools necessary to maintain, deepen, and share their progressive praxis, can potentially cultivate a more equitable educational landscape for all students.

The research design employed a robust qualitative methodology to investigate three empirical questions. Preliminary data gathering involved organizing three *Anti-Racist Happy Hours*, treated analytically as focus groups, conducted via Zoom. These sessions were pivotal in shaping the research questions and design. Subsequently, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with progressive Black educators via Zoom, and the transcripts were coded and analyzed using a grounded and thematic approach in MAXQDA. The *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* data encompassed a thematic content analysis of the session materials and participant dialogue in the Zoom chat, as well as reflective feedback surveys completed by session attendees in Qualtrics.

This chapter sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration across seven subsequent chapters. Chapter two delves into the social-historical underpinnings of public education development, illuminating the historical significance of Black educators and their pivotal role amid contemporary educational crises. Chapter three offers an expansive review of pertinent literature and conceptual

frameworks that inform this study. Chapter four details the research questions, methodological design, and analytical procedures. Chapter five presents the findings of research question one, elucidating how race and racism within public schools shape Black educators' racial and progressive identity. Chapter six delves into the outcomes related to research question two, examining the resources utilized by progressive educators to sustain their praxis. Chapter 7 discusses the findings of research question three, identifying the informal resources progressive educators leveraged to address gaps in their critical education. Finally, chapter eight concludes this dissertation by presenting implications derived from the study's findings and delineating avenues for future research.

In conclusion, this dissertation will navigate the multifaceted impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public education, revealing durable inequities and underscoring the significant role of progressive Black educators in preserving equity amidst adversity. This study offers valuable insights into preserving progressive praxis during unprecedented challenges by illuminating how racial identity shapes and fortifies pedagogical approaches. The historical narrative underscores Black educators' enduring resilience on the frontlines of a national crisis, emphasizing their contributions to fostering learning communities and promoting critical engagement. Moreover, examining racialized organizational dynamics within educational institutions provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by progressive Black educators. Moving forward, this work calls attention to the transformative potential of progressive praxis in advancing equity and democratic education, advocating for enhanced professional development opportunities and autonomy for educators. As we navigate the return to in-person schooling and prepare for future educational adaptations, this dissertation's findings serve as a timely and substantive contribution, offering tangible pathways to cultivate a more equitable educational landscape for all students.

Chapter 2

Social-Historical Context

2.1 The Role of Freed People in Developing Public Education

Formerly enslaved peoples were instrumental in developing the public education system in the United States, especially in Southern states. According to W.E.B. Du Bois, "public education for all at public expense was. . . a Negro idea" (Anderson, 1988, p. 5). Though previously prohibited from learning to read or write, in the years following the Civil War, freedpeople began establishing schools across the South to educate other emancipated peoples. They reclaimed ownership of their educational experiences by establishing their own institutions, founded and managed solely by formerly enslaved peoples. Their desire to evolve the academic landscape for freed people was rooted in their understanding of education as a tool for obtaining liberation and freedom. The original private freedmen schools in the South focused on leadership training, political consciousness, and cultural preservation, elements not prioritized at free schools in the North. Northern missionaries provided structural and curricular assistance; however, freedmen largely resisted external influences to remain true to their educational mission and vision. Mass public education was born out of the resilient desires of formerly enslaved folks to ascend beyond "second-class citizenship" and from the social, political, and economic oppression that supported the Southern capitalist regime (Anderson, 1988, p. 1). The significant contributions from freed women and men and the dominant class's continued desire to limit educational autonomy for people of African descent compose a contemporary public education system still struggling to provide an equitable education for all.

Since its inception, public education in America has operated at the intersection of con-

ceptions of citizenry and democratic values. As public education became increasingly accessible, the link between educational credentials and full American citizenship became more tightly coupled. While facing backlash from the Southern Planter class, who resented government oversight, freed folks persisted in their self-teaching and self-sustaining activities by developing "common" schools, which were public institutions focused on the basic elementary fundamentals of reading, writing, mathematics, history, and geography (Anderson, 1988; Du Bois, 1935). The self-reliance and resiliency of freed women and men – values cultivated while formerly enslaved – motivated their resistance to Northern influences who sought to civilize them in their ways of knowing and being. The most suitable and beneficial curriculum for all students, particularly those of African descent, has always been up for significant debate and continues to perplex educational scholars today. However, when common schools adopted the *New England Classical Liberal Curriculum*, it was not in an attempt to imitate white schools in the North but rather to provide access to the most highly regarded philosophical foundations to date and to provide a contrast for understanding their personal experiences better. Although studying the New England curriculum in common schools was not necessarily a critical process, teachers did not utilize it to maintain the mainstream ideology of Black inferiority (Anderson, 1988).

Since the end of slavery, cultivating African American leadership has been a notable priority for freedpeople (Du Bois et al., 1903). To achieve this required "...men and women of knowledge and culture and technical skill who understand modern civilization, and have... training and aptitude to impart...(Du Bois et al., 1903, p. 12). However, acquiring this knowledge and skill necessitated a higher education system willing to serve African Americans unbiasedly. As of 1903, institutions such as Princeton University refused to consider people of African descent for enrollment. Those colleges and universities that did allow African American students to enroll, such as Harvard, were wrought with racial intimidation and barriers to professional degree credentialing (Du Bois, 1935). To combat these challenges, formerly enslaved people began establishing historically Black Colleges and universities (HBCUs) with the financial assistance of Northern philanthropists. Institutions such as Morehouse College (1867), Howard University (1867), and Spelman College (1881), all of which are still in operation today, helped to further solidify education as a cornerstone of the Black community and its progress. Responsible for the development of political leaders, scholars, professionals, and community activists, HBCUs ensured that Black folks were adequately prepared

to face the onslaught of social, political, and economic changes that were on the horizon.

2.1.1 Integrating Public Education

By the early 1900s, it was evident that people of African descent were adamant about receiving an education, demonstrated in the development of common schools and HBCUs across the South (Du Bois et al., 1903). Racial integration in schools was heavily debated, especially as education became a mainstream requirement for upward social mobility. Although African Americans were determined to remain self-reliant and depend on their own institutions, they were also abreast of the resource disparity between white and Black institutions, which impacted their social legitimacy and cemented their position as racialized organizations (Ray, 2019). Because HBCUs and common schools were required to make do with what they had, they were regarded as inferior to white institutions, even by other African Americans. How Black institutions were viewed influenced perspectives concerning racial integration in schools and fueled much of the Black community's advocacy for school integration. The idea was that if African American students could attend the same organizations as their white peers, they would consequently receive a more quality education because they would have additional resources, funding, and better-qualified educators, and thus, the same academic achievement opportunities as their white peers. However, even though Du Bois's liberal arts, comprehensive approach aligns with contemporary perspectives regarding liberatory education, not all Black thought leaders of the time agreed with his theoretical frame (Du Bois et al., 1903); Du Bois, 1935.

Generations of enslavement, followed by Reconstruction, Black Codes, and Jim Crow, motivated the rise of educational scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois and one of his most notable critics, Booker T. Washington. Though they both agreed that education is a liberatory practice, they significantly differed in their "...method, audience, tone, and character..." (Dunn, 1993, p. 26). Where Du Bois advocated for a rigorous and comprehensive liberal arts education that prioritized critical consciousness and access to higher education for African Americans, Washington endorsed a focus on vocational training and economic freedom. They both envisioned a world where African Americans could exist free of segregation and discrimination; however, Du Bois argued that education would empower freed people to challenge their oppression, whereas Washington promoted more of an accommodationist perspective. Consequently, Washington believed that African Ameri-

cans needed to prove themselves through hard work and economic advancement before they should begin demanding equality. Du Bois and Washington were unapologetically ethnocentric in their campaigns. Also, they did not concern themselves with much of what is prioritized in contemporary organizations, such as classroom management and theoretical foundations. Instead, they emphasized that education's ultimate purpose was to cement African Americans' social, political, and economic futures (Dorrien, 2020). However, achieving this goal would be a more daunting task with integrated schools because, according to Du Bois, as long as white people hold racist beliefs, Black students will need their own educational institutions to succeed (1935).

Du Bois predicted that students of African descent would not receive an education if all schools were forced to integrate. This was evident by the few Black students who attended public schools and universities in the North and how they were treated. By the mid-1930s, over half of the four million African American children in the nation were attending school, and 90% were being taught by Black educators in segregated schools. Du Bois asserted that separate schools would continue to be necessary until the racial prejudice reproduced by the color line ceased (1935). In other words, until students of African descent are also afforded educators sympathetic to their needs and background, adequate facilities for learning, and opportunities for extracurricular activities, public education cannot lend itself to the reproduction of democracy (Du Bois, 1935). Du Bois urged members of the Black community to recognize that subjecting Black youth to the toxic stress of racism, coupled with historical miseducation, is not worth the altruistic veil of integration, which he classified as a "fatal mistake" (1935, p. 330). Over eighty years later, race and education scholars continue to wrestle with the impact of school integration being politically challenged without targeting or disrupting the hegemonic beliefs of Black inferiority.

2.1.2 The Impact of *Brown v. Board of Education*

Brown v. Board of Education (1954) was a pivotal Supreme Court case that catalyzed civil rights legislation and significantly impacted the future of public education (Driver, 2018). The landmark ruling overturned the established tenet of "separate but equal" – a doctrine established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) to justify racial segregation – thereby declaring the legal segregation of public schools unconstitutional (Cates, 2012). The social climate of the 1950s situated public education at the tense crossroads of local governance and equitable access. Before this, equity was

not a prioritized political matter, and the courts refrained from intervening in local issues, such as schooling (Kozol, 2012). However, the ending of World War II and the international condemnation of Nazism triggered world powers to highlight the United States' hypocritical treatment of African-Americans via the enforcement of Jim Crow, thus endangering the nation's global standing. With the country's morality at risk and the economy's inability to maintain the strain caused by racial stratification, the Supreme Court took on the desegregation of public schools. Although it is evident that the ruling achieved the goal of increasing the number of Black and white students who attend school together, almost seventy years later, America's public schools remain racially isolated and unequal in their distribution of personnel, funding, and fundamental resources (Ray, 2019).

Desegregation was a lengthy, arduous process requiring multiple rounds of legislation. Many school districts in the South challenged the Supreme Court ruling. Given the court's limited ability to effectively oversee local desegregation efforts, southern districts lacked the incentive to adhere to the new law. A year following the original ruling, the Supreme Court followed up with *Brown II*, which mandated that desegregation efforts be achieved at "all deliberate speed." *Brown II* was viewed as just as unenforceable as its 1954 predecessor and a deliberate attempt to undermine the law's intention to immediately eradicate racial segregation in public schools nationwide (Driver, 2018; Tushnet, 1994). *Brown II* propelled desegregation efforts, but many districts continued their practices until forced busing programs became widespread in the early 1970s. Catalyzed by a court case in Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, cross-neighborhood busing became a new controversial tool to balance the racial demographics of school districts locally. Although busing programs became widely popular, they also served as the new platform for antagonistic parents to rebirth local control campaigns in public schooling (Driver, 2018; Patterson and Freehling, 2001).

Though effective in achieving its goal, forced busing was not well received by white parents who disagreed that their children should be inconvenienced in the name of civil rights (Driver, 2018). Previous displays of white rage (Anderson, 1988) in response to forced desegregation were met with political condemnation, and National Guard intervention, and consequently, the aftermath of *Brown v. Board of Education* introduced a more covert, colorblind rhetoric as a means to the same discriminatory end. Rather than some parents outright stating that their white children should not have to attend school with Black children, they emphasized their concerns over the quality of education provided by a neighborhood school and whether the change will disrupt their

learning (Driver, 2018). To engender their concerns, white parents began pulling their children from public schools and either homeschooling or enrolling them in private schools (Ray, 2019) or "segregation academies" (Driver, 2018, p. 291). This mass exodus from public schools and into suburban communities is known as *white flight*, and it is a primary driver for the emergence of de facto segregation – or practices that yield the same discriminatory result as official policy – in public education (Ewing, 2018).

The growth and maintenance of de facto segregation can be attributed to how the country funds public education (Kozol, 2012). Due to a financial infrastructure that relies on property taxes to determine per-student spending budgets, by 2011, 7% of public schools had become "apartheid schools" – schools with a white student population of 1% or less. Consequently, affluent communities with higher property values could secure higher student budgets and better tax subsidies than parents and students in poorer neighborhoods (Driver, 2018). As the Supreme Court loosened its reins on desegregation efforts and control returned to the districts, local governance began taking advantage of the relationship between housing and public schooling to lawfully re-segregate school districts. Although school governance boards appeared race-neutral when they started drawing new zoning maps for neighborhood schools, they were inevitably doing so around highly segregated neighborhoods created from white flight (Ray, 2019). The financial infrastructure of the public education system and the de facto practices that maintain its operation have undermined a significant portion of *Brown v. Board's* progress. However, the impact of the ruling on the teaching force has not been undone and has meaningful implications for students' learning experiences today.

Black educators were severely displaced due to the Supreme Court's decision as Black schools and teachers were classified as inferior relative to white schools and teachers. This ideology underscored the rapid closing of Black schools and layoffs of Black educators (Ethridge, 2008; Fultz, 2004; Oakley, Stowell, and Logan, 2009). Before the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Black principals and teachers made up 34% to 50% of the educator workforce across the 17 states with segregated school systems. Today, nationwide, only 7% of teachers and approximately 11% of principals are Black (Spiegelman, 2020). Some educators were able to find new homes in newly integrated schools; however, they faced a culture shock similar to the one their students endured when they were forced to navigate unfamiliar territory. In addition, they were met with explicit racial hostility and resistance from fellow educators, white students, and their parents, who did

not want their children to be taught by a Black teacher (Brown and Hunter, 2009). Rather than struggle with unemployment or face racist abuse in integrated schools, many Black teachers began migrating to other professions. Progression in civil rights opened more opportunities for Black women, thus creating significant gaps in the profession for white teachers to fill, who now constitute 82% of the public education workforce (Spiegelman, 2020).

2.1.3 The Historical Significance of Black Educators

Black educators have a deeply rooted legacy in the teaching profession, yet their voices have long been systematically marginalized (Acosta, 2019). Despite their ostracization, their historical and contemporary impact on education remains notable and worthy of in-depth examination for the following reasons: (1) Black educators have an extensive history of "...plac[ing] themselves on the frontlines – discursively and physically – to denounce the racialized harm..." perpetuated by the organizational structures and policies enforced by the public education system (Royston et al., 2021, p. 70). (2) Many Black educators were once K-12 students in the same system, giving them a sociopolitical consciousness of the relationship between white supremacy, schooling, and power (Madkins and Royston, 2019; Royston et al., 2021), undergirded by their lived experience. (3) There is a need to distinguish Black educators who actively or passively maintain the status quo from those who exercise their moral authority to protect their students, specifically Black students, from harm (Royston et al., 2021), as the latter are crucial assets in developing a more equitable education system. For example, veteran Black educators are often perceived as rigid and resistant to adopting novel strategies; however, it is essential to consider the sociopolitical climate in which they were raised, schooled, and later trained to appreciate what motivates their pedagogical practices fully.

Since slavery, Black teachers have viewed their profession "...as one of collective racial uplift" (Walker, 1996, p. 179; Duncan, 2022). Those who share in this commitment are guided by an ethic of care rooted in the fictive kinships Black educators create with their students and their families. For some educators, this is guided by a parental instinct to care for their students as if they were their children. However, beyond love and care, Black educators possess a critical consciousness of their students' lived experiences (Freire, 1996;Acosta, 2018). According to Michele Foster's work, Black Teachers on Teaching (1997), educators expressed their concerns regarding the

necessity to provide their students with a robust curriculum that they can absorb, retain, and utilize because, from their experience, children who do not value their education can potentially face severe consequences. Black educators' knowledge of social inequities and the deep bonds they build with their students suggests that their approach is fueled by the fear of the realities their students could face if they do not take their education seriously. The way Black educators command their classrooms and provide structure and accountability by setting high expectations is often successful because of establishing these relationships (Acosta, 2018).

Contemporarily, Black educators are often considered to be warm demanders (Fraser and Irvine, 1998). Warm-demander educators provide a structured, disciplined, nonsense-free environment, but their ability to achieve this is rooted in their shared culture, history, and race (Fraser and Irvine, 1998). However, it is essential to note that the warm-demander approach is not universal, as some literature suggests that some Black teachers can be more punitive and hold more negative evaluations of their Black students relative to non-Black teachers because of internalized racism (Jackson, Kazembe, and Morgan, 2021). Nevertheless, many Black educators' adherence to the warm-demander typology can be considered in how they consciously and judiciously (Siddle Walker, 1993) exercise their moral authority (Noblit, 1993). According to Milner (2006), Black educators' authoritative approaches – not to be confused with authoritarianism – are to ensure that students are being pushed to their fullest potential because they know the repercussions of "accepting mediocrity" (Acosta, 2018, p. 987). In exercising their moral authority, Black educators exemplify their care for their student's well-being and position themselves as central figures in their education and overall life success (Acosta, 2018). Black educators have consistently demonstrated a robust sociopolitical commitment to educating Black students (Franklin, 1990; Du Bois, 1935; Anderson, 1988). Their ability to foster caring relationships and cultivate community among their students while maintaining high expectations has significantly improved Black students' feelings of belonging, safety, and academic achievement (Royston et al., 2021). However, it is crucial to note that the presence of a Black educator does not guarantee an equitable learning environment (Whitaker, 2023).

Mainstream sociologists of education explored the consequences of ethnoracial congruence throughout the 1990s and 2000s, finding that Black students, when paired with an educator with a shared cultural background, performed better academically and with fewer incidences of truancy

(Lindsay and Hart, 2017; Redding, 2019). Rasheed et al. (2020) determined that ethnic matching yields higher engagement, motivation, attendance, and enrollment in more rigorous courses (Dee, 2004). These findings suggest that the cultural synchrony (Irvine, 1990) ethnic matching cultivates can be quite beneficial; however, this body of work is limited in its assumption that race or ethnicity is the most salient identity required for social alignment. For example, schools that are composed mainly of Black students and teachers find social class, language, and nationality to be much more significant identifiers to find community than skin color. Additional limitations include (1) the student and teacher may not consider themselves to be members of the same in-group, leading to misunderstandings; (2) racially or ethnically matched educators may still hold biases against their own racial or ethnic group and respond negatively to characteristics or behaviors they consider undesirable, (3) educators may also reinforce normatively accepted, negative stereotypes about their own racial or ethnic group (Whitaker, 2023). Nevertheless, given Black educators' legacy of success in creating such nurturing learning environments, it is vital to understand how they overcome social and structural barriers in their organization and community to ensure their landscapes of community and care are cultivated and maintained through curriculum and pedagogy.

2.2 Equity Resources for Progressive Educators

2020 marked a significant milestone for public education, fundamentally transforming its landscape. On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic, which disproportionately impacted Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities and fueled anti-Asian hate crimes (Romano, 2021; Gover, Harper, and Langton, 2020), forced some schools to transition to distanced, virtual learning. On the other hand, the Black Lives Matter protests, catalyzed by the vigilante murder of Ahmaud Arbery and state-sanctioned police killings of Brianna Taylor and George Floyd, thrust racial injustice into the global spotlight, compelling the education system to respond. All educators who transitioned to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and worldwide civil rights movement faced unprecedented challenges as they scrambled to locate resources to address the racialized health inequities and police brutality their students were witnessing and would inevitably question (Cheng and Conca-Cheng, 2020). However, progressive Black educators who served primarily Black student populations endured more significant struggles as they worked diligently to close the digital divide

exacerbated by COVID-19 and to locate formal opportunities and resources to enhance their anti-racist knowledge base and pedagogical skills (Buttimer, Littenberg-Tobias, and Reich, 2022).

2.2.1 Bridging The Digital Divide

COVID-19 and the transition to virtual distance learning required that schools and districts address a long-existing inequity in technological access and efficacy among students, teachers, and parents (Williams, McIntosh, and Russell III, 2021). It has been well-documented that low-income families have less access to computers and the Internet, dating to well before the onset of COVID-19 (Schulz and Robinson, 2022)). There were reports of students being unable to complete specific online assignments or students seen doing work in Taco Bell or other publicly accessible locations equipped with reliable Wi-Fi (Ebrahimji, 2020). In addition, schools in low-income areas have a much more limited technological infrastructure (Sayer and Braun, 2020). Some schools have smart boards and laptop or iPad carts for each classroom and for students to take home, while other organizations may be fortunate only to have enough devices for students to share solely during school hours (Werfhorst, Kessenich, and Geven, 2020). Although most schools assuaged the first level of inequity by providing all students with the devices and internet access necessary for virtual learning, many did not provide formal, widespread, and ongoing training for students, parents, or teachers to navigate the online platforms required to maintain learning.

Though many schools managed to address inequity in access, few provided the necessary opportunities to learn how to navigate the new platforms they were introducing successfully. To ensure the learning experience remained purposeful, community-based, integrative, and student-centered (Pace, Pettit, and Barker, 2020; Williams, McIntosh, and Russell III, 2021), progressive educators took matters into their own hands. Teachers sacrificed unpaid time collaborating with informal networks and engaging in self-directed learning to train fellow educators, students, and parents to navigate the novel virtual platforms (Trust and Whalen, 2021). Although teacher-parent relationships have always been a vital component of a community-based learning environment, educators who did not already have strong relationships with their students' parents were required to enrich them during the pandemic (Kaden, 2020). According to a survey study conducted by Williams et al. (2021), teachers reportedly spent "...hours troubleshooting technical issues... counseling stressed... parents, and answering emails" (p. 12). This assistance was often provided case-by-

case between teachers and parents instead of through a mandated workshop (Williams, McIntosh, and Russell III, 2021). Consequently, dedicating these additional hours meant educators expanded their technological knowledge base and skill set while learning how to facilitate lessons uniquely (Rhim and Han, 2020). However, educators struggled to locate formal online resources or professional learning opportunities to learn how to maintain community-based learning environments while integrating equity-focused and anti-racist pedagogy into their digital praxis.

2.2.2 Critical Professional Development

Critical professional development (PD), as opposed to the traditional top-down approach to PD, involves educators engaging as politically conscious individuals committed to teaching and transforming society (Kohli et al., 2015). During the pandemic educators desired online professional learning opportunities to help them further their equity expertise in response to the sociopolitical climate, however the public education system lacked the necessary leadership and infrastructure. For example, in transitioning to virtual learning, educators required additional support to maintain a sense of belonging among their students through a virtual platform. The most significant transformations in pedagogy occurred in how educators communicated and provided opportunities for community building (Bertacco, 2020) Godsey, 2020; Kaden, 2020; Lynch, 2020; Rhim and Han, 2020; Sayer and Braun, 2020; Whittle et al., 2020). Lynch found that it was just as important to be as attuned to their students' emotional needs during the pandemic as their educational (2020) and to do so educators utilized resources such as message boards for student interaction, breakout rooms for one-on-one engagement, and games to build camaraderie (Whittle et al., 2020; Bertacco, 2020; Godsey, 2020; Lynch, 2020). However, the effectiveness of these methods was shared primarily through word of mouth and informal networks among educators rather than through mainstream and ongoing professional development sanctioned by the school or district (Williams, McIntosh, and Russell III, 2021). Educators discovered that the student-centered practices learned in the virtual learning environment are essential and should be documented and shared with future educators who may need to transition similarly during a crisis (Williams, McIntosh, and Russell III, 2021).

The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement amid a racialized public health crisis motivated nationwide conversations regarding structural racism in our institutions (Buttimer, Littenberg-Tobias, and Reich, 2022). Progressive educators, especially those committed to main-

taining their democratic praxis, sought online resources to deepen their expertise on histories of oppression and how it is reproduced in the K-12 system (Buttimer, Littenberg-Tobias, and Reich, 2022). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-racist and equity-focused professional development was limited and primarily facilitated in person, prompting questions regarding whether online training could be as practical (Parkhouse, Lu, and Massaro, 2019). Asynchronous, massive open online courses (MOOCs) became quite popular during the pandemic (Seaton et al., 2014), but according to Buttimer et al. (2022), they posed some significant challenges. One potential issue with asynchronous MOOCs is the variability in the existing expertise of the program participants. For instance, educators with a robust understanding of racism and structural inequity in schooling are going to independently navigate the curriculum more effectively compared to an educator who may be in the beginning stages of developing their critical praxis (Kizilcec, Pérez-Sanagustín, and Maldonado, 2017; Littenberg-Tobias and Reich, 2020). Although it is difficult to replicate the intimacy that in-person training would provide and critical work often requires (Parkhouse, Lu, and Massaro, 2019), synchronous and collaborative online professional learning opportunities can be beneficial and effective.

The pedagogical challenges accompanying MOOCs are notable. However, given the drastic growth in interest in anti-oppressive resources and professional learning opportunities (Dean and Finster, 2023), online platforms are the prime entity for addressing these timely needs (Buttimer, Littenberg-Tobias, and Reich, 2022). From a practice-based teacher education (PBTE) perspective, educators must be provided with ample opportunities to apply the pedagogical skills that are modeled "...in low- or no-stakes simulated environments and with the support of teacher educators" (Buttimer, Littenberg-Tobias, and Reich, 2022, p. 2; Grossman, Hammerness, and McDonald, 2009; Loewenberg Ball and Forzani, 2009). Effective online anti-racist, equity-focused training can be accomplished through synchronous or hybrid learning (i.e., synchronous and asynchronous programming). Synchronous engagement with an online facilitator provides an engaging space to explore difficult emotions that may arise during the training, such as guilt, shame, or anger (Chung, 2023; Wing Sue et al., 2009). Synchronous online programming can also provide opportunities for peer observation and evaluation (Johnson and Marx, 2009), real-time coaching from teacher educators (Averill, Anderson, and Drake, 2015), and collaborative reflection and debriefing (Domínguez-Varela et al., 2021), all of which are vital when discussing critical issues in educa-

tion. Moreover, asynchronous learning may involve journaling a reflection on the course content, responding to a given prompt, reading and annotating critical literature, or engaging in critical discussion with family members and peers.

An ongoing complaint from educators is how rarely professional development links the equity issues they are discussing to applied and contextual practice (Kavanagh and Danielson, 2020). Although some educators may have an existing knowledge base regarding structural inequity in schooling and society, they may still struggle to apply this expertise to their daily pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008; Milner IV, 2010). Consequently, it is essential when considering how online programming is developed and facilitated to ensure that novel concepts and terminology around anti-racism and equity are coupled with direct and applicable examples (Buttimer, Littenberg-Tobias, and Reich, 2022). Equity and anti-racism are complex issues to learn about and, therefore, require multidimensional modes of engagement that are also straightforward and practical – taken-for-granted elements often only considered by fellow educators. Providing these safe spaces for educators to engage in critical conversations is vital for maintaining and improving their praxis; however, because they are rarely offered or supported by the traditional system, progressive educators were often responsible for developing these environments for themselves during the pandemic.

2.3 Organizing for Equity

As the nation struggled to navigate the comorbid impact of structural inequity in health care and state-sanctioned violence from the carceral state, conservative politicians covertly initiated their attack on public education (Almeida, 2021). The institutional call to action, bellowed by educators on the frontlines to critically revolutionize public education based on the lessons learned during the pandemic, was swiftly met with a white rage (Anderson, 2016) response. Because educators nationwide mobilized to intentionally advance equity in their classrooms in response to the sociopolitical climate, misinformed debates regarding the appropriateness of these topics for K -12 classrooms and the moral responsibility of classroom teachers began to emerge. Robust and critical professional learning opportunities focused on anti-racism and equity were already limited before the pandemic and lacked an adequate online infrastructure once the transition to digital

learning commenced (Smith, 2020). To improve their praxis, progressive educators went beyond learning the necessary hours or credits for professional development. They sought opportunities to complete online courses, attend webinars, and engage with other educators domestically and internationally on social media.

Progressive educators were motivated to cultivate and maintain their own online informal professional learning communities (Bommel and Liljekvist, 2016) to combat the limited programming and the increasing restrictions applied to formal, publicly funded programs. Formal professional development programs, often led by external educational experts or school administration, introduce specific content knowledge or instructional skills expected to be applied in the classroom. The bottom-up knowledge sharing (Ravenscroft et al., 2012) process of informal learning "...involv[es] the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria..." (Rashid and Asghar, 2016, p. 76). Social media is a standard, informal vehicle for relationship building and resource sharing among educators nationwide and internationally. From Twitter to Facebook, informal networks of teachers from varying backgrounds and experiences are organizing to advance equity in education and retain the lessons they learned from unprecedented crises.

2.3.1 The Power of Social Media

Technology has significantly changed how we work, socialize, and learn from others and the external world. The ubiquity of smartphones and the expansion of internet access have made Internet-based platforms prime sites to empower educators to collaborate to further their expertise (Fucoloro, 2012). Traditional, formal professional learning opportunities often treat teachers as passive actors in the learning experience rather than as co-constructors and producers of meaningful knowledge (Brennan, 2021). However, Britt and Paulus (2016) and Trust (2016) argue that informal spaces, such as social networks like Twitter, exemplify how educators co-develop information and apply it based on their local context and capacity. Social networking is defined as Internet-based communities created to foster discourse, cooperation, and information sharing across various networks (Gunawardena et al., 2009). The power of social media resides in its ability to transform the individual learning experience into a collective space for knowledge sharing and application (Macià and García, 2016). To cultivate a more interactive professional learning envi-

ronment, progressive educators "initiated and orchestrated" (Bommel and Liljekvist, 2016, p. 1) their professional development to reclaim ownership over their learning process (Macià and García, 2016).

The effectiveness of any professional learning opportunity relies on the relationships and connections developed among educators (Chugh and Ruhi, 2018). Evidence suggests that educators work and learn best when collaborating and fielding ideas from other educators (Buttimer, Littenberg-Tobias, and Reich, 2022). According to Johnston (2009), educators must possess or share autonomy over how they collaborate and engage with other educators. Progressive educators determined that online platforms like social media provide cost-effective, diverse, and flexible opportunities (Davis, 2013) to continuously connect with other educators (Rashid and Asghar, 2016) who are like-mindedly motivated to engage critically with the system. High-quality professional development is complex to administer when resources are already significantly limited by inequities in funding and further constrained by the realities of virtual learning; therefore, progressive educators turned to the only other sources of support they found available and compelling.

Twitter threads and Facebook groups were utilized during the pandemic to share pedagogical content and subject-matter knowledge. In doing so, progressive educators transitioned from a monologic professional development frame, where the subject matter is owned by the author of the book or lecture, to a dialogic frame, where educators maintain ownership of the process that occurs during the course or while collaborating with colleagues via social media (Bommel and Liljekvist, 2016). However, given that online platforms are conducive to fostering discourse around reforms, it is essential to emphasize that social media use is not risk-free, as public school educators may face public backlash, resulting in privacy and employment concerns.

Chapter 3

Literature Review & Theoretical Background

3.1 Racialized Organizations

The racialization process involves the application of racial meaning to a social practice, group, or entity that was otherwise void of racial classification (Omi and Winant, 2014). Racialization is traditionally analyzed at institutional (macro) and individual levels (micro), often disregarding the mediating factors of meso-level organizations, such as schools (Wooten, 2006). Race is often omitted from conventional organizational formation theories or instead characterized as a neutral function of personal identity (Ray, 2019). Similarly, race scholars, even those who describe racial inequity in systemic terms, rarely identify the interceding role of organizations in how race is institutionalized (Ture, 1967). However, Wooten (2019) explains, "We can imagine organizations as having an identity (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991) tied to race, and as a result, have the same capacity to be racialized. . . the same way that people are" (p. 1). To understand how meso-level organizations inculcate racialized ideologies by validating discriminatory policies, consider the following top-down (macro to micro) analysis of racially discriminatory hiring practices:

Federal law (institutional level) prohibits discrimination when considering an individual's legal history in the hiring process; however, the law does not prohibit employers from inquiring about a potential candidate's legal background. Because it is often difficult to prove whether an

individual's legal history deterred an employer from offering them employment, institutions can use their ability to inquire per federal law (Varghese et al., 2010). If an applicant's race is unknown, then the overrepresentation of people of the global majority in the legal system and the negative connotations associated with having a legal history suggest employers may use legal history as a proxy for race. Respective organizations (meso-level) adopt the institutional policy that allows legal history to be collected during the hiring process, even though federal law does not require this factor to be considered when making employment decisions. Individual hiring managers (micro-level) within the organization, who again have no obligation to account for legal history, possess the agency to make final determinations. Naturally, their decisions are imbued with their personal biases regarding legal history. As a result, people of the global majority are less likely to be considered for hire than their equally or less qualified white counterparts (Holzer, Raphael, and Stoll, 2007). Although racialization at the meso-level is rarely analyzed uniquely from the macro structures it is embedded within, it is essential to acknowledge how organizations engender social boundaries that reinforce exclusionary structures and limit the agency of actors operating within them (Carter, 2006; Ray, 2019).

Racialized organizations are "meso-level social structures that limit the personal agency and collective efficacy of subordinate racial groups while magnifying the agency of the dominant racial group" (Ray, 2019, p. 36). According to Ray (2019), all organizations are composed of racialized agents because every organization is racialized. This means that organizations receive a racial identity due to the operation of racialized actors while also playing an active role in further racializing the individuals navigating the racialized organization. However, the degree to which these actors depend upon racialized criteria to determine the allocation of resources, define racialization patterns, or dictate the inhibition of human agency is variable. By extending the structural race work of Jung (2015) and Bonilla-Silva (1997), Ray establishes the role of organizations in the reproduction and defiance of the racialization process. To understand how the structural conditions of racialized organizations, such as schools, can shape the agency and identity of its internal actors (e.g., educators), researchers must acknowledge that their landscapes are not race-neutral but rather significantly reinforce the process of racialization.

3.1.1 Schools as Racialized Organizations

Ray offers four tenets of racialized organizations evident in public schools' daily practice. The first tenet establishes the impact racialized organizations have on the agency of racialized groups (2019). As educator's job security and student achievement become more tightly coupled with systems of accountability, especially for urban schools, the capacity for educators to develop and facilitate curriculum freely has become more limited (Dover, 2022). Meeting standardized testing requirements has become the priority, and educators whose students are not making considerable progress according to state standards are at risk of receiving poor evaluations and, thus, potentially terminated (Nichols and Harris, 2016). Black educators are more likely to use non-traditional pedagogical methods to facilitate curriculum and are at greater risk (Gist, White, and Bianco, 2018).

The second tenet of racialized organizations is the legitimation of unequally distributed resources, which is demonstrated through school tracking. Academic tracking is rooted in the institutionalization of Black inferiority as an educational ideology, often a "taken-for-granted aspect of organizational life" (Wooten and Couloute, 2017). According to Jeannie (1986) and Braddock and Dawkins (1993), students in high-track English courses gain exposure to materials and literary content meant to prepare them for collegiate work. In contrast, low-track English students cannot readily access this high-status knowledge (Smith-Maddox, 1998).

The third tenet Ray develops is how racialized organizations allow whiteness to serve as a signaling credential (2019). In response to increasing school violence, zero-tolerance policies have been enforced to decrease drug and weapon use on school campuses and curb gang violence that may spill over from the community (Stahl, 2016). In practice, however, zero-tolerance policies have disproportionately punished Black and brown students relative to their white peers for non-violent, behavioral infractions that may include poor attitude or cell phone use (Morris, 2016). The ideology of white superiority undergirds the belief of Black inferiority, which is demonstrated in how white students' experiences, values, and behaviors are held in higher regard than those of Black and brown students. Bourdieu's (1990) theory of cultural capital "maintains [that] schools validate the culture of the dominant class while they delegitimize the... [culture] brought to school by groups, not in power" (Smith-Maddox, 1998, p. 305).

The final tenet of racialized organizations is the assurance that decoupling will be a racialized process, meaning that the legitimized commitments to challenging racism and exclusion are often disaggregated from the actual policies and practices that either uphold or ignore established "racial hierarchies" (Ray, 2019, p. 17). For example, the widespread adoption of multicultural or culturally competent curricula to meet the inclusive identity needs of Black and brown students has done little to challenge the existing power structures that catalyze the racial inequity resulting from Eurocentric curriculum and punitive disciplinary policy (Mills, 2008).

3.1.2 Agency & Professional Identity

Agency is a fundamental asset within organizations composed of power dynamics and hierarchies contingent on social position. The extent to which social actors within organizations can employ their agency within racialized organizations depends on their position and the organizational structure (Sewell Jr, 1992; Ray, 2019). Often, to be considered a legitimate participant of an organization, the expectation is for internal actors to submit to the collective will of the organization (Wooten and Couloute, 2017); however, the degree to which an individual consents will vary. For example, educators are expected to adhere to their schools' collective identity, which traditionally aligns with the educational status quo. Traditional public education employs a curriculum imbued with European epistemologies and discriminatory disciplinary policies that separate students of the global majority from their education, two organizational elements that not all educators are willing to maintain. Many Black educators, in particular, due to their ability to more readily pinpoint these critical issues in education, are less likely to buy into their organization's collective identity if it upholds these traditional values. So, their ability to act within the role assigned to them or their identity agency (Hitlin and Elder, 2007) is significantly impacted because of how racialized organizations "shape habitual action" (Ray, 2019, p. 37).

While navigating racialized organizations, educators' agency is significantly impacted by the organization's control over how their time is utilized. Because an educator's position within their organization – which is contingent upon how well they submit to their organization's collective identity – directly influences how they exercise agency over their time, those with the least control over their time are less likely to have any authority over organizational procedure, practice, or policy. Educators spend most of their time developing and facilitating curriculum; however, the

era of accountability has notably affected how educators can utilize their time in the classroom. Critics of the standards-based reform movement contend that it overemphasizes objective measures while sacrificing the emotional, personal, and relational aspects of teaching, which is at the core of many teachers' commitments (Day, 2002; Day, Sammons, and Stobart, 2007), especially those who identify as progressive in their pedagogy.

3.1.3 Systems of Accountability: Standardized Testing & Disciplinary Policy

As educators navigate racialized organizations, what and how they teach is greatly influenced by systems of accountability (Diamond and Spillane, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 2004). The United States relies upon an educational model that systematically educates, assesses, and disciplines students without considering students' individual needs, consequently undermining equity efforts (Freire, 1996; Ritchie, 2012). Mandated curriculum and instruction often lack cultural range and depth, ensuring student evaluations based on the prescribed lessons will be similarly vague and inauthentic. Furthermore, disciplinary models, embedded with ideologies of Black inferiority and behavioral racism (Kendi, 2023), directly underpin racialized notions of deviance, exhibited in the disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates between white and Black students (Smith and Harper, 2015). Recent education reform efforts have focused on increasing equality by setting specific academic and disciplinary objectives. For example, in the late 1980s, Congress introduced schools to zero-tolerance policies to decrease school violence. The federal government followed up with the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 to improve educational outcomes based on the assumptions that accountability standards would encourage educators to work harder, students to learn more, and schools to enforce more adequate practices (Heilig and Darling-Hammond, 2008).

The theory of racial tasks establishes the relationship between "internal organizational hierarchies" and the "ideological, interactional, and physical labor" (Ray, 2019, p. 12) exercised by people of the global majority (Wingfield and Alston, 2014). This is demonstrated when educators are rewarded for how well their instructional content and disciplinary practices mirror institutional values (Meyer, Rowan, and Meyer, 1978). When this occurs, their deference to the collective will of the organization legitimizes their professional identity as the standard that other educators should strive to follow (Ray, 2019). However, in doing so, according to the racial task theory, when people of the global majority adhere to "racialized organizational scripts" (Ray, 2019, p. 37), they

are just as susceptible to reproducing systems of inequality as their white counterparts. The organizational script of many traditional public schools involves teaching a Eurocentric curriculum that reproduces epistemic racism by propagating bias, reinforcing stereotypes, and writing people of the global majority out of history. Furthermore, educators are expected to adopt the school's disciplinary policies, which were established with good intentions, but, in practice, a zero-tolerance approach has disproportionately excluded Black and brown students from their education.

According to education reform scholars, educators tend to minimize content and abandon student-centered, interactive pedagogy to adhere to standards-based accountability (SBA) policies (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Diamond, 2007; Lipman, 2004; Heilig and Darling-Hammond, 2008). SBA is even more limiting for urban, low-income schools where the requirements are high-stakes, and the pedagogy is traditionally more didactic while minimally reflecting the authentic lived experiences of the students. For example, Diamond and Spillane (2004) demonstrate how probationary schools in Chicago disproportionately disperse educational resources in favor of high-performing students, thereby limiting the learning opportunities for low-performing students. When educators passively accept the written curriculum, they often unknowingly perpetuate epistemic racism – which is perpetuated in schools when the curriculum centers on specific bodies of knowledge while disregarding others as illegitimate.

Epistemologies are culturally specific 'ways of knowing' that dictate how we understand our world and what kinds of knowledge are credible (Grix, 2002). For instance, a Eurocentric curriculum is a curricular narrative that centralizes people of European descent's political and social perspectives and their cultural contributions while marginalizing and misrepresenting the lived experiences of people of the global majority (Bell, 2019; Sizemore, 1990). The misrecognition students of the global majority experience as a result of the curriculum is harmful and can make it difficult for students to identify their place in their school community and society at large (Dozono, 2020). When students struggle to find their identity or to feel a sense of belonging, it can lead to behaviors and attitudes that may be considered misaligned with the policies intended to maintain social control and order.

Approximately 90% of U.S. public schools have adopted zero-tolerance policies (Martinez, 2009). Zero-tolerance refers to the policy-based response to increasing violence in schools. Schools that embrace zero-tolerance are considered intolerant of school violence – a moral good – and thus

severely punish students who exhibit behaviors (Kodelja, 2019). Although zero-tolerance policies responded to a national increase in school violence, individual academic organizations decide which policies to adopt and how they will be enforced – with minimal oversight – so their application can differ from school to school (Curran, 2019). Zero-tolerance policies are generally intended to severely punish fighting, drugs, weapons on campus, and gang activity, with long-term suspensions and expulsion (Stahl, 2016). In practice, when educators buy into the collective will of their organization's disciplinary policy, students are suspended for "talking back" and refusing to turn over their phones (Morris, 2016). Zero-tolerance policies are not applied equitably because who and what is considered violent or a classroom disruption is contextual and rooted in racialized power dynamics. The same racist ideologies that undergird the criminalization of Black and brown people in mainstream society have also been adopted to justify disciplinary interventions. Introducing metal detectors and school resource officers to reduce violence, the exclusionary impact of zero-tolerance policies, and the proliferation of racial stereotypes position schools to resemble institutions of social control rather than safe, humane environments that nurture and cultivate future generations (Morris, 2016).

The most notable change to school disciplinary infrastructure in the last thirty years has been the significant increase in school resource officers (SROs) (Fisher and Hennessy, 2016). The surge in SROs has expanded the school-to-prison nexus and reinforced the ideologies mentioned above rooted in racism and criminality. The drastic increase in law enforcement entities on school grounds has escalated the number of violent interactions over minor, often non-violent infractions between school authority figures and the students they are employed to protect. Monique Morris (2016) demonstrates how these violent interactions between students and school resource officers or law enforcement have become an increasing problem, especially among young Black girls. Viral videos include 16-year-old Shakara being tossed from her desk by an SRO after a teacher grew frustrated with Shakara for taking "too long" to put her phone away. The involvement of carceral entities exacerbates non-violent issues that can be addressed by improving classroom management through student-teacher relationships, for example (Crenshaw, Ocen, and Nanda, 2015). The increasingly punitive approach to schooling serves as a stark example of how schools function as racialized organizations. Teachers adhering to traditional, stereotypical assumptions, relying on their organization's zero-tolerance policies, which are often rooted in behavioral racism (Kendi, 2023), utilize

their racialized discretion to apply these policies in harmful ways. In contrast, when educators prioritize building deep bonds with their students and when families embrace a progressive praxis, they can begin to defy the status quo.

3.2 Progressive Educators & their Praxis Development

Contemporary educators are precariously situated between the socially constructed dynamics of knowledge and power. Some educators recognize the political responsibility of their role and actively engage in practices to cultivate values of equity and anti-racism in the classroom (Collins, 2009). Others adhere to the race-neutral collective identity of traditional public education and thereby believe their role is meant to be void of moral authority (Durkheim, 1973). Educators committed to challenging contemporary issues from a progressivist perspective will be identified as progressive educators. Progressive educators prioritize student-centered learning while supporting the existing and growing expertise of fellow teachers; they organize to build community between other progressive educators across school sectors and lead critical conversations regarding the role of schooling in creating a more democratic society. Progressive educators go beyond instilling diversity and inclusion and ensure that just practices are upheld inside the school and society. Furthermore, progressive educators understand the necessity of engaging students' families and communities as partners in their growth, learning, and development. In summation, progressive educators believe that schooling goes beyond scholastic preparation but is responsible for nurturing future generations with democratic values (Kaplan, 2013).

3.2.1 Building a Democratic Praxis

Education is essential for democracy. Public education has held many responsibilities throughout the years, but the most important, and yet most often taken for granted, is its role in cultivating future generations of democratic individuals committed to upholding the fundamental tenets of democracy (Collins, 2009). According to Patricia Hill Collins, teachers must acknowledge their role as critical intellectuals (Giroux and McLaren, 1986) and "...facilitators or gatekeepers of fundamental democratic ideals" (Collins, 2009, p. x), which involve engaging in the moral and ethical discourse surrounding the oppression of marginalized peoples. It is also essential for the system

to recognize progressive educators as transformative intellectuals who identify and analyze societal contradictions that inform organizational practices while conceptualizing emancipatory possibilities for structural redress (Giroux and McLaren, 1986). When educators operate through a democratic pedagogical lens, they are (1) striving to transform the relationship between teacher agency, labor, and school power dynamics and (2) utilizing a curriculum that is student-centered and critically examines "...power, language, culture, and history" (Giroux and McLaren, 1986, p. 229). To cultivate and sustain a democratic praxis among educators, it is imperative that teacher education programs and ongoing professional development intentionally propagate democratic practices, provide support and resources for critical pedagogy, and ensure the recognition of teacher expertise (Giroux and McLaren, 1986).

Although democracy is a central element of societal governance, its role is rarely considered in constructing and maintaining social institutions, such as public education (Apple and Beane, 1995). Because the definition of democracy can be ambiguous, it is unsurprising that schools are lauded as democratic organizations while simultaneously undermining democracy's most central tenets (Apple, 1988). While democracy calls for diversity, cooperation, and a focus on serving the common good, many public schools adhere to traditional standards that reward high-status values, competition, and individualistic perspectives. Educators seeking to maintain a democratic society are challenging existing organizational barriers in schools, such as academic tracking, standardized testing, and zero-tolerance policies. When school reform occurs, however, there is often a contradiction between the intentions of the intervention and how it is implemented. Concerning schooling, local governance is frequently preferred; ironically, when policies are imposed, they are often on a national scale, resulting in a more widespread impact on communities with varying needs (Apple and Beane, 1995). For example, implementing Common Core standards nationwide was intended to standardize and enrich the learning experience while advancing critical thinking skills. As a result, standards-based objectives have severely limited the curriculum around those above European epistemological frames, excluding students' experiences and devaluing educators' expertise.

In response to increasing diversity in public schools and the durable inequalities (Tilly, 1998) that persisted in academic outcomes, there was a national push towards a more diverse curriculum in the seventies and eighties as the Multicultural Education Movement gained momentum. Critical advocates such as James Banks (2008 and Christine Sleeter (1996) emphasized the need for

curricula that represent the cultural experiences of diverse students more authentically. However, facilitating multicultural and culturally competent curricula has often involved a superficial engagement with diversity and culture without critically examining the root causes that necessitate such interventions. Democratic schooling requires a critical and anti-racist curriculum that allows the organization to go beyond engineering consent from students and helps them construct social meaning for themselves (Collins, 2009). Collins states, "...through critical education... we can encounter ideas and visions of others" (Collins, 2009, p. 180). Through a critical lens, one can unearth realities and experiences that differ from those of white, cis-gendered, able-bodied, affluent, Christian, heterosexual men, the identity baselines against which all others are value-labeled (Collins, 2009). Critical education examines why these value labels were created, how they are maintained, whom they serve and punish, and how they can be subverted and ultimately uprooted (Freire, 1996). Anti-racist pedagogy utilizes a critical theory paradigm "to promote social justice for the creation of a democratic society" (Blakeney, 2005, p. 199). When educators adopt an anti-racist teaching framework, they are challenging the existing, depository nature of schooling (Freire, 1996), which suggests educators should be void of moral authority (Durkheim, 1973) and that students are ill-equipped to handle the complexities that accompany critical pedagogy. Because, in essence, educators are responsible for ensuring that their students thoughtfully engage with a wide range of historical and contemporary discourse to develop their voices and global perspectives (Apple and Beane, 1995). To successfully maintain and further their robust expertise, educators must have the autonomy to reimagine their training and professional development.

Introducing new methods of schooling and teaching is often met with opposition. Not only does it require additional training and resources, but it requires communities to rethink how public education could operate. When alternative forms of schooling are discussed, schools for truancy or teen pregnancy tend to be the most familiar reference points (Maynard et al., 2012). As a result, resistance to the status quo of schooling is often met with opposition due to fear of the unknown (Maynard et al., 2012; Gray and Chanoff, 1986; Apple and Beane, 1995). Once a school no longer reflects the traditional banking concept of education (Freire, 1996), it is often sanctioned as underperforming and later closed or transformed in a way that maintains democratic values in its discourse but not in its practices (Gray and Chanoff, 1986). Adhering to this challenge as an educator requires accepting the risk accompanying subversive practices and cultivating and

maintaining a complex knowledge base.

For educators to challenge the traditional curriculum, for example, they must examine bell schedules, divisions of knowledge, and linguistic content for European epistemology. However, doing so does not involve simply discarding Eurocentric texts but guiding students through a critical analysis of the implicit biases and misrepresentations reproduced through the content and integrating diverse materials that align with their students' lived experiences (Chang, Liang, and Tsai, 2020). Educators who successfully help their students critically engage with social problems through curricular content provide pathways and language for students to challenge dominant epistemologies that (1) relegate people of the global majority to inconsequential minority status, (2) minimize the legacies of people of the global majority to one-dimensional histories of oppression and (3) revise legacies of oppression using language that subverts the responsibility of the oppressor (Colombo, Rebughini, et al., 2022; Dozono, 2020). Existing teacher preparation programs and ongoing professional development do not prepare educators to critically engage with these complex topics nor provide them with the skillset and resources necessary to guide their students, but rather instruct educators to rely on superficial elements of multicultural and culturally competent pedagogy.

Broadly, multicultural education encompasses a variety of teaching practices intended to respect the growing diversity of students in public schools. According to the founders of critical pedagogy, schooling should aim to help students develop a conscientizacao (conscientization) or a critical consciousness to identify social, political, and economic injustices (Freire, 1996). Although developed as a by-product of critical pedagogy, multiculturalism is often superficially implemented and can reinforce racial bias and stereotypes. Multicultural education is intended to situate schools as sites that address and dismantle systems of oppression (hooks, 2014) and is guided by five central tenets, "...content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering institutional culture and social structure" (Banks, 1996, p. 14). However, many educators who use multicultural pedagogy either do not know how to go beyond cursory applications of the curriculum or are doing so without the resources and support that would accompany school-wide commitments to multiculturalism. This materializes in the classroom as ill-equipped teachers who cannot move beyond the most common, notable figures relevant during the Civil Rights Movement, which will likely only be discussed during Black History Month, for

example (Banks, 1996; Banks, 2008; Sleeter, 1996). In addition, there may be educators who are better prepared to lead more critical conversations but do so in fear of administrative backlash and limited formal resources.

Chapter 4

Methods

4.1 Preliminary Research

Anti-Racist Happy Hours. From 2020-2021, I hosted three *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* to build community with others, seeking to make sense of rapid changes occurring in the nation and the world. The rising health inequities and the incomprehensible curricular attack on public education left many educators, researchers, scholars, and community members feeling disheartened, ignored, confused, and needing a safe space to express concerns. These unprecedented transformations were calls to action; consequently, the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* provided a platform to strategize a path forward. The *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* catalyzed the development of research questions for this study. Attendees overwhelmingly expressed interest and excitement, indicating a strong attraction among progressive educators towards informal avenues for deepening their praxis and understanding of equity and anti-racism in education. Before each session, registered participants received guiding texts to review, shaping the discussion questions posed during the sessions. Each *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* involved robust, critical dialogue, both orally and within the Zoom chat, engaging group activities, and action-oriented planning and development.

The first session, held on October 30, 2020, titled "Education as the Practice of Freedom in the Era of Black Lives Matter," drew seven participants. Guiding texts included a synopsis and critical quotes from bell hooks' "Teaching to Transgress" and excerpts from Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." Participants focused on what it means for education to be a liberatory practice in contemporary society. More specifically, what role does a liberatory education have

in a society that continues to be plagued with such inequity and racial turmoil? This session was motivated by expected curricular educational changes in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Legislation banning Critical Race Theory (CRT) significantly impacted some teacher's literary resources and curriculum development.

The second section, which convened nine participants on November 20, 2020, explored "Myths of Meritocracy and the Impact of Distance Learning." The guiding text encompassed Nicholas Lemann's "The Big Test: The Secret History of American Meritocracy" and Jonathan J.B. Mijs' "The Unfillable Promise of Meritocracy: Three Lessons and their Implications for Justice in Education." Participants unpacked their understandings of meritocracy and reflected on how the myth appeared in their schooling careers. Valuable thought exercises occurred as attendees discussed whether neutral definitions of meritocracy exist or if the concept is inequitable at its core. This session was motivated by the system's desire to persist based on normative standards in the virtual environment despite rampant inequity.

The third session, which occurred on January 29, 2021, with the participation of two attendees, delved into "Teaching and Reaching Unruly Bodies: Exploring Student Disability Research and Racism in Special Education." Guiding texts comprised Nirmala Erevellas' "Educating Unruly Bodies: Critical Pedagogy, Disability Studies, and the Politics of Schooling" and Stephanie Keeney Parks' blog post, "How Racism Impacts Black Kids with Autism: From the Clinic to the Classroom." This session was led mainly and guided by *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* attendees, the subject-matter experts who provided many guiding materials. In sharing personal anecdotes while engaging with critical literature, participants demonstrated the necessity of intentional spaces for educators – of the formal and informal variety – to have the opportunity to excel in leadership positions.

4.2 Research Questions

The first research question is motivated by two assertions: (1) educators must be a living example of what the world's politics should be (hooks, 2014), and (2) the personal is political (Cahill, 2007; Thompson, 2008). Research question one aims to examine how a core political identity, such as race and the influences of racialized schooling experiences with teachers and peers,

shapes the progressive praxis development of Black educators. The first question is: **how do race and racism in public schools shape Black educators' progressive identities?** Based on Michele Foster's work, I expect Black educators' critical perspectives toward education and their motivations to become a progressive educator to be significantly influenced by their racialized K-12 schooling experiences (1997).

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the transition to virtual learning, and nationwide civil unrest brought equity and anti-racism to the forefront of political, social, health, and educational discourse. The co-occurring nature of these unprecedented events left the institution of public education scrambling to continue effective operation. The second question aims to ascertain how Black educators rose to the challenge and ensured their learning environments remained student-centered in the face of rapid and unpredictable change. The second research question is: **what resources did progressive educators use to maintain their praxis during the COVID-19 pandemic?** Given how Black educators have historically overcome social upheaval in education, it is expected that the Black educators in this study followed suit and identified resources that allowed them to maintain their progressive praxis.

The third research question is significantly motivated by the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* and the discourse of the educators who attended. Many expressed that since the pandemic's onset, they had no safe space to express their feelings or frustrations regarding the institutional response to the pandemic. They also lacked professional opportunities to critically engage with other educators to strategize or discuss the challenges they faced communicating with their students about the social transformations they were witnessing. The third research question is: **How did progressive educators utilize informal resources to mitigate gaps in their progressive education during the COVID-19 pandemic?** Participants' willingness to engage candidly on a social platform such as Zoom demonstrates how the growth of social media as a tool for digital activism has allowed for the sharing of unequally distributed resources and the opportunity to foster collective resistance more broadly (Mehan, 2023).

4.3 Participants

The following study includes (1) survey responses from *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* registrants and attendees, (2) semi-structured, in-depth interview responses from self-identified progressive Black educators, and (3) a content analysis of the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* hosted 2020-2021.

Anti-Racist Happy Hour Registrants and Attendees. Virtual *Happy Hours* served as a safe, informal environment, encouraging open-candid conversation and critical dialogue. Thirty-five individuals registered for the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* from 2020-2021. Participants were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling. To advertise for the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours*, flyers were created in Canva, posted to social media, and emailed to local and national professional networks with a link to sign up for the sessions. The flyer called for individuals of all races who desired a safe space to have critical conversations about public education. *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* registrants and attendees were recruited through email – which they proved when registering for the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* – to complete a Qualtrics questionnaire. The registrants and attendees were racially diverse and included teachers, graduate students, educational technology specialists, and professors.

Progressive Black Educators. I recruited forty self-identified, progressive, Black educators to partake in an approximately one-hour, semi-structured, in-depth interview. To qualify for an interview, participants must self-identify as African-American or Black, demonstrate active teaching engagement in the virtual learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, and articulate an understanding of progressive education. Notably, the final criteria point was not initially included in the recruitment material; however, given the public recruitment method, many individuals were posing as educators to receive the compensation, so including this question assisted with identifying authentic progressive educators. All selected participants were regionally diverse and represented a variety of grades and school sectors.

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Role During Pandemic
Ms. Bethany	38	Black/African American	High School Teacher
Ms. Brianna	28	Black/African American	Middle School Teacher
Ms. Charisse	41	Black/Haitian American	High School Teacher
Ms. Chloe	27	Black/African American	Middle School Teacher & School Dean
Ms. Danielle	30	Black/African American	High School Teacher
Mr. Franklin	26	Black/African American	Middle School Teacher & School Dean
Ms. Kwensi	60	Black/African American	High School Teacher
Ms. Melinda	48	Black/African American	Math Interventionist
Ms. Quinta	28	Black/African American	Middle School Teacher
Mr. Stephan	26	Black/African American	Middle School Teacher
Ms. Tracy	58	Black/African American	Middle School Teacher

Table 4.1: Semi-Structured Interview Participant Demographics

4.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured Interviews. I conducted eleven semi-structured, in-depth interviews with progressive Black educators. Educators were selected based on their alignment with the sampling frame and their definition of progressive education. Forty educators were identified as meeting the criteria; twenty-four educators scheduled their interviews, and eleven attended their interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed for a structured approach while also affording the flexibility to explore ideas more in-depth that may arise throughout the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021). Educators were selected based on their alignment with the sampling frame and their definition of progressive education. For instance, one participant defined progressive education as:

> "Progressive education means equipping students with 21st-century skills, assisting them with the tools and strategies to be life-long learners, college and career-ready, as well as providing them real-world problems and experiences. We must ensure they are able to think critically and arrive at the destination of "answers" in a variety of ways. Engaging in student discourse and student-led instruction and problem-solving is crucial to student success."

This portion of the sampling criteria was included to ensure fidelity among participants because interviews were being conducted virtually. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded solely for audio, with participants' informed verbal consent. Each interview lasted forty-five minutes to an hour, and participants received compensation in the form of a $50 VISA e-gift card upon the

completion of their interview.

Key interview questions included:

(a) How did your K-12 schooling experiences inform the formation of your racial identity?

(b) What are the most critical contemporary issues in public education?

(c) How was professional development facilitated during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The interviews were transcribed (Rev.com) and analyzed with MAXQDA, using an inductive, thematic approach.

Thematic analysis involves identifying, examining, and disseminating patterns within data (Braun and Clarke, 2012). This process organized and provided preliminary interpretations of the data. After reading the transcripts multiple times, initial codes were generated in MAXQDA by systematically highlighting portions of the text that aligned with the proposed research questions. The primary codes were organized into themes, then aggregated and assigned to the related research question. The themes were reviewed to ensure alignment with the coded segments and overall consistency with the data set. At this stage, themes were refined and reorganized until they accurately reflected the narratives in the data set. Each theme was named and operationalized, which involved an in-depth examination of each theme, establishing which aspects of the data each theme encapsulates.

Anti-Racist Happy Hour Content Analysis. Content analysis is a widely applicable analytical tool used for (Stemler, 2015) making "...replicable and valid inferences from...meaningful matter to the contexts of their use" (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 24). I conducted a thematic content analysis of the guiding themes and Zoom chat dialogue of the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours.* After getting familiar with the data and noting initial interpretations, preliminary codes were generated by identifying significant portions of the chat that were descriptive and recurrent. The codes were then organized into potential themes, meaningfully grouping them based on their relationship and the research question. The generated themes were narrowed, named, and defined, ensuring fidelity. Lastly, I quantified the occurrences of central themes by counting the frequency of pertinent and recurring narratives to examine the prevalence of these experiences within the data.

Anti-Racist Happy Hour Reflection Questionnaire. I administered a questionnaire through Qualtrics to the thirty-five registrants and attendees of the Anti-Racist Happy Hours. Nine registrants (n=9) responded to the questionnaire. The reflection questionnaire aimed to capture their

motivations for registering, and if they attended, they were prompted to reflect on their experiences. The questionnaire took approximately ten minutes to complete, and participants were compensated with $15 VISA e-gift card upon survey completion. The questionnaire included items such as:

(a) What motivated you to register for an Anti-Racist Happy Hour?

(b) What did you learn from the Anti-Racist Happy Hour(s)?

(c) Would you attend an Anti-Racist Happy Hour in the future?

Chapter 5

Findings: Research Question 1

Research question: How do race and racism in public schools shape Black educators' progressive identities?

5.1 Black Progressive Educators

Progressive educators, dedicated to fostering equity in education, actively identify, challenge, and aim to eliminate oppressive educational structures. This chapter introduces eleven progressive Black educators who discuss their insights into pressing educational issues and their personal and political commitments to the field. The chapter will then delve into the complex racial socialization process these educators experienced as students in the K-12 public education system. It will explore the impact of early relationships with Black educators and the influence of racialized organizational structures on the educators' growth and development. Further, it will illuminate how these organizational factors perpetuated racial inequity, informing their racial identity and progressive praxis. Finally, the chapter will highlight the strategies these educators employed to promote student well-being, strengthen family ties, and enhance community partnerships, underscoring the vital tools they used to support their transformative educational goals.

"Teaching is inherently political work" (Nieto, 2006). The relationship between power and privilege undergirds the sociopolitical contexts surrounding school policy development, changing demographics, disparities in funding, and potential for reform. As educators who identify as progressive, which involves cultivating the next generation of democratic citizens, it is necessary to

explore how they conceive of their commitments and whether they are solely personal, rooted in political ideology, or a combination of both.

Ms. Bethany (38), a high school math teacher in the South, shared that her dedication is rooted in political and personal ideals. Although politically, she recognizes that the profession does not adequately compensate educators for their efforts, she simultaneously acknowledges that the students she serves are in need of advocates who are willing to fight for them. Ms Bethany stated,

> "I'll tell everybody I've been thinking about leaving the school 'cause we don't get paid no money. But if I don't do it, who's going to do it? If I don't fight for them, who will fight for them?... It's near and dear...So it is a combination."

Identifying that she offers something unique to the educational system as a student advocate – a role cultivated through her student-centered relationship building, –, Ms. Bethany has chosen to persist in her role even though her labor has not been adequately rewarded. In alignment with her student-centered perspectives, Ms. Bethany believes that one of the most critical issues in contemporary public education is the prioritization of standardized testing rather than focusing on student growth. She explained,

> "I feel like they put too much pressure on the data side of things versus letting teachers teach and preparing students to become career and college-ready citizens...I just feel like the focus isn't where it needs to be. We need to understand what...these kids need to know in order to be successful?... Why do they need this state test? What is it for? That state test don't show [how] this kid has grew and learned in a year. There needs to be more focus on growth in kids versus standardized testing kids. You can...see how much a kid has grew and measure as a teacher more than a test can. A test don't tell you nothing. Everybody's not a test taker. You need to find a way to look at kids without testing them to see what they've learned...You see more when you see a child in action, but a test is not in action 'cause now I'm stressed thinking, 'What if I don't get this right? How's this gonna look on me? How's this gonna go?' It's so much stress and pressure behind testing that you don't see kids growing. I think there needs to be more focus on kids' growth than it is on testing."

As a classroom teacher who engages with her students daily, Ms. Bethany believes that she is best

suited to measure and assess student growth rather than standardized testing, which can induce negative reactions such as stereotype threat and other testing anxieties that inevitably influence outcomes (Nguyen and Ryan, 2008). Although standardized tests do not appear to benefit students overall, Black and brown students face particular challenges due to the lack of cultural competency present within the assessments, creating further disparities in educational outcomes.

Ms. Brianna (28), a former educator who began teaching at the pandemic's onset, stressed how "...the structure of the educational system does not support Black and brown kids..." Ms. Brianna explained how the traditional education system operates in misalignment with the cultural values of Black students, limiting their opportunities for success. She continued,

> "When we think about the way our education system is set up [it's], 'Hey, kids come to school,' they read the book, they memorize the material, they take the test, they move forward.[But] if you think traditionally how Black people learn, it's not that way...If we date it back to like, let's just say slave times, the way that we learned and gathered information was through music...movement...interaction [and] collaboration. So if we have a system that is built not to include those things, we're basically not allowing Black students the opportunity to be successful..."

As a progressive educator, Ms. Brianna recognizes the unique relationship people of African descent have with education, thereby shaping how they learn and the impact of the system's misalignment on their access to educational opportunities. Her structural perspective of education further underscores her commitment, as Ms. Brianna explained; similarly to Ms. Bethany, her dedication is rooted in personal and political factors, stressing that "...as an educator, you don't really have a choice...it has to be both..." Ms. Brianna continued by explaining why she believes educators need a political education to ensure their students can receive equitable access to educational opportunities and to secure the necessary resources and support for educators to be successful. She stated,

> "...I think that you can't have a successful educational setting without that [political education], right? Because we know that systemic racism is affecting the effectiveness of education. So if we are not knowledgeable on the political background, the systems that are put in place, socioeconomic status, and how that has generationally affected

different communities, then it's impossible for us to directly impact those kids or give them a fair chance at being successful. It also makes it really hard not to...be able to support teachers in what they need, right? Because they're also a part of this political system...So, if we don't understand it, how can we fix the problems...that have come from it? So I think...that's really important."

Ms. Brianna supports educators in deepening their political knowledge and shared that she is demonstrating this commitment by earning her Master's degree and focusing on research that centers on Black and brown students and educators. As a progressive educator, Ms. Brianna illustrated how she has developed her expertise and how it informs her commitment to equity in education. Her experiences and expertise underscore the need for the system and powers within to acknowledge and value the aptitude of the educators who contemporarily navigate the system.

Ms. Charisse (41), a former educator in the Northeast, criticized how often policymakers undervalue educators' expertise and exclude them from pertinent discussions regarding educational reform. According to Ms. Charisse, Black educators have been offering their suggestions for decades to advance equity in educational practices and policies. However, given the minimal progress over the years, she does not believe that their advice has been seriously considered. Ms. Charisse candidly explained,

"First of all...we are the expert[s]. Stop talking at us... The policymakers have to really ask themselves do they want our recommendations because I find it hard [to believe]. We've been talking about policies, [like] discipline, for the last 50 years [and how] Black students have been...disciplined at a higher rate. Black educators, progressive leaders, we've been explaining these biases [and students'] lack[ing] [a] sense of belonging. The policies that are implemented...discourage them from engaging in the system. So again, my question is, do they wanna listen to us? Do you want us at the table, or do you want us to be a part of the table? Cause we can always pull up, but do you want us to show up?..."

Ms. Charisse's concluding statement illustrates how even when progressive Black educators are called to the table to share their perspectives, their contributions are rarely valued or incorporated into reform strategies. The system's inaction underscores her commitment to education. Ms.

Charisse also shared that her dedication is "both" personal and political; however, she shared that *progressive* has become a new buzzword, and it lacks significant meaning if there is not much action behind the term. Ms. Charisse explained,

> "...It's both, [but] how you role model [it]...one of the most important keys in being progressive...[T]he thing is too, [the term] "progressive"...it's sexy, it's cute. So you find a lot of people like, 'I'm progressive 'cause I read a million books, and I could tell you about this.' 'Okay, now show me'...[S]o there are two kinds of progressive. There is the literary progressive, and there's the actionable progressive. And when you're actionable, it's 365 days. And then that's when you gauge how political [you are]. But there is some political aspect, whether the politics stay in the school community [or not], but how are you progressive and you're not political because you have a board that is making decision[s]? That's political...Like if you pay union dues, you're political...'Well, I'm progressive in my classroom and my thoughts...I separate [the two].' That's bullshit. Sorry for my language. That's bullshit...'Cause sometimes a lot of people with the progressive stuff they do, you're just like, 'stop, just call yourself an engaged teacher, take the progressive out.' Cause you don't have to be progressive to do good. So call it what it is. You're engaged!"

According to Ms. Charisse, being a progressive educator goes beyond one's conceptual expertise and requires actionable and goal-oriented teaching. A significant component, however, is recognizing one's role in teaching as inherently political; otherwise, it is impossible to be intentional about one's progressive practices. So, while some educators may consider themselves to be progressive in action, it is possible they are simply "engaged" in positive teaching practices.

Ms. Chloe (27), a teacher and Dean of Curriculum and Instruction in the South critiqued the limited number of progressive educators in the public education system. She explained how there is "...power in numbers..." suggesting that increasing and uniting the number of progressive educators in the system will help ensure that students' needs are met. Ms. Chloe explained,

> "...There aren't enough....progressive educator[s]. You shouldn't...feel like a unicorn, you know? In your eyes...nothing that you're doing [is]...magical; it's just something that you're doing that's essential to make sure that your kids are getting what they

need and what they deserve so that they [can] compete in a global market..."

By dispelling the notion of progressive educators as mythical beings and emphasizing the essential nature of their work, Ms. Chloe challenges prevailing narratives and invites a broader embrace of progressive practices. She additionally identified a key and readily adoptable element, which is the commitment to ensuring all students "...[get] what they need and deserve..." Although progressive Black educators' perspectives on education may have unique origins, their practices can be replicated by any educator committed to equity.

Ms. Chloe further asserts there is power in numbers in describing the necessity of students and their families' voices when advocating for educational changes. In describing her commitment to the system, Ms. Chloe shared what she witnessed when students and their families were invited to the capitol to advocate for new legislation,

> "I think it's both...I think that...on the politics side, like as educators, you have to realize that your families and your students are your best assets at this thing. Some school systems are really good at turning those families into tools...to really push legislation along. I can recall a few years back [when] we took a group of our educators down to the capitol...to advocate for an increase [in] funding for...schools. And they ultimately listened. I mean, of course, not to the tune of what we wanted to, but we did create some progress. So, as educators, yes, the politics is there, but I would say we just have to remember our tools and remember what we have in our box. We have our students, teach 'em how to use their voices. We have our parents, teach 'em how to use their voices, and really work at that thing together because it's definitely power in numbers when it comes to that. And then personally...I mean, that's what being a progressive educator is about...[I]t starts with you..."

Ms. Chloe's insights into the scarcity of progressive educators and her call for unity underscore the critical need for collective efforts to meet student's diverse needs. Through her experiences at the capitol, she affirms the beneficial outcomes that occur when educators, students, and parents converge to advocate for equitable policies and the transformative power of solidarity in addressing systemic change. Collective action is necessary to begin bridging the substantial resource and opportunity gaps present in today's public education system.

Ms. Danielle (30), a current educator in the South, shared many of Ms. Bethany's sentiments regarding standardized testing. She criticizes how teachers are often forced to "...teach to the test..." without instilling new practical skills and how they do not account for the existing diversity in learning styles. More specifically, the standardized assessments in her district rarely align with the curriculum, especially when the curricular standards are imported from other states and districts. She explained that much of their "curriculum [is] from California [and] New York," which are "...thriving, well populated, well donated, and well-governed states..." with the funding to ensure their curriculum matched their state tests. A luxury that Ms. Danielle has not experienced as an educator. She continued by explaining the significant resource disparity her school experiences, how it impacts student achievement, and the implications of those outcomes. Ms. Danielle stated,

> "We have to share workbooks, or we have to print [and] buy our [own] printing paper. That's the disparity that I'm seeing now...in...the Black community. Not only do we not have the right curriculum [but] we [also] don't have the resources with that curriculum to teach. Teacher guides are scarce, we're sharing teacher guides...When it comes to Chromebooks...I have 54 students in one grade, and they all have to share one computer...And so what happens is you get the test scores back, you look at the overall state...the overall county, [and]the city, and then you get back into those marginalized groups and say, 'Oh, Black people are not thriving. Black people are not smart. Look at their test scores.' But look what you gave us. You gave us nothing! ...We worked with the best that we had. For students who do thrive, kudos to them. But as a community, we are not thriving because we don't have the resources to thrive..."

Ms. Danielle's candid reflections on the challenges employed by standardized testing underscore a broader issue of resource scarcity and inequity in education, particularly within marginalized communities. Her critique of the disconnect between imported curricular standards and local needs sheds light on the deficiencies of a one-size-fits-all approach to education. Ms. Danielle's narrative reflects her dedication to education as deeply personal while reflective of the political structures at play within her organization. When asked whether her commitment was personal or political, she explained that "it is both..." Ms. Danielle continued,

> "...Personally, I wish I had an educator like me growing up. Yes, I was confident. I

spoke out when I needed something, but I wish a teacher [had] helped me out. I wish the teacher [had] made it more engaging [and] reached out to my parents...Politically...I don't see people that look like me in spaces where I want them to be. I want them to be lawyers. I want them to be doctors. I want them to be in politics. I don't see enough of us...there...[A]nd also this whole not teaching about [Black] history...So...politically, I'm doing that for them too...I need to see my people thrive, and politically, I wanna speak out to the politicians, to researchers to get that out there, get that information out there like this is what we're going through...If we really deep dive into the research [and] not just, 'well, Black people are just at the bottom tier.' Go deeper...as to why. And then help!...[In] what ways can we help? [In] what ways can we build that educational equity for them to succeed? And it might be extra money, but do that. So...everybody in this country is thriving, not just certain groups..."

Ms. Danielle revealed a deeply rooted desire for change in education, born out of her own experiences as a student and her observations of systemic inequalities as an educator. Through her dual lens of personal and political commitments, she articulates a vision of education that advocates for holistic support and practical research that can advance equity and help struggling communities thrive. Ms. Danielle illuminates the critical need for systemic reform and inclusive policies by acknowledging the dearth of representation and inequitable access to resources.

Mr. Franklin (26), a middle school math teacher and Dean of Curriculum and Instruction in the Northeast, expressed that Black students suffer from a lack of representation from their administration and teaching staff. He explained how the organizational hierarchy is racially structured and how it limits the number of Black educators in leadership. He explained,

"...I think...you could definitely speak towards the lack...of teachers that look like them or the lack of administrators that look like...them. You have very few teachers [who] identify as the same race or ethnicity as our children. Then you have even fewer administrators that identify as the same race or ethnicity as our children. And it's like the further you...get to the top of an organization, the less likely it is that you're gonna run into somebody that looks like you. And the issue is those, those individuals...have that final overhead say so on what is being done with children? How are they receiving

> instruction? What is being communicated to families on a day-to-day basis? What are gonna be the policies of your entire school network? And so you have someone that doesn't look like them, making decisions for them, that doesn't live in their city, that doesn't see them on a daily, daily basis to really know what's going on in the school. Passing down policies, you have a...superintendent passing down policies to a principal passing down policies, to their secondary leadership who's then passing down policies to the teachers. And so it's like this trickle down...effect where even though there we may have more...diverse teacher spectrum, which is beneficial, but...some either leave the profession before they even move up, uh, in pursuit of word mobility or they just kind of stay, stay as a teacher and don't, don't go up at all. [Because] also the administration has also created a stigma of looking very unsustainable. And in this day and age, people are seeking to be very sustainable in life."

According to Mr. Franklin, there is such high turnover at the administrative level that it is not considered a sustainable avenue for educators seeking long-term job security. Moreover, in alignment with the other progressive educators, Mr. Franklin believes his role is "rooted" in personal and political ideals. He does not consider the work possible "...unless you have a personal ...buy-in..." Mr. Franklin shared that he "...take[s] the children [he] work[s] with personally...the school that [he] work[s] in personally...every little detail..." On the other hand, he shared that he also has a "...political stake in regards to...advocacy work..." Mr. Franklin explained how important it is for educators to leverage opportunities to have their voices heard to advocate for students and themselves.

Ms. Kwensi (60), a veteran educator in the South, underscored the importance of student advocates for ensuring all of their needs are taken into consideration. She explained how the system failed to holistically evaluate students' circumstances and how this can impact their social-emotional well-being. Ms. Kwensi stated,

> "...[One] of the most critical issues in public education is that we don't look at the whole student. We don't look at the home life. We don't look at whether or not that child had breakfast...or even dinner that night before. They might have had potato chips for dinner. We don't look at whether or not they have their lights on, whether or

not...they're being raised by grandparents because their parents might be incarcerated or [their] parents might be in an abusive relationship. We really have to look at the whole student because there could be other reasons why they're struggling academically and socially, emotionally. So we really need to make sure that we maintain social emotional learning within the schools and that those programs are done with fidelity and they're done consistently."

Ms. Kwensi echoes the sentiments of the other progressive educators grappling with the limitations of traditional academic metrics and evaluations. In emphasizing the significance of considering students' socio-economic circumstances, familial dynamics, and emotional well-being, Ms. Kwensi highlights the inherent inadequacies of a system that fails to recognize the complex realities shaping marginalized students' lives. Meeting these needs has been made more challenging, however, due to new policies created to ban Critical Race Theory (CRT) in public schools. Ms. Kwensi explained how even though CRT was not taught in their school, the sweeping legislation encompassed any discussion of resources pertaining to race. She shared,

"A lot of...teachers...were very disturbed that politicians were making it [CRT] even an issue when we weren't even discussing this in the classroom. It even got to the point that we were told that if we were gonna purchase anything using school money, it had to be approved. So even if it was...academic based, it had to be approved to make sure it would not fall into that line of anything having to do with race or Critical Race Theory. And so we just decided, at least [my] department, we decided that we would not purchase any academic material. Only just you...consumable supplies, paper, pencil, things like that. Because we didn't wanna have to go through the process of having something approved that we knew we needed for our classroom. So it was very frustrating for a lot of educators."

Feeling undermined by the system that should trust their expertise, educators went as far as ceasing the purchase of academic materials to avoid the offensive approval process. Notably, however, while Ms. Kwensi recognizes the issue of materials being banned and the system failing to be holistic, she considers her commitment to education to be solely personal. She explained, "I consider there to be a personal commitment. Politics can change...I think it's a calling...I have a gift for teaching...

I believe that it is what I was created to do." Ms. Kwensi considers the political perspective from a more literal rather than structural approach, in that external politics can change and evolve as new governing leaders are elected, as opposed to a more fixed personal politic regarding education.

Ms. Melinda (48), a math interventionist in the South, underscores much of the concern Ms. Kwensi described when she shared that the most critical issue in education is the number of teachers leaving the profession. She explained that there are not enough new educators entering the profession to offset the number that are leaving. Ms. Melinda explained,

> "The most critical issue overall right now is...the shortage...I mean, we're in a crisis now with the number of teachers leaving the profession, and then the number of teachers who are entering the profession, it's just not a balance. So I don't know who is paying attention...but, um, you know, I'm doing the math because that's just what I do on a daily basis, and if somebody doesn't open their eyes and it's not gonna take too many more years and we're going to be in, in a mess..."

Ms. Melinda's assessment of the teacher shortage crisis reflects the far-reaching implications for the future of public education. When experienced educators, especially those committed to progressive values, exit the profession, the lack of new entrants escalates an existing precarious situation. Even though Ms. Melinda recognizes the teacher shortage as a national crisis, similarly to Ms. Kwensi, she does not identify with the inherently political aspect of her role. Consequently, she "...consider[s] [her role] to be a personal commitment..." Ms. Melinda continued,

> "...At first, I thought I wanted to go into what I didn't even know was politics. I didn't know that's what it was called because my dream was to go to school, be a teacher, and then be a member of the school board. That's what I was going to do until I figured out what the school board did and how they argued and everything. And no, I don't wanna do that. So, yep. It would be personal. So I think I can touch individuals a lot easier or with a lot less personal pressure if I just kept it personal.

Like Ms. Kwensi, Ms. Melinda has a literal approach to politics. She would identify her role as political if she were a member of the school board; however, as a classroom teacher, she believes that she can avoid potential political pressures. While Ms. Melinda acknowledges the broader

implications of educational policy and governance, she opts for a more personal approach to make an impact.

Ms. Quinta (28), a charter school educator in the Northeast, reflects many of Ms. Melinda's concerns regarding the teacher shortage. She explained the broader implications of their school losing a core element of their performing arts program and the long-term impact this had on students. Ms. Quinta explained,

> "[The]...teacher shortage, that's the big one. We had a teacher resign today. Literally, she gave her two-week notice. She's the theater teacher. I was, like, shocked. But I get it...She knows...her value and on the other side of this decision is gonna be a lot more pleasant experience. So it's like we take the loss, but we also have to be understanding. But ultimately, the kids are impacted the most...We don't have a huge extracurricular...focus. We only have performing arts, and we have gym, and kids don't even get those every day. So without...performing arts...the kids are deprived socially..."

Ms. Quinta explained the tangible repercussions of teacher attrition, especially mid-year. Although fellow educators understand and recognize that departing teachers are doing what they feel is best for their well-being, they simultaneously acknowledge that it is the students who suffer the most in the end. As school funding continues to decrease and extracurricular programs continue to be cut, it is essential that the programs that do remain also have active teachers willing to facilitate them.

In alignment with the other junior educators in this study, Ms. Quinta considers her commitment to education to be personal and political. However, she believes her dedication is more rooted in her political commitment as she recognized she would likely be happier, more valued, and experience better pay in another profession. She explained,

> "Both...I believe that my existence is political...I think that it is radical...I know my value, and I think that there are so many other places I could be and be more valued and be paid more. But I do believe that my existence is political, especially when I see teachers who are not as culturally responsive; I'm like, I have to stay. I literally have to be here because I have to help regulate the situation. I have to be the other force in the room...I have to do things differently...I think...it is very personal, but I think I stay for the political reason. I think if it was up to like personally, I would have

been gone...[Because] I think I could be happier somewhere else, but I stay because I think...I'm willing to sacrifice a little bit of happiness if it means that I'm, I'm giving a little bit more...[So] I think I stay politically."

Ms. Quinta acknowledged the allure of alternative career paths offering greater recognition and remuneration while remaining steadfast in her conviction that her presence in the classroom is a more effective form of resistance. Her choice to remain in the system is motivated by a sense of responsibility to challenge the status quote in advocating for cultural responsiveness to effect substantive change in the educational landscape.

Mr. Stephan (26), a science teacher in the South, echoed many of the same sentiments regarding resource disparities and teachers not having what they need to develop and facilitate innovative lessons. He explained, "...I'll have like a really good idea that I want to do, but it just would not be sustainable because I would have to go out and get that stuff..." Mr. Stephan continued by explaining that even if he had the funds, he would have to take additional time out of his day outside of his contracted hours to acquire the necessary materials. Underscoring the other critical issue he explained, which is the limited time educators have to perfect their pedagogy. Mr. Stephan stated,

"The biggest...thing is resources and then time commitment because...it is so hard...to be the best possible educator you can be...within the limit of school hours. Whether that's from you getting up earlier to get to school before your class starts to lesson plan or...planning after school [and] planning on the weekends. And...I don't wanna do [any] of that...There's supposed to be a planning period [but] I gotta go sit in somebody else's classroom because, you know, teacher shortage, 'cause being a teacher is hard..."

Being an effective teacher is a significant time commitment and even more so when one is aiming to be progressive in their praxis. Mr. Stephan's reflection highlights the challenge of balancing the motivation to provide engaging instruction with the reality of limited resources and time constraints, a common challenge faced by educators in this study. Further, similarly to the other junior educators interviewed, Mr. Stephan's commitment is rooted in personal and political ideals; however, he explained that it was not his intention to be political but rather that he recognized the inherent politics embedded in his role. He continued,

> "I feel like it's both. I mean...I'm not trying to be political, but in reality...everything is political in some way, shape, or form...For me personally and politically, [I] focus on, you how can I, in some minute...way – granted, I may not ever see fruits of [my] labor – [but] how can I bring some sort of positivity to my classroom for my scholars... However that looks, whether it's through the content, whether it's through our conversation [or] whether it's through me sharing something about [myself]..."

Mr. Stephan's experiences illuminate the complex realities faced by educators, especially those new to the profession. His direct acknowledgment of the inherently political nature of his role, coupled with his efforts to cultivate a favorable classroom landscape, undergirds the multitude of responsibilities teachers have. Mr. Stephan's narrative reflects the reality of many of the participants in this study, exemplifying the commitment and creativity necessary to navigate the precarious landscape of contemporary public education, all while aiming to have a meaningful impact on their students and their futures.

Ms. Tracy (58), a veteran educator in the South, similarly echoed that the teacher shortage is a critical problem. She described the aftermath of teachers leaving the profession in high numbers during the pandemic and the implications for students and the teachers who remain. Ms. Tracy further explained the social-emotional impact of virtual learning on students and teachers. She stated,

> "Fighting the powers that be and just being overworked. So the biggest thing that we're fighting right now [is] teachers literally left the building. We came back and were thrown in the building with kids that had been, and not to even mention ourselves, but you know, breaking down emotionally. Our mental health, our self care, many of us were weak and we needed our own support to be able to support the student...So we failed the student as the educator, but then the state failed the teachers to be able to support the students. We had a lot of people literally have nervous breakdowns last year, and they walked away, which left the few people [who] are still there to pull the load for others. So you have a classroom with students, no teacher, people had to cover, you got 40 and 50 kids in your room where your capacity is 25, you're [now] breaking down. The heat, the air things are not functioning properly [and] you still gotta prepare

> the goals...state tests...and milestones that come along with your evaluation and your job... You got students that are in the building but not coming to class or students that are still literally remote...Disconnects with language with our ELL's [English Language Learners]. Literally, there were a couple of kids that never logged on until we opened the building. That's when they started school. [So] it was a lot...It was very stressful. And then we get more work, no [extra] pay, and really just we're frontline workers out there, and we put ourselves in harm's way for the profession, and it wasn't really appreciated."

Ms. Tracy highlights the system's many failures to ensure that students and teachers had what they needed to be successful during and after the pandemic. The impact of burned-out educators leaving the profession resulted in the remaining educators feeling overburdened and overworked as they mitigated the gaps created by the attrition. Overcrowded classrooms and compromised learning environments took an emotional and physical on students and teachers. As a progressive educator Ms. Tracy is capable of identifying the critical issues in education, however, consistent with the other veteran educators interviewed, she considers her efforts to be rooted in personal rather than political commitments. She shared,

> "I think it's more of a personal commitment. Even though I have done some political stuff in the building. Voter registration is one of my...sorority['s] initiatives [and] it's a personal belief that we should all vote [and that] our voices do matter...So, yeah, it's a personal commitment more than political."

Similarly to the other veteran educators interviewed, Ms. Tracy views her political commitments in literal terms and as separate from her teaching role. Voting and voter registration are key elements for the cultivation of democratic citizenry and an effective method for introducing students to civic engagement; however, viewing one's position in the classroom as inherently political influences how one identifies and redress inequity in the classroom, in their organization, and in society at large.

In summary, the insights shared by these eleven progressive Black educators reveal their perspectives on the most critical issues in contemporary public education and how they view their roles and responsibilities as teachers. Their concerns regarding resource inequities, teacher shortages, and limited time constraints underscore their capacity to identify significant problems in education and establish what composes their progressive commitments. To further explore how these

educators came to understand their roles as progressive, this next section will examine how their childhood schooling experiences informed their racial identity and, ultimately, their progressive praxis.

5.2 Racial Identity Formation & Progressive Praxis Development

Black educators' formative years, shaped by diverse K-12 environments, profoundly influenced their views on education and their adoption of progressive teaching methods. The progressive Black educators in this study shared their experiences and strategies for fostering a student-centered learning atmosphere, which is a learner-centered model – as opposed to teacher-centered – that is rooted in constructivist and democratic principles (Salnick, 2023). The process of racial socialization – how society conveys messages about the significance of race and ethnicity and their related values – involves instilling cultural pride, preparation for injustice, encouraging an increase in self-efficacy, and explicitly challenging harmful rhetoric (Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014). The educators who participated in this study underwent distinctive forms of racial socialization in diverse educational settings characterized by varying school structures, cultures, and levels of teacher influence. Factors such as neighborhood and community contexts, relationships with educators, and peer interactions collectively shape their racialization process. Consequently, these experiences influence their commitment to embracing and promoting a progressive praxis.

Racial socialization frequently commences within the home environment, evolving through subsequent educational experiences (Lesane-Brown, 2006; Murray, Stokes, and Peacock, 1999). As students embark on their journey into elementary school – a pivotal period for the assignment and self-selection of racial identities – some may initially possess a strong connection to their racial identity, while others find it more salient later in life (Lewis, 2003). Ms. Charisse, a Haitian American educator, shared how she came to terms with the discriminatory experiences she had with her peers. Ms. Charisse's racial identity was primarily solidified in the home; however, it was informed by instances of alienation from her peers due to her race. Although was never confused about her racial identity, she initially stated that her K-12 schooling experiences in predominately white schools "...did not inform [her], because [she] always knew [she] was Black..." However, after a brief pause, she continued,

> "...well, in a way it did, with experiencing racism... [I]n public school there were experiences that made it clear [how I was treated] was based on racism.... [T]he students who were predominantly white, in [my] classes [and] they would have parties, they would have engagements, and us Black students were never included."

The exclusion Ms. Charisse experienced informed how she perceives the education system and who it is meant to serve. She considers herself a progressive educator because she "...acknowledge[s]...the system was never built..." for people of the global majority. She explained how the foundation of this country was built on the exclusion of "...women...Black people...[and] Native Americans..." Ms. Charisse attributed significant shifts in the system to the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* and stressed how important it is to recognize that the regime is set up to help make individuals comfortable in a system never designed with their success in mind.

Ms. Charisse's early schooling environment shaped her perception of how the system was designed to function and, thus, how she approached her progressive praxis. In alignment with historical race scholars in education, Ms. Charisse believes in a particularistic approach to teaching, emphasizing that when Black students get what they need, all students benefit (Dunn, 1993). She explained how important it is to "...creat[e] a sense of belonging in [the] classroom...for all of our students, but particularly our Black students...period...Sometimes people are like, 'Why [just them]?'...[Because] when Black students receive everyone benefits! So I'm being specific..."

Ms. Chloe, who grew up in the South, shared how her self-perception was shaped after transferring to a more diverse high school with "...a group of mixed peers and mostly white teachers..." after navigating predominately Black schooling environments for elementary and middle school. She explained, "...the impact that my [primary] school education had on my perspective of myself and my abilities, I noticed a difference between me and my peers." She attributes that self-assurance she possessed – and failed to witness in her African American peers in her more diverse schooling environment – to "...[her] primary school experience." As an educator who fondly remembers their early educational experiences, Ms. Chloe expressed how she wanted to instill the same confidence she received by ensuring that her approaches are centered around the students and their learning environment, ultimately meeting them where they are. She shared, "...[S]o...I wanted to be... another black educator that could positively influence my scholars [and] make sure

they're confident about [who] they are, what they can be, and just really ensure that they receive an education that's tailored to them and beneficial for them as adults." Ms. Chloe's desire to focus on students' self-efficacy and receiving an education that is intentionally designed for their benefit is one of the many ways progressive educators adopt a student-centered approach to teaching.

Ms. Bethany, who attended predominately white schools, recalled how she believed her race was overlooked while in K-12. As a result she did not fully appreciate who she was or what she was capable of attended she was in higher education. Ms. Bethany explained how later attending an HBCU for college shaped her perception of her abilities. She stated, "...They put more emphasis on who I was as a person...there wasn't a lot of emphasis placed on African Americans..." Ms. Bethany explained how she did not develop a more positive self-perception as "...a Black educated woman [who] could do anything..." until she entered higher education. She continued, "So I didn't really understand...until I went to an HBCU, and they glorified Black people for who they were." According to Ms. Bethany, her K-12 experience did not aid in her developing a positive self-image related to her racial identity. To combat what she experienced, she explained how she does everything in her power to explain to her students how the system operates and their role in it so they do not have to wait until college to begin understanding their value. Ms. Bethany shared how she aims to instill in her kids the mindset that even though Black people are viewed as not being "...at the top of the...pole..." they should exercise their power to figure out how to get there. Ms. Bethany explained how critical it was to "...get [their] education..." and stressed the fact that "...[they] don't have to be the smartest...[they] just have to know how to critically think..." and learn how to "...make [their education] work for [them]..."

The formative schooling experiences of these educators played a significant role in shaping their racial identity and the praxis they ultimately adopted. Despite being educated in diverse environments, Ms. Charisse, Ms. Chloe, and Ms. Bethany shared a common challenge: an organization that lacked a widespread commitment to fostering an inclusive culture.

Organizational structure and cultural inclusivity

Schools and their inhabitants play pivotal roles in perpetuating and reshaping the complexities of race and racial hierarchies. However, the maintenance of structural racism in schools is not due to the actions or inaction of an individual, group, or school but rather a result of widespread

institutional and organizational buy-in for the continuation of the status quo. Achieving and sustaining a racially inclusive environment necessitates comprehensive organizational support at all levels. Schools must constitute explicit and implicit directives affirming inclusive, welcoming messages while challenging detrimental rhetoric that jeopardizes the preservation of an equitable atmosphere. Participants reflected on the positive aspects of being part of racially inclusive schools, where they felt valued and integrated into the community. However, they also recounted the difficulties encountered in spaces that failed to acknowledge or accommodate their cultural experience. These experiences shaped their racial identity formation and influenced how they navigate their respective organizations in the future as educators.

Ms. Tracy grew up in a predominately Black, suburban city in the North. She recalled "...learn[ing] the Black national anthem. . . ," and she shared, "[W]e sang it with pride and glory every single day like people do the Pledge of Allegiance..." Ms. Tracy, even as a young student, understood how unique this experience was, so she was "devastated" when she moved to the South for high school and learned that because of forced busing, she would not attend school in her community. She explained, "I was in the ninth grade and. . . they [the new school district] had [forced] busing, which was devastating to me...[I was] being taken out of my community going into another community that really did not look like the one I was in. . . The teachers, some were Black. . . but the student body was totally different..."

The rich cultural experience Ms. Tracy enjoyed in her primary school years did not carry over into high school, as the organizational commitment to cultural representation was different. Not only was she no longer singing the Black National Anthem to start her day, but she believed she had been racially profiled regarding her course placement and needed her parents to intervene on her behalf. She shared how having these disparate experiences "...led [her] to the classroom to make a difference..." Ms. Tracy wanted "...to be that support person, to help propel them to be the best them..." She explained that even though "...they may not be on the college path...whatever the path is...[she aimed to] help them be their best self and not just profile them as...the Black kid. . . or...the poor kid..."

Organizational messaging regarding race can be profound and direct (e.g., singing of the Black National Anthem) or more covert and indirect (e.g., assigning Black students to incorrect courses). Regardless, it permeates the organizational structure at all levels and significantly influences all

actors involved. Ms. Melinda, an educator raised in the South, was also a product of forced busing. She described her experience navigating a newly integrated school and how the organization mismanaged the potential of their first Black homecoming queen and first Black valedictorian. Ms. Melinda shared,

> "...I graduated in '91 from high school, and I grew up in a pretty urban city. We were still bused though, [there was] forced busing...But... we had never had a Black homecoming queen, so [when] the Black girl had won... we [ended up with] a Black and a white homecoming queen. We had never had a Black valedictorian. So instead of narrowing it down to [tenths of a] point... they just took the GPA, and we had three valedictorians because all three of them had the same GPA because the Black girl would've been the valedictorian..."

Similar to Ms. Tracy, Ms. Melinda was required to leave her community to attend desegregated schools mandated by the *Brown v. Board* decision. Due to the sluggish implementation of the Supreme Court's ruling in many Southern districts, a busing mandate was introduced to expedite efforts. Although the intention was to enhance educational resources and opportunities for Black children, the outcome often heightened the racial trauma they were subjected to (Driver, 2018; Tushnet, 1994). These experiences exposed Ms. Melinda to racial injustice early, shaping her understanding of her position in the world and defining her role in effecting positive change. Ms. Melinda's high school publicly demonstrated that Black students' achievements do not deserve the same independent recognition that white students historically received from the school. Consequently, Ms. Melinda wanted to combat that and understood that doing so would require learning about her students as individuals and demonstrating that she cares about who they are as a "...whole child..." She explained,

> "I'm interested in the person themselves...[so] we go far beyond the subject area...we're talking about current events...life skills...relationships...So when [they] walk through that door...[they're] walking through into life. So [I tell them] if you haven't lived before you came into this class, then consider this living..."

Ms. Melinda demonstrated what it takes to celebrate her students, how she got to know them and their interests, and how she built intentional relationships. Ms. Melinda recognized that

cultivating this inclusive environment had to be a priority regardless of whether her organization took the initiative. Underscoring how progressive educators mitigate gaps in cultural inclusivity in their organizations.

Ms. Quinta, an educator who transferred to her first public school in the third grade, learned early in her development that Blackness is not monolithic. She explained how "...for the first time [she] really understood Blackness in a different way..." and acknowledged that she had witnessed a lot for her age. She continued, "...I saw all types of things...and started to see like, 'Oh, Blackness isn't one way..." Ms. Quinta explained how she witnessed "...kids that were spot on, who were doing...everything they needed to do....And there were kids who were...throwing desks...[and] in a lot of ways that shaped [her] experience." Ms. Quinta went on to explain the impact of having predominately Black leadership in this elementary school. She shared, "...we...had a lot of Black staff. The principal was Black for the first time. It felt very culturally responsive...like a community." Though Ms. Quinta valued the Black educators she encountered and the culture they created, she recognized how the principal's unilateral trajectory for all Black students to attend college was reductionist, which limited students and further influenced how she understood legitimate ways "to do Blackness" (Johnson, 2003). She stated,

> "I felt in a lot of ways Blackness had to be one way. It was very, very, very strict. We were in school from seven o'clock to four o'clock every day. And our principal was really just like, 'You're going to college, and whatever it takes to get you there, we're gonna do.' So I felt he was committed, but I also felt like he wanted Blackness to be one way."

Sometimes, schools that serve large Black populations adopt more regimented and structured organizational policies and practices in an effort to keep students "on track" (Hambacher, 2018) and, in Ms. Quinta's case, college-ready. However, inequity occurs when the ideologies that motivate the policy and the disproportionate outcomes of the practice persist unchallenged. As a progressive educator, when Ms. Quinta recognized that her organization was going in a similar direction as her elementary school, she identified an opportunity to "...leverage people from [the] community..." who knew "...what [her] kids need[ed]..." She explained how her organization followed community recommendations and implemented a new "...socioemotional requirement..." when they realized they had gotten "...super strict..." and were relying on "...[their] Black educators to enforce the

discipline..." To correct for their punitive phase, Ms. Quinta explained how her organization began focusing on "...check[ing] in with the [students] mentally...[and] socially..." Ms. Quinta's experience underscores the importance of a school culture that values students as individuals and invests energy into learning what motivates their interests.

School policies are intended to ensure widespread organizational stability and objective continuity of practice (Wells, 2002). Oftentimes, however, one-size-fits-all policies do not account for situational occurrences that may require a different approach than the one mandated. Zero-tolerance policies, for example, were adopted to address school violence, primarily drug, gang, and gun offenses that were increasing on school grounds (Stahl, 2016; Morris, 2016). Though the policy appears necessary and neutral, its application becomes punitive and biased. Teachers began utilizing zero-tolerance policies for non-violent issues that often involve perceived disrespect or cell phone use in class. Consequently, these policies have disproportionately pushed Black students out of academic spaces for non-violent, interpersonal conflicts with teachers and peers.

Mr. Stephan recalls constantly being in trouble in school and the lack of intentional attempts by his teachers to ascertain the root of the issue when conflict occurred in the classroom. He explained how the response was often so swift that there was little room for meaningful dialogue to help diffuse the problem and create an avenue for deeper understanding, connection, and redress. Mr. Stephan shared how "...when [he] was going through K-12...it was just real quick. Like, 'Oh no, he's talking back. Go to detention, go to in-school suspension, go to out, OSS – outta school suspension'...There was no patience. There was no conversation." He expressed how, as a student, he did not understand the issue's significance. However, his experiences as an educator caused him to be more inquisitive rather than reactionary regarding undesirable student behavior. Mr. Stephan shared,

> "...[W]hen it comes to the classroom and interacting and... especially behavior, [or]... discipline...I always go against the grain...I've always had a rule [that] I will only go the method of writing a behavior referral up... if I've exhausted every other option. Whether that's [having]...countless conversations [where] I've tried to give them [the] benefit of the doubt [or] I've tried to be stern and handle it as best as I can. [Then] I'm like, 'Okay, well now I'm just gonna go ahead and try and get some more help outside

> because I've tried everything that we deem as putting scholars first or specifically, trying to understand what's going on."

The school policy may recommend that teachers resort to a behavioral referral after the first or second warning; however, Mr. Stephan prefers to exhaust all alternative options before doing so. Not until he identifies that the situation is grossly out of his control does he call upon external resources to mitigate a classroom issue.

Although merit is often touted as the primary determinant of student outcomes, how organizational policies are practiced profoundly impacts the resources, connections, knowledge, and status accessible to a student (Bourdieu, 1990). How school policy is implemented can vary from classroom to classroom and school to school. However, when aiming to build equity, a core set of structural values must remain consistent across teachers, classrooms, and organizations. Mr. Franklin, an educator who once attended the school where he now works, explained how he witnessed non-Black teachers approach school policy, particularly regarding discipline. He explained how his "...experiences have...[been] informed by...the area and school that [he] work[s] in, [which] is predominately African American..." Mr. Franklin, "...Observe[d] how other individuals [who] did not identify as African American...can perceive cultural differences...and behavior of students..." This means, "...there are things that may seem normal [to him as a Black man] that may seem abnormal to them, or [he] can rationalize [the] behavior differently..." He concluded by declaring how non-Black educators create their interpretation and assessment of Black students' behavior, and it "...isn't always the right assessment."

Mr. Franklin aims to improve students' self-efficacy and opportunities to succeed to combat the inconsistencies in student perception among educators. Mr. Franklin believes the lessons acquired in striving for mastery in a particular math concept, for example, can translate into more significant opportunities for growth later in life. As an educator and a school leader, Mr. Franklin explained how he approaches this in the classroom and how he encourages other educators to be creative in their criteria for student achievement,

> "...I consider myself to be a progressive educator because of my emphasis on not only teaching [and] catering to the academic skills of a child, but also, building...a child's like belief in...themselves...and their own success, and...their willingness to strive for that

> success. So, part of my success is not only being intentional about data and responding to conceptual and procedural errors that I may see in student work or making sure that the content standard is internalized but also making sure that students also believe in their capabilities to achieve. Because even though there are a lot of students that are very capable of the math, but they lack the confidence...to actually try it...So... we spoke to students about being able to have...a growth mindset, knowing that sometimes you'll make mistakes in math, but it's important that you learn from those mistakes and use them to grow. And then creativity know, allowing students to know that math is flexible...[A]lso pushing teachers... to understand that when we teach students, we're teaching them... the way to access the material, but [also] allowing students to have their own ways of achieving that mastery as well..."

In his K-12 years, Mr. Franklin learned that differences and, more explicitly, biases in perception can impact student treatment and, consequently, their outcomes. Therefore, he aims to maintain a learning environment that ensures students believe in themselves and their abilities. The messages conveyed through the curriculum and school personnel, whether explicit or implicitly, reinforce and challenge existing racial attitudes and understandings.

Teacher influence

Relationships and engagement with educators notably influenced participants' decisions to become educators and to abide by the progressive values they chose to adopt. Many of the experiences the educators shared of being overlooked for their successes or feeling unnecessarily targeted resulted from negligent and discriminatory practices exercised by their K-12 teachers. However, some shared positive experiences with role model educators who demonstrated what it meant to be student-centered. Teachers are "frontline actors" who facilitate, negotiate, and gatekeep "fundamental democratic ideals" while preparing students for "upward social mobility" (Collins, 2009, p. x). However, how educators engage in these practices varies due to respective life experiences, teacher training (e.g., pre-service and ongoing), and social climate.

Hypervisible-invisibility

Black bodies in organizations, like schools, have been historically marginalized and "othered," underscoring the relationship between "race, place, and the politics of visibility" (Jenkins, 2023, p.239). Trapped in the paradox of hypervisible-invisibility, Black youth frequently become the focal point of excessive and unwarranted negative attention (hypervisible), all the while struggling to have their voices acknowledged and their needs addressed (invisible) (Newton, 2023). Rooted in anti-Blackness – an ideology that renders Black bodies expendable – the concept of being present yet unseen is the reality of many Black students whose organizations do not center them in the conversation. The anti-Black perspectives that underscore the invisibilization of Black bodies are deeply entrenched in organizational structures and are maintained and reproduced through overt and subtle antagonistic dynamics that foster organizational and interpersonal neglect of Black students (Jenkins, 2023).

Ms. Brianna, who was raised in a predominantly white community, often faced the challenge of being the sole Black student in her class and the additional complexity of being overlooked in comparison to her white peers despite excelling academically. This juxtaposition was very explicit for Ms. Briana and greatly "...influenced [her],...how [she] got in the classroom and still shapes who [she] is today." Ms. Brianna stated,

> "...Growing up...it was a matter of [not] being seen...So, feeling like I was getting passed over, feeling like my accomplishments were not comparable to my white counterparts' accomplishments. So anytime I got a good grade or did a good, you know, thing in the class that was never celebrated...I very much so remember when it came to opportunities for leadership when I was in the K-12 setting...they weren't looking at me as a leader. And so I was just getting passed over and not seen."

She remembers watching classroom presentations and never seeing herself reflected in the animations, expressing, "...it was very clear to me how I was being left out of scenarios.." As a progressive educator, Ms. Brianna wanted to challenge how she felt invisible to her teachers and within the curriculum. She explained, "I wanted to be able to be a beacon of light for someone in the classroom..." because she often felt unseen for all of who she was. Therefore, Ms. Brianna wanted her students to know, 'Hey, it's okay to be who you are... You're supposed to be proud of your hair.

You're supposed to be proud of the way you talk and [how] you look." Because of how invisible Ms. Brianna felt in the classroom, she believed there must have been something wrong with who she was. Therefore, she wanted to ensure that her students felt welcome in her classroom and to be proud of how they showed up. The lack of inclusion and acknowledgment encountered by invisibilized students holds profound implications for their future, given that education serves as a crucial sorting mechanism for experiences, opportunities, and knowledge (Lewis, 2000). These elements are even more tightly coupled for low-income schools whose students rely more heavily on their resources.

Ms. Danielle, raised in a predominately Black community, also felt overlooked in her K-12 experience and attributed it to the school's low resources due to community divestment. Schools with large Black student populations often receive less funding and thus more often employ less qualified teachers. Ms. Danielle candidly explained,

> "...I grew up in... [a] community [that] is a very low-income, predominantly Black community... [T]he community thrived [because of] the people there, but it didn't thrive financially. And so what happens is those schools in those areas do not get what they need. And [so] I did not get what I needed in my K-8 experience."

Ms. Danielle believes that she was forgotten about and left unchallenged because of her "good" behavior and academic ability relative to her peers. She continued,

> "I just didn't think that the teachers poured into me... they forgot about me...They ignored me. They, you know, they're calling me to help [other students], but I was never pushed [academically]... K through eight... [I] didn't get the push that I needed. Because when I got to high school, I realized on my own, not a teacher... I realized I couldn't do the math that I was chosen to do... It was [put in] an honors algebra class. And I'm like, 'I can't...what is this? I can't do any of this. And I'm like, I didn't even learn this.' They [were] like, 'So how are you straight A student at your K-8 school?' I'm like, 'I don't know. I don't know any of this math. Can I please switch to a remedial math where I can catch up and maybe I can get to honors, I don't know by the time I'm a senior, but right now I [can't] do the math?' And I made that decision on my own. And I was, it just showing me like I didn't learn what I needed to learn for high

> school because of where I grew up....And I realized that on my own and not a teacher. And...from that moment, I was like, I'm gonna just do this on my own because no teacher is pouring it to me. Not one teacher is pouring into me. How did I realize this on my own? I'm a month in school. I'm literally failing the class, and not one of you said, 'Okay, what's going on?' You just kept letting me fail until I realized myself I couldn't do it."

Upon entering high school, Ms. Danielle keenly realized the substantial impact of invisibilization on her academic opportunities. This became apparent as she felt unprepared to continue in the honors math class she was assigned in her 9th-grade year. It is noteworthy that Ms. Danielle independently identified this issue, further contributing to the idea that her success was inconsequential. Unfortunately, the emotional isolation from invisibilization often exacerbates the reduction of teacher support (Newton, 2023).

When Black youth learn that their behaviors are perceived as undesirable, they modify their behavior to avoid attracting negative attention and retain teacher support. Ms. Quinta recalls when a teacher quit on the first day of school, motivating her to be a "good student." She shared,

> "...When I got to second grade, I had a teacher who was white [and] she quit on the first day. That, that actually was like one of the most defining moments. I was like, 'Oh, I have to be really good [because] the teachers are out here leaving us.' But I also thought that maybe we, as a classroom full of black children – I remember thinking this – I thought that we in some way made her leave. So... that really helped me to try to be a good student."

Ms. Quinta described how she self-policed to ensure that other teachers did not leave. Suspicious of the idea that the overabundance of Black students was the reason for their departure, she committed herself to modeling what she believed the teacher would consider to be suitable or appropriate classroom behavior, essentially distancing herself from other Black students who may not be doing so. Experiencing hypervisible-invisibility not only serves to hinder the socio-emotional development of girls by isolating them from their teachers and peers but also serves to criminalize them and push them out of school altogether (Morris, 2016).

Ms. Bethany, transitioning from middle to high school, suffered from excessive negative

attention from a teacher she believed had it out for her based on her race. She explained

> "She was my eighth-grade social studies teacher, and then she was my ninth-grade social studies teacher. I felt like she was following me...[T]hen she was like my 10th, 11th, and 12th grade [elective] teacher. She used to pick on me, and I kept telling my mom, 'Mom, I think it's because I'm not white. I don't care what nobody says. I think she doesn't like me because I'm not white.' She used to pick on me...I was the only kid that got in trouble. She gave me a D for chewing gum in her class. That's how bad it was. And then when my mom had a meeting, she's like, 'There were a few days where she put her head down.' So nothing directly related to, 'oh, she didn't do this as far as classwork, schoolwork, participation, homework.' It was, 'Oh, she put her head down. Oh, she chewed gum, [so] we're gonna give her a bad grade'".

This was a salient racial experience for Ms. Bethany, as she voiced how it was her first encounter with poor grades. In reality, when some educators attempt to employ a student-centered approach, they do so in a way that makes a student feel targeted. Consequently, Ms. Bethany declared she would never recreate the same hostile environment she was forced to navigate in her childhood. Reflecting on when she felt alone in the system with no one to intervene, she expressed,

> "I promised myself that every kid would be equal...I wouldn't pick on kids and wouldn't be mean just to be mean. Back then, there were no advocates for kids...[I]t's a different ballpark now, but...once you were fed to the wolves, you were fed to the wolves. And back then, kids were to be seen and not heard. So when you go to the office...you [don't] have nobody to advocate for you. You [were] just there. And I promise that if I ever had seen a kid that [is] going through the same thing, I would try my hardest to advocate for [them]."

Ms. Bethany understands what it means to receive unwarranted negativity from an educator, which motivates her commitment to creating a safe and welcoming learning environment for all of her students.

The experiences shared by the progressive educators in his study are evidence of broader systemic issues that particularly impact Black students. Their narratives illuminate the consequences of racial marginalization and invisibility within the educational system. Ms. Brianna's aim to

become "...a beacon of light..." for her students uplifts the need for visibility and representation to foster a sense of belonging and self-worth among students. Ms. Danielle's experiences also highlight the significant disparities in educational resources that disproportionately disadvantage students from low-income and predominately Black communities. How she employed her agency to rectify the gaps in her learning demonstrates the resilience necessary to combat systemic neglect. Ms. Quinta's account of adjusting her behavior to avoid scaring off a new teacher and Ms. Bethany's yearly experiences with a hostile educator underscores the importance of positive teaching role models who are motivated to help students succeed.

Positive role models

Evidence suggests that racial congruence between students and teachers in the classroom can significantly impact academic achievement and improve students' sense of self and belonging (Joshi, Doan, and Springer, 2018). The few Black educators and teachers of color the participants in this study learned from serving as role models and catalysts for their current teaching practices. Ms. Quinta shared the lasting impression having Black educators early in her educational career had on her self-perception.

> "...[D]efinitely...without a doubt, having a Black preschool teacher, I can still remember her name...Miss M, [and]...a Black first-grade teacher...Ms. C really [had] a big impact on me...I don't think I felt any type of way. I was just...able to really be a kid. And so I think that in that way, I felt like any other kid in the class..."

The ability to simply exist in the classroom without a racialized target on her back was a notable experience for Ms. Quinta and speaks to the learning environment she chose to cultivate for her students. To ensure students were engaged, Ms. Quinta explained how she sought feedback from her students daily. The purpose was to ensure she was accurately gauging student interests and ensuring their work was meaningful. She stated,

> "...Kids will tell you when they're bored, and it's not personal, but they will let you know, like, 'This is not interesting, miss.' And that...feedback...for me is big. [For example] when you give a do now and you watch kids who finish it super quickly, or you watch kids finish it super slow...that [at] the moment data is...bigger than professional

> development. Watching what kids struggle [with...or what they like versus what they don't like...what kids discuss more...Almost every day, kids will see a prompt, and they'll answer it, and it's cute...they gave you what you wanted, but it's not passionate... I'm constantly striving [that] for passion..."

Ms. Quinta's efforts demonstrate how her ability to be herself as a student influenced her desire to create a similarly inclusive, student-centered atmosphere in her classroom. Intentionally monitoring student progress and responses to the assignments exemplifies her dedication to ensuring students are engaged with the content and are motivated to continue learning because it aligns with their interests. Educators play a significant role in creating a nurturing and engaging classroom environment while ensuring students are prepared for and have access to opportunities that can expand their worldview beyond academics.

Student involvement has yielded greater student developmental outcomes, especially those involved in leadership programs (Cress et al., 2001; Smith, 2018). Ms. Tracy shared how she encountered a Black teacher in her high school who was recruiting other Black students into clubs where they were grossly underrepresented. As a result, she got involved in clubs and organizations she would not have otherwise been invited to because she was Black, allowing her to cultivate leadership skills early. Ms. Tracy reflected,

> "I was in a lot of organizations [and]...social clubs...I was the first Black to integrate some of those opportunities based on one of my instructors, who was a Black female who wanted to get more Blacks involved in things. So she pivoted me in some scenarios where I end[ed] up being like the first to integrate some things...And so I did run for the student council. I was the first [Black] Vice President of the Executive Student Council. My counterpart, he was the first Black male to be the President of Student Council..."

Ms. Tracy benefited from the guidance of a Black teacher. She was also afforded early opportunities to hone her leadership skills, which proved beneficial down the road as a teacher and in education governance at the state level. Because of the efforts she was a product of, Ms. Tracy became the type of educator who exposed her students to as many opportunities as possible. She reflected on how "...[she has] students from the past that [visit her]...' and say, "Remember when you took me skiing, we went to this [and] you made me read the newspaper,' 'You didn't let me play football

because I didn't do my work. 'Hey, this is my wife, this is my kids, this is my teacher.'" Because Ms. Tracy does not often see her efforts reflected in her teacher evaluations, she finds comfort that her students return and express their gratitude as her measure of a job well done.

Some progressive educators in this study identified progressive educators in their educational journey and highlighted how they went above and beyond. For example, in reflecting upon what influences her progressive praxis, Ms. Chloe shared,

> "...[Just] seeing those progressive educators that influenced me...I can think back to my fifth-grade band teacher pulling my parents aside and saying, 'Look, you get these kids on instruments so that they can pay for college themselves.' I can think back to...a middle school instructor of mine who made sure that I was really... doing my due diligence in the area of science and math and making sure that... I could set myself up for success. I remember... a ninth-grade instructor of mine saying, 'I could see you in politics' [and] recommended me [to] a program...that sent me to DC where I learned lots of great tools that I still use to this day..."

Ms. Chloe benefited from several educators who valued her achievement, as demonstrated by how they advocated for her long-term success beyond their respective classrooms. Notably, these characteristics should be shared among all educators yet are considered progressive relative to the status quo. Ms. Chloe attributes much of her success to those educators who challenged her throughout her K-12 experience and explained how they helped her become the progressive educator she is today, stating, "... [T]hose really influential educators in my life really made me from the very get-go say, this is what I wanna do [and] this is what I have to do...content-wise." Progressive educators significantly influenced Ms. Chloe in her K-12 experience. Their commitment to her overall life success, above and beyond their classroom, instilled specific values in her that she felt strongly about passing along to her students. However, regardless of whether the educators in this study benefited from progressive educators in their K-12 experience, they eventually developed a progressive praxis, much of which they attribute to the highlights and challenges that molded their racial identity.

The formative schooling years of the Black progressive educators in this study notably informed their racial identity formation and, ultimately, their pedagogical approach to education.

Their organizational and interpersonal accounts of systemic neglect and discriminatory practices shaped how they processed their racial socialization and the strategies they chose to employ. As progressive educators, they have been able to leverage their unique backgrounds to foster learning environments that prioritize student learning and ensure that inclusivity and equity are more than just discussed ideals but actionable realities. Their commitment challenges existing inequitable structures and creates a blueprint of tools and strategies for future progressive interventions.

5.3 Tools & Strategies of Progressive Educators

This section explores the methods progressive educators utilize to maintain a student-centered environment. As educators working antagonistically to the traditional system, they often engage in rebellious behaviors. These actions frequently result in them being flagged as problematic, potentially risking their jobs. The progressive educators in this study discuss how they defy school policy and innovate with curricular content to maintain student engagement.

Rogue tactics

Rogue educators are teachers or school leaders who identify racially oppressive practices and policies and strategically employ their agency to create and sustain equitable learning environments outside the traditional system. At the time of the interviews, all educators were still operating within the conventional system, so they are not considered rogue educators; however, their behaviors and actions lend themselves to rogue tactics. In considering various practices and policies that involve curricular content and disciplinary approaches, the progressive educators in this study employed rogue tactics to challenge racially oppressive systems they identified operating within their respective organizations. Employing these strategies is classified as a rogue act because the progressive approaches are often antagonistic to traditional methods of operation. This was apparent when Ms. Danielle explained when she "...got in trouble..." for speaking up at the community town hall meeting. However, she expressed that "...[she] did not care... [she] was gonna say what [she] had to say..." because it was clear to her that the community members were also concerned about the cities' changes "...but [they] were afraid to speak up...", but Ms. Danielle was not. For that, she faced the consequences.

Ms. Tracy was similar in that she "...often got in trouble for being a rebel..." As a progressive educator, she has worked hard to be culturally diverse in her pedagogy and invited various cultural voices and perspectives into the classroom. However, she expressed how she is "...dishearten[ed] at times that [her] evaluations "...reflected [her] rebellion..." rather than "...reflect [her] passion..." She recalls being "...called in by the old school Black teachers..." who expressed they were "...tired of getting [her] out of trouble..." Although she recognizes that her approach can be "...powerful and dangerous..." and has "...probably hindered...[her] evaluation in the district..." she was steadfast in the fact that she did not do what she did for district approval. Ms. Tracy stated, "I'm still gonna retire in...six years. And...they can't fire me. So...it's about the kids. I tell them, 'I come here every single day for you. I'm in this building for you.' Ms. Tracy's unwavering commitment despite backlash from her organization exemplifies how progressive educators must resort to rogue tactics to remain true to their praxis.

Educators who value building and maintaining relationships with their students often adopt alternative approaches to relate to them and cultivate a welcoming environment. Unfortunately, this is not always met with positive feedback from the administration, which is what Ms. Brianna experienced as a teacher. She explained,

> "...[S]o that was a battle that I faced with them thinking that my teaching style was not appropriate just because I included music or because I wanted to relate to my students and understand their perspective. I wanted to build that relationship and that became unprofessional to leadership. So that really shaped me into who I am. 'Cause it made me take a stand like, 'Oh, I have to do this now because they're telling me I can't.'"

Progressive educators like Ms. Brianna understand how building a solid foundation with their students by relating to their interests and meeting them where they are helping to ensure a more symbiotic classroom environment.

Modifying disciplinary practices

Zero-tolerance policies are a common feature in public schools today. As more research emerges documenting the disproportionate impact of zero-tolerance policies on students of the global majority, some schools have implemented alternative forms of discipline for teachers to adopt.

However, the result of "disciplinary infractions" largely depends on how the educator perceives the student and the act the student is engaged in. Too often, non-violent, verbal, interpersonal conflicts within the classroom arise and lead to interventions from school resource officers and even law enforcement. Progressive educators recognize how the relationships they build with their students can mitigate much of the potential student-teacher conflict that may arise. Ms. Brianna explained how she was classified as "unprofessional" because of how she managed her classroom. She shared,

> "...My discipline was geared towards what I [thought] would support them, but for some reason, that was viewed as unprofessional... [S]he actually told me that I need to adjust the way I speak to them because it's not professional. And I felt like, Hey, I'm gonna talk to them like I'm their mom like I'm their aunt because that's how we relate to each other... I don't have any disciplinary issues. So whether or not it makes you comfortable is not really my problem. It's more so about what works for the kids..."

As the classroom teacher, Ms. Brianna believed she was the best equipped to determine what worked best for her students. She recognized that by taking the time to develop those relationships, she could relate to them and maintain their attention, so she experienced minimal conflict. Even though it worked for Ms. Brianna's classroom environment, it was misaligned with how the traditional system recommends teachers interact with students. Is the ultimate goal to ensure all teachers remain aligned with policy or to create the most efficient and welcoming learning environment for all students?

As Mr. Stephan went on to explain, many of the "behavioral" issues he is faced with are not violent and within his ability to reconcile. He continued,

> "...[T]here's... a big thing of... no phones in class [and] there's no sleeping [and] there's no this, there's, no that... [W]hen it comes to phones... I'm not about to be... chasing people... and things of that nature. I let 'em know about it, 'Hey, look right now, let's focus on this, and then as soon as we done, you can get on your phone.' [I]f they're sleeping, you know, I'll talk to 'em like, 'Hey, what's up? What's going on?'...[And] I'll leave 'em alone... I remember one time I asked some of my Scholars, 'Who here has a job?' Dang, near[ly] every single one of 'em raised their hand. And then some of 'em was like, 'Oh, I just got off at midnight, and then they had to be at school as six... 'But

> that's just a reality that... a lot of them [are] having to manage. So, I try to be the one that... is understanding [in these] situations..."

Much of what Mr. Stephan encounters in his classroom includes minor infractions such as cell phone use or sleeping in class. Even though some headlines depict physical altercations between students and school personnel over cell phones or verbal defiance, Mr. Stephan recognizes the value of incentivizing and choosing his battles with his scholars. As he explained, some situations lend themselves to compromise depending on the day's instruction goals. In contrast, others require understanding only acquired through care and communication. Care and communication are also prudent when ensuring students' instruction is relevant to their life experiences and affirms and recognizes their legacies and futures.

Ms. Quinta, who had several defining moments in her K-12 experience, also reflected upon situations she encountered as a student that she knew she did not want to reproduce in her classroom. She shared an experience with a teacher who she believed abused the disciplinary system by giving the students boring work on subjects that he was interested in when they did not comply. Ms. Quinta explained

> "There are things that I've experienced as a student from teachers that I'm like, I never wanna do that ever again. I had a teacher, a white male teacher who... abused the discipline system... [H]e at one point made us read a book about Mount Kilimanjaro. It was like, it was the most boring book I've ever heard....it was the worst. But I remember thinking like, why is he making us read this?...[W]hat are we getting out of this? And it's [because] he was interested. But we read it for like a month and it was like the worst thing ever. I was like, I don't understand who's regulating this, like... who's gonna fix this? [So]...I think for me as a teacher, just knowing... I at least have the awareness of how things used to be so... I can do things differently."

Ms. Quinta disagreed with her teacher's response to students' misbehavior and recognized that, by having that experience, she was better equipped to do things differently. Innovative and dynamic pedagogy often keeps students engaged, but educators must value a student-centered approach to learning for this to be a priority.

Curricular modifications

Progressive educators are intentional about their curriculum development because the mandated curriculum does not traditionally represent the histories or experiences of all students. The educators interviewed for this study explained why they put in the effort to go beyond the given curriculum and how they ensure it is relevant to their students. Ms. Quinta explained how vital it is for educators to have a "...willingness to grow..." to reach their students best. Rooted in the idea that all students can learn, Ms. Quinta stressed the importance of trial and error to determine what works best for each student, "if this way doesn't work, we gotta try something different." Rather than moving on to a new concept without ensuring mastery, Ms. Quinta recommends seeking "...new techniques and new literature..." to determine the most effective teaching model. "...Teaching and education [are] too complex..." to not be willing to be innovative, according to Ms. Quinta, and how an educator can classify themselves as progressive.

Being innovative as a progressive educator can take a variety of forms. Ms. Chloe ensures that the content is relevant and relatable to her students. Ms. Chloe explained,

> "...[A] progressive educator is knowing that...you have to go beyond the content to really tap into your scholars' needs [and] to even get their attention to engage in the content... [you have to] make it relevant for them. [A]nd that in itself is an additional task beyond making sure that they know how to add, subtract, and multiply. It's using real-world examples from things that are currently happening on television. I have [colleagues] who have done units on...prominent TV shows that the scholars are watching, just to make sure that they're engaging them and making sure that...all the elements are there...whatever the content that they're supposed to teach is there. But to be a progressive educator is to take that extra mile to make it relevant to your students and your families..."

Ms. Chloe recognizes that this requires additional effort because traditional education does not require educators to be exceptionally creative. The curriculum is developed at the state and district levels for teachers to follow and facilitate. However, the lessons are often superficial or didactic, providing few opportunities for students to be collaborative and hands-on, thus decreasing their chances of engaging with the material meaningfully. Beyond ensuring the curriculum aligns with

their students' interests, progressive educators want to ensure it will prepare them to survive in the real world.

Ms. Chloe significantly benefited from open and differentiated instruction and wanted to reproduce similar conditions in her classroom. She explained that she learned her scholars by "...tapping into what they really want[ed]..." and by doing so, she was able to "...provid[e] them with the tools for them develop and grow..." Ultimately, Ms. Chloe wanted her students to "...think beyond..." what they currently expected of themselves or what they believed the world expected. Additionally, as a progressive educator, Ms. Chloe values the holistic development of her students and, therefore, makes a conscious effort to learn about their interests beyond their academics. She shared how she developed and maintained meaningful relationships with her students throughout the year to ensure she could intervene where possible. Ms. Chloe explained,

> "...[W]ell, as a teacher just really...getting to know my students at the beginning of the year [and]...at the middle of the year...[A]nd [just] continuing to develop our students...Yes, it takes more time...but the impact and the growth [are] worth it...I would say it's just harder 'cause people don't, don't wanna put in the time...[but] our children are our future. So, like you have to put the time in now, you have to put the work in now. You have to really...tailor to their interests now so that they can be...successful individuals once they leave you...[I]t just goes beyond the classroom to me...[I]f I have kids in dance or if I have kids interested in sports...it's just really getting to know them...because they're not just gonna tell you that they need 50 more dollars so that they can play sports this season...[Y]ou have to keep asking them. You have to keep checking [on] 'em. They have to know that you care. And then for them to be like, 'Yeah, man...but you know, I'm gonna figure it out.' 'Yeah, we gonna figure it out together..."

Ms. Chloe understands the importance of meeting each student where they are and makes an effort to do so by developing meaningful relationships with them. By learning where they need the most attention for growth and their most significant challenges, she is more equipped to effectively guide her students toward success.

Traditional, top-down education (i.e., teacher-centered) commenced to prepare students for

the workforce. Decades after the foundation of public education, students are still expected to follow the traditional trajectory of earning the necessary credentials to labor for employment. Because this continues to be the reality for most students of the global majority, progressive educators want to ensure they prepare their students for what they could face after high school and college graduation. Therefore, students must recognize that the real world is much more complex than learning material to regurgitate on an assessment. As such, progressive educators like Ms. Brianna explained why she approached her instruction the way she did,

> "...[M]y instruction was geared towards what I knew what they needed... So that means that I'm not just focused on teaching them the standard, but I want to make sure they're able to be successful people personally and professionally... And so when I'm thinking of progressive, that means I'm gonna connect the content standards, what's happening academically to real-world scenarios so that students are able to apply what they're learning in my classroom [and] past my classroom. And this also means that I'm gonna have conversations with them that are not traditionally structured with standardized assessments... Because I understand that at the end of the day, how well they do on a test is not gonna...determine their ability to be successful in life. So when students are young, specifically in that K-5 setting... their minds are still malleable, so you still have the opportunity as an educator to impact the way that they're gonna think about the world. You have the opportunity to show them how to think... I really focus on how the skills that they're learning in school are going to be applicable to their life outside of the classroom..."

The curriculum provided to educators is meant to be aligned with the standardized tests that evaluate whether students can advance to the next grade level. However, they do not assess how prepared students will be to pay taxes, vote, or engage with the socioeconomic and political systems critically, for example. Some progressive educators recognize how the provided curriculum does not effectively teach about how the system operates to oppress certain groups and people and believe it is their responsibility to fill this gap. Ms. Quinta teaches her students about systemic oppression and the resources she utilizes. She stated,

> "...I would say one... way I've addressed this... is [to] have real conversations... with my

> students, and I let them know what it is. [A]nd not in a way that's just like, 'yo, racism exists,' but I will actually give them statistics... [T]here's a book called Punished... by Victor Rios... [and] it talks about black and Latino boys... going to prison, [so] I expose them to the school-to-prison pipeline. Not in a way that's to scare them, but to give them awareness and then help them move past it, [so] like, how does this apply to me? How can I [do] X, Y, Z? I feel like... those who are on the receiving end of the system... that's where you have to educate...?[Y]ou have to let kids know that you're in a system, you're in an institution..."

Ms. Quinta employed texts like Punished to help her students visualize the system in which they exist. She utilized the "...caged bird..." metaphor – comparing the system of oppression to a cage – to explain how easy it is to forget one is in a cage when it has been so all-encompassing for so long. Ms. Quinta wants her students to recognize their proverbial cage so they can be in a better position to free themselves from it.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the civil unrest in 2020 motivated many teachers, schools, and districts to discuss how they should address social issues and current events. Mr. Franklin explained the process his organization endured in response to the murder of George Floyd,

> "...George Floyd,... his murder... brought to light a lot of... racist, systematic practices that were happening in different schools. And so people took the time to call out different school networks, or different institutions that they thought were inherently racist... [S]o during that process, people [teachers] took the time to create different presentations for students that made sure that... students were informed about different situations and that... we had the opportunity... to discuss it..."

As educators collaborated to determine how to facilitate the best conversations regarding health disparities or the Black Lives Matter movement, they began to simultaneously evaluate how they approach other systemic societal issues, whether historical or contemporary. Mr. Franklin continued,

> "...Then we had to take the time to [say], 'Hey, let's review our actual curriculum. What are the materials that we're putting in front of kids?' So, like...what are we talking about in history class? [W]hen we talk about slavery in history class, how is

> that being rolled out?...[W]hat questions are kids being asked? Because we see time and time again, there's a lot... there are a lot of very problematic questions that our students are being faced with... [T]his school in Missouri asked this racist question about Obama. And... so our network has been put in a position to be very intentional about... review[ing]...materials..."

Many schools' multicultural efforts have fallen flat. Conversations about slavery and other racially charged historical and contemporary issues have resulted in racist class projects and homework assignments that offend students of the global majority and mischaracterize historical events.

> "...Is this question problematic? Are we providing... teachers with the time and...background knowledge to have a...properly informed dialogue with students?...[T]aking the time to inform teachers so that they can address their own biases and unlearn some practices...because they need to be seeing it as well. Like...if you see something in a lesson plan, you know you need to be aware of that or...something that you need to make sure you're not saying in front of students."

Mr. Franklin explained why his organization needed to evaluate the content of their curriculum intentionally, the educators facilitating it, and the biases they may hold. Because no educator can operate within a school as a race-neutral actor, it is critical to be self-reflective and open to reassessing and unlearning their perspectives. However, according to Mr. Franklin, the system may not be equipping its educators with the necessary resources to do so. Given how committed the system is to maintaining the status quo, this calls into question how progressive these educators can be.

A critical element that defines a progressive educator is their commitment to developing the next generation of democratic citizenry. What this means to each progressive educator, however, differs widely. Some educators have a very literal perspective of what it means to develop their political praxis and how to assist their students. In contrast, others derive from a much more structural perspective. Regardless of their understanding, an essential element of being a democratic citizen is being able to identify injustice and be well-equipped to take action when democracy is being threatened. Although the educators in this study self-identify as progressives, it is unclear whether they fully receive the necessary support and resources to commit to this ideology. The

following research question will explore the various approaches educators take to further their political education and how vital they believe it is for progressive educators to enhance their knowledge further. In addition, the next question will also explore the formal and informal resources educators utilized to maintain their student-centered and rogue practices while serving on the frontlines.

The reflections of the Black progressive educators in this study illuminate their profound role in challenging and transforming mainstream educational paradigms. Their engagement in rogue tactics to ensure they avoid punitive responses and remain aligned with their student's interests underscores their commitment to stepping outside conventional frameworks and often risking their professional standing. Going beyond the mandated curriculum, these educators advocate for the system to reconsider what it means to empower and educate future generations. Their narratives are a timely call to action for educational systems to retain Black progressive educators better and to prioritize a more holistic, student-centered approach that authentically values equity and justice. Furthermore, their ability to mitigate gaps created by the system promotes their desire to employ their agency to ensure their students have what they need. As the COVID-19 pandemic wrought unprecedented change in the public education system, the progressive educators in this study sought additional resources beyond what their schools or districts provided to address digital inequities and remain connected with students, families, and the community.

Chapter 6

Findings: Research Question 2

Research question: What resources did progressive educators use to maintain their praxis during COVID-19?

6.1 The Transition to Virtual Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted a number of institutions, with public education undergoing rapid and extensive changes that significantly transformed the daily lives of educators, students, and their families. Amidst this upheaval, the pandemic unearthed numerous pre-existing healthcare and housing inequities. Notably, however, challenges surrounding technological integration emerged as a paramount obstacle faced by the Black progressive educators in this study.

When schools began to close, the principal challenge revolved around ensuring students had access to the appropriate technological resources to remain connected to their learning environment. Although many districts and schools swiftly moved to address resource disparities by providing students with Wi-Fi and computers, many failed to effectively prepare students, parents, and educators to utilize these resources for educational purposes. Before the pandemic, technology was a supplementary aspect of the classroom rather than the primary conduit for learning. However, the closure of most public schools and the transition to learning primarily online necessitated a profound shift in approach.

The endeavor to replicate the physical classroom environment and its essential components in

the virtual realm presented a substantial learning curve for many participants. Educators candidly discussed the hurdles encountered in identifying and mastering new educational platforms. They detailed their efforts to support students and parents in mitigating any technological challenges, even after school hours. According to participants, most schools only provided Zoom and Google Suite, so educators were responsible for selecting platforms that allowed for the continuance of student-centered instruction.

More effective professional development before and during the pandemic could have mitigated the lack of training, support, and overall preparation for the transition to virtual learning. Though some educators considered their organization's professional development ineffective before and throughout the pandemic, others shared the consequences of an organization getting rid of their professional development altogether.

This chapter highlights the significant impact of digital inequity on public education, particularly magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the firsthand experiences of progressive Black educators, the chapter illuminates the formidable challenges that confronted students and teachers alike. These challenges encompass the daunting realities of limited technological and internet access and educators' struggles with adapting to virtual learning. As progressive educators deeply committed to student-centered learning, the pandemic was particularly disruptive due to their inability to personally engage with students as this did in the classroom environment. Moreover, the chapter examines the systemic oversight of digital literacy education and the failure to address digital inequities proactively before the beginning of the pandemic. Progressive educators' perspectives shed light on the urgency for systemic change and strategic adaptation to ensure equitable access to education in the digital age.

Subsequent themes in this chapter further explore the complex challenges and innovative responses of progressive Black educators amidst the pandemic. Although the pandemic was a difficult time, progressive educators managed to successfully navigate virtual learning and remained committed to maintaining student-centered practices. The participants in this study adapted to the virtual learning space by identifying and developing innovative approaches to enhance student engagement and provide some form of differentiated instruction. This chapter concludes by exploring the essential role of professional development in supporting educators' growth and advancing equitable practices within education. It critically evaluates the structure, effectiveness, and

limitations of professional development experiences during the pandemic, emphasizing the importance of locally tailored, meaningful training, that is ongoing and supports career advancement. In showcasing the perspectives of progressive educators, this chapter offers valuable insights and recommendations for navigating the complexities of an ill-prepared educational system in a rapidly advancing digital age.

Navigating an ill-prepared system

Digital inequity in public education was an existing, widespread issue. News stories of students completing homework assignments in McDonald's parking lots for their Wi-Fi were common occurrences (Ebrahimji, 2020). However, the pandemic brought the digital divide to the forefront of educational discourse. Ms. Tracy clearly outlined the significant challenges faced by families during the pandemic regarding access to technology and internet connectivity. She emphasized how the existing digital inequities were further exacerbated, leaving many students without what they needed at the onset of the pandemic. Ms. Tracy explained,

> "I think one of the other things is our barrier with the haves and the have-nots. A barrier was truly not having... technology or actually being assigned a device from your school, but had, your parent not had the money to have... internet or they gave you access... [at] a location, but your parent had to work; therefore you could not do the work because you could not get on the computer, which now you're a grade level or two behind. So we have, again, marginalized the lower and middle-class working parent [who] wants their student to go to school and have a[n] education. We failed them because one day, we were in the building, and the next day, they were like, school is closed. And the parents should have not only been given a device for this student, but we failed as far as giving them internet access. And not every student had a device. It could have been three or four kids in one house... with one device, so everyone's having to utilize the one device to get their work done..."

Ms. Tracy criticizes the system for being ill-prepared for the technological requirements of the pandemic. Although the institutional powers that govern public education could not predict COVID-19's commencement, the transition may not have been as difficult if digital inequities had been

taken seriously prior.

The system left students ill-equipped to learn in the pandemic and teachers ill-equipped to teach. Ms. Brianna became a new teacher at the beginning of the pandemic, and though she "...felt prepared to teach in the classroom...", she "...didn't know how to teach virtually..." However, even Ms. Bethany, an educator with multiple years of experience, vulnerably expressed how challenging the transition to virtual learning was for her. She shared that it was one of the most difficult parts of her teaching career, and she does not believe that she succeeded, though she did her best. As a young, energetic teacher who is used to robust conversations and engaging relationships with her students, Ms. Bethany deeply struggled with the new normal cultivated by the pandemic. She expressed, "...It was the hardest point in my life...I couldn't engage with my kids...[it] was the worst time...," and if she could give any recommendations to the system for future educators, it would be that "...teachers need to be trained in that [virtual learning]..." Additionally, Ms. Bethany did not believe that her students had what they needed to be successful and to remain actively engaged. She explained,

> "Student engagement [was]...harder...[I couldn't] get them to write on the screen 'cause they didn't have the same resources I had. So there was those little things...[I]f all [the] kids had iPads, all [the] kids would've been able to write and participate on the screen, and I [could] hold them more accountable. But when the resources aren't there, and they just have these old cheap $50 Chromebook, it ain't so much they can do..."

Virtual learning dramatically changed how most teachers engaged with their students and revealed how prepared or unprepared educators were to facilitate learning via Zoom and other online platforms they may be unfamiliar with.

Operating under the assumption that all educators were technologically sound, the system overlooked veteran educators who may not commonly use technology as a supplemental tool. Mr. Stephan compared the learning curve teachers experienced to an episode of "Abbott Elementary." A veteran educator struggled to use the new classroom application in an episode about school technology. Much like what participants shared occurred in reality, Abbott's administration offered no staff training for educators to learn how to use the platform, and the teacher was too embarrassed to ask for help. The character, Ms. Howard, often resorted to inputting frivolous data or refusing

to use the system altogether, and Mr. Stephan explained,

> "...that's real. That's what people would do. 'Cause it's... like, I've never did this before. Now you're forcing me to do it with no explanation and then with no sustainable... plan [for integration]..."

Although schools ensured teachers had access to common applications such as Zoom and Google Suite, some teachers were simultaneously learning how to use the systems and how to facilitate curriculum with them. Even if educators were familiar with the applications, they were constantly updated with new features to account for the additional online traffic and meet student and educator needs.

Ms. Quinta reported how long it took her and her students to adapt to the virtual environment. Adapting her curriculum to what was available in Google Drive was a process and took several months to master. Ms. Quinta described her experience as the following,

> "I had to really learn how to use Google Drive. [T]he documents, the Google... Sheet[s]. I really had to tailor that into...the same curriculum that we've been using. So I had to... [figure out] how to make an assignment with those things, PowerPoints [and] different notes. That was really hard...It took me a while. I would say... it took me like the first two months school to... really get a knack [for] it..."

Ms. Quinta explained that adapting to the new technology also took her students a while. As an educator in a low-income community, her students did not have access to computers therefore, they needed significant help with basic computer skills, which she explains would have been beneficial prior to the pandemic. Ms Quinta continued,

> "...'Cause they... haven't used technology in this community a lot. They don't have the technology. So for them to... put a laptop in front of them and actually be told to use it, that was tough for them... [A] lot of them learned... how to use a keyboard [and] what buttons to press. They didn't know that [the] shift button could turn one of those... letters into a capital... So we had to literally teach... basic computer skills, which, if that was taught before the pandemic, it would've been a smooth transition. But since we don't have those resources to teach computer skills, that was mostly us teaching from August to like October basic computer skills..."

Although technology has become a much more ubiquitous feature in daily life, some communities continue to suffer from limited access to technological equipment and the Internet. Had the institution of public education prioritized closing the digital divide in the years prior to the pandemic, as well as providing the digital literacy training that was previously mandated in some schools to students and teachers, they would have been better prepared for the transition to virtual learning. Virtual learning requires strong teachers who are willing to learn, remain open-minded, and acquire new responsibilities.

According to Ms. Chloe, the virtual environment "...exposed some teachers. . . " She explained how the pandemic led to a loosening of restrictions and limitations in oversight; therefore, educators were left to rely solely on their own creative devices to adapt and facilitate curriculum. Ms. Chloe explained how "...[education] became more loose..." and she did not believe that it "...was to the benefit of the students..." Ms. Chloe expressed that "...[Y]ou really had to be a strong teacher to survive in the virtual environment because it required you to innovate and engage in a way that you never had before." The virtual learning environment required educators to be strong and adaptable to navigate the shift effectively.

The progressive educators in this study identified the digital inequities in public education and how unprepared the system was to make the transition to virtual learning. Although the system could not have predicted the commencement of COVID-19, the lack of attention in bridging the digital divide prior to, ensured the transition to the virtual environment would be much more labor intensive. The chronic inaccessibility of technology for some communities also illuminated the lack of digital literacy education being offered by some schools. Though it may appear that technology is ubiquitous enough not to require formal education, the progressive educators in this study have demonstrated the need for digital literacy continues to exist. To overcome these pre-existing challenges worsened by the pandemic, progressive educators discussed how they had to be strategic in maintaining their praxis in the virtual environment.

The gift and curse of virtual learning

Educators during the pandemic were required to overcome a number of obstacles to bridge the digital shortcomings illuminated by the transition to virtual learning. Progressive educators who desired to remain as student-centered as possible in the virtual environment had to devise in-

novative techniques to gauge student engagement, maintain relationships with parents and families, and prioritize student health and well-being. Educators described how they sought opportunities to relate to their students and their circumstances, as some students were too embarrassed to share their home environments with their peers. Participants in this study also explained how the pandemic allowed for limited separation between work and personal life, as teachers were mitigating technological issues with students and families well beyond traditional school hours. The transition to virtual learning was a daunting task, and not all educators – even those who consider themselves to be progressive and regularly traverse precarious organizational crossroads – believe they succeeded in the virtual environment. However, the Black progressive educators who participated in this study persevered and demonstrated how much they cared about their students' holistic well-being, which is evident in their attempts to remain as student-centered as possible despite the many limitations.

Ms. Bethany expressed she struggled significantly in the pandemic, especially in the beginning when she was trying to get them to "...buy-in[to]..." the new process, "...but [because she] couldn't see..." her students "...[she] couldn't see who understood..." and in her opinion, "...participation is the biggest part..." of learning. Ms Bethany explained that in the first few weeks, "....[she] didn't do a lot of teaching...[she] spent more time trying to get them comfortable..." She continued, "...So on Zoom, we're playing Zoom games [and] trying to build rapport and relationships so I can get 'em working..." In this process, however, Ms. Bethany learned why some of her attempts to re-engage students were not effective initially. To maintain the face-to-face engagement, Ms. Bethany originally instructed students to keep their cameras on, she shared,

> "...So when I was having a requirement to cut on your camera or...required to talk, [otherwise] I don't know what you're doing, [so] I have to sit there [and] everybody's camera can be off. Everybody can be muted for the entire class time..."

However, Ms. Bethany eventually learned that the issue was not the material she attempted to cover or the casual atmosphere she wanted to cultivate, but rather some students were too ashamed of their home environments to share them virtually with their classmates. Once Ms. Bethany recognized this as an issue, she did her best to make her students feel comfortable by being relatable and in showing that her home environment was not always ideal either. She explained,

> "...So you try to do casual conversations, but people don't want open up they camera 'cause they blinds broke. And I'm like, 'I have broke blinds [too]. My dog broke my blinds. You can see 'em any day.' It'd be days they'd be like, 'my room [or] my house dirty'. 'Okay, I got dishes in my sink.' I don't care if it wasn't [actually] dirty, I'll go make something look dirty just to try to get him there..."

Though Ms. Bethany does not believe she was the most effective teacher in the traditional sense, as she lamented that her lessons "...always didn't go as planned...", she worked hard to ensure her students felt seen, valued, and worthy of being present regardless of the conditions home environment. Similarly, Ms. Charisse recalled the state of her home as a child and could easily relate to the fear and hesitation her students may have felt; she candidly shared, "...You had your camera off, boo, I don't blame you 'cause I know if I was growing up, I would have my camera off 'cause they would see some things up in my household." Although traditional schooling is often antagonistic to progressive practices, it offers students an opportunity to remove themselves from their home environments and operate with a level of autonomy and anonymity that somewhat equalizes their trajectory. Students are always accompanied by some aspects of their home lives. However, virtual learning explicitly situated students within a personal context that was inescapable, offering an added layer to an existing pressurized circumstance caused by the pandemic.

The pandemic not only revealed technological inequities, but further unearthed how traditional education is not often conducive to learning. Teachers often discussed how rushed the traditional curriculum is and how they never feel that they have enough time to cover the mandated content (Collinson and Cook, 2001). Ms. Charisse recognized how the system attempted to continue business as usual in the virtual world, and she expressed her discontentment. The pandemic, however, offered her the unique opportunity to slow down. The limited oversight and confusion surrounding student assessment and evaluation allowed her to leverage her autonomy and develop curricular plans and timelines better suited for her students' needs. Ms. Charisse explained, " ...I was not rushing through anything. If the topic needed to last four or five...classes long, fine...[I]t was a pandemic. What am I rushing [for]...?" As the expert in her subject area, Ms. Charisse did not believe that her organization's administration or any other institutional powers had the right to dictate how she served her students in the virtual environment. She also did

away with a lot of the traditional criteria for student achievement, such as attendance, in-depth assignments, and rigorous assessments, She continued,

> "...And who's gonna check me? The state?! It was one of the opportunities like, no seriously, you gonna come to my class and tell me about what is health?! We're not doing that...We're doing our check-ins. We're gonna talk about their heart; we're gonna talk about drinking water. It's gonna be a safe space. And they will always remember how they were taught in that class...And it wasn't punitive. A kid didn't show up, Okay. I'm not gonna give you a zero. For what? You didn't show up for five weeks, okay, I'm gonna call making sure you're okay, send services [and] supports. But you're not gonna get a[n] 'F.' It was one of those things you feel like, 'What do I do with grades?' [But also] why do you care? It's a pandemic. . . "

Public education's attempt to maintain the status quo did not benefit students or teachers. In the midst of a pandemic and civil unrest, the youth, especially, needed time to process, heal, and regroup. Ms. Charisse explained that we too often take for granted what is asked of young people and that society regularly requires things from them that even adults struggle to accomplish. Rather than use this time as an opportunity to be more strict and further limit student agency, Ms. Charisse utilized the space to ensure her students were safe and well. She shared,

> "...We want a break sometimes, too, as adults. We're asking kids to do things that we don't wanna do. We go to therapy, we gotta huff, we gotta puff, we gotta light candles, incense, go for walks, have lattes just to be sane [enough] to get it together. And then we're asking these little ones, yeah, I don't think so. No! And guess what? Most of my kids showed up...And they always had an opportunity to check in with me. Sometimes if...after like five classes, I didn't see your face. I'm like, I wanna make sure you're okay. Call me when everybody leaves. Let me see your face. Check-in, check-out. That was it...[W]ith the pandemic, that's when everybody wanna be OCD. For what?..."

Ms. Charisse's plan to maintain her progressive praxis was misaligned with the system's attempt to maintain traditional policies and practices. This, however, did not deter her from ensuring that she remained student-centered in her expectations. The pandemic offered an opportunity for Ms.

Charisse to deepen her student-centered practices, however, her pre-existing commitment to progressive education is what underscores her willingness to stray away from traditional expectations.

Ms. Quinta also adopted a similar, student-centered approach for her students. Though she was acting against the system's expectations, she believed that she knew how to best meet her students where they were at the time. As a progressive educator, Ms. Quinta regularly operates outside of the traditional educational paradigm; therefore, she was somewhat prepared to deviate from the status quo. She quickly recognized that not everything she did need to be tied back to academics but that ensuring students were enjoying themselves was just as important. Ms. Quinta shared how she maintained her progressive praxis in the virtual environment,

> "I took out a lot of the extra stuff when I realized that there are so many other factors than just my boss telling me I have to do something. I started taking things away. So, like in our documents, for example, we would have a do now. A 'do now' is just the first thing a child does when they enter your room. I would change the do now up to something fun and interesting. I was like, this can't be all academic 'cause they're not with me right now. They're on camera, there's noises happening in the background... I have to get their attention... [S]o like cutting things out... [I]f we have like three writing tasks per day, I cut out two or I cut out at least one thing that seemed repetitive, or I would accept verbal answers too. I got to the point where I was like if I'm just trying to see participation, I don't need you to type this up; I'm gonna call on you. I'm gonna write down what you say. And then that would be your participation grade for today..."

Though some progressive educators struggled to adapt to the virtual environment, others realized that it was an opportunity to further employ their rogue tactics without being concerned with teaching evaluations and job security. Ms. Quinta explained how "...COVID was the most culturally responsive we've ever been. It's like when the world stopped, we had no choice but to stop..." She continued,

> "...[A]nother thing I did was... tak[e] a lot more breaks... [A]nd part of this is like the finesse of it all, but knowing that my principal... can't say exactly where I need to be at any moment, that for me was like, I'm gonna run with this now, [and] now I can

actually be where I wanna be when I wanna be there. [A]nd [it was] not like totally non-academic... it was still academic, but I felt a lot more agency to be able to throw in a quote, to throw in a clip... because there was a lot more room to justify. I could literally say, 'My kids were not participating, and I needed to stop the show and do something differently.' And... there was more justification for decisions during... quarantine..."

Progressive educators felt they had to fight harder to justify their nontraditional classroom choices. However, the virtual learning environment made student engagement the number one priority, more so than standardized testing, and thus afforded educators more freedom to rely on their own expertise for classroom instruction. Ms. Quinta used the virtual environment to her advantage and no longer felt the same pressure characteristic of the traditional school atmosphere.

Progressive educators in this study managed to remain student-centered and continued to prioritize relationships with students' parents and families. Oftentimes, I went above and beyond what was required of them and outside of school hours. Parents unfamiliar with the new applications their children needed to remain connected with their learning environment looked to their child's teacher for help mitigating these technological challenges. Ms. Danielle explained how she felt as though she was on-call like a doctor because she accommodated the parents' schedules. Though she encountered hostile and frustrated parents after traditional school hours, she explained why it was important for her to remain patient,

"...I was like, emailing, some parents, they don't even know how to email. Okay, I'm gonna text to you. I know you know how to use a phone. So I will...text parents like, 'Hey, this is what the student should be doing. I'll give you the steps on how to log on. Just call me.' When I say, I felt like I was on call 24[/7]. I felt like a nurse or a doctor. I was on call 24/7. Cause if parents came home late and they were trying to help their child, it's 10 o'clock at night [and] they don't know what to do. So they had to call. But I was really open cuz I know... that was a struggle for people who never had [the] technology before or don't know how to use it to now you have to use now it's a necessity, and I don't know how to use this necessity... It was so sad at first. Like they were so confused. They were frustrated. I mean, yelling. It was a lot. But I didn't take that personally because I know for a fact you never had this before. You don't

know what you're doing. I'm gonna be patient... with the students and the parents and just the families. Like we had... some Black children in our community that's raised by their grandmothers and grandfathers and great aunts [and] they definitely don't know what they're doing. So I really had to...be on call 24[/7]. And I wanted to teach this so that way... when this happens, again... in the future... they will know what to do..."

Progressive educators interviewed in this study ensured they could maintain their progressive praxis in the virtual environment. They quickly realized that student engagement would be difficult to maintain in the virtual environment, and they would have to devise innovative methods to keep them focused. Rather than attempting to map their intended syllabi to the virtual environment, they decided to take a step back and reassess what was best for their students. The Black progressive educators in this study determined it was best to slow down and find new ways to meet their students where they were. Educators changed lesson plans, did away with attendance, took breaks, and sought opportunities to reconnect with their students. Though it was not an easy feat, they managed to remain student-centered and continued to ensure their parents and families had what they needed. Doing so, however, required many of them to go above and beyond even their usual rogue tactics. Some went as far as identifying and introducing new educational platforms that could further ensure their students were receiving the student-centered instruction and support they needed.

Identifying new educational platforms

Public education was required to quickly pivot to adapt to the new virtual learning mandates. Though most organizations managed to provide their teachers with unlimited Zoom accounts, rather than the free 45-minute version, and ensure they had access to Google Classroom, any additional supplemental materials were provided by the educators themselves. The progressive educators in this study identified a need for additional educational support and employed their agency to integrate the new platforms into their curriculum. As Ms. Charisse explained it, she incorporated new technology "... because...it was student-centered... [She] saw the need and... did it..."

Although some educators managed to accomplish their goals with the resources provided, others recognized the significant impact the pandemic was having on student engagement and

concluded their students needed more. Ms. Brianna explained how poor engagement at the commencement of virtual learning motivated her to find innovative educational platforms that allowed teachers to continue cultivating relationships with their students and keeping them engaged.

> "...[W]hen we first became virtual, it was kind of hard to connect with the kids because they're at home [and] they're on Zoom. [A]ny... middle school child on Zoom is not really [just] sitting there. They're in the living room, eating hot Cheetos [and] watching TV. [A]nd...[the] connection was where I thrived, right? Like I am a relationship-driven person. So in my mind, the problem was the lack of relationship[s]. So I needed to...come up with a solution for how I could build th[ese] relationship[s]. So that began my quest to find different technology platforms that were going to help support building the relationship with students while also getting the data I needed to drive my instruction. If students aren't responding, how can I teach them? So that's kind of when I got introduced to certain platforms...Flipgrid, where students can record the videos [and] post them on a platform. [T]hey love that 'cause it feels like social media to them...So any way that I can pique their interest, I'm doing it... [T]he platform I really fell in love with was Nearpod...I like it because it allows students to engage with the content and it's a platform that is going to really support your differentiation of instruction. You're able to...attack those multiple intelligences with one platform. You have so much autonomy as a teacher to create something original and cater to your students. And so that's what, that's what I loved in my classroom is that I can build something that's going to reach every single kid in the classroom. And so then I began to value... what technology could bring and...yes, pen and paper are important, but that's just not the way that the new generation works...If they can get on their phone if they can type on their computer, they're interested in the learning, and we gotta do what they're interested in. So I was like any tech platform that I could integrate in[to] the classroom that was gonna get them excited..."

Ms. Brianna's student-centered approach was to cater to her students' interests and to identify platforms that allowed her to continue to differentiate her instruction. Ms. Danielle also valued ensuring that her curriculum remained open and differentiated. She discussed her discovery of

"...iReady..." and that she enjoyed using it because it aligned with their state standards. She explained that she was able to "...assign... lessons on...iReady, and students just had to get logged in..."

Educators' primary focus during the pandemic was student engagement. However, not for the purposes of collecting rigorous data or significantly raising standardized test scores, but to keep students afloat and at least provide them with the support needed not to get too far behind. Ms. Tracy described her experience with "...Pear Deck..." and how she used it to poll her students, assess their growth, and differentiate instruction. She also discovered "Screen Castify," where students are able to "...interact with the screen... and use the whiteboard..." The platform provided Ms. Tracy with the power to create innovative and engaging lessons. "Kahoot" was also a popular platform amongst the educators in this study. It provided teachers with a fun and engaging way to quiz their students on topics of their choice. Ms. Quinta shared that "...Kahoot was [a] big..." feature in her classroom. She also discovered "...Desmos [and] Clever..." and shared how they are websites that she continues to use outside of the virtual learning environment. The progressive educators in this study described these platforms as fun interactive opportunities for students to feel as though they are playing games rather than learning. This is not to say that progressive educators do not ensure their students value their education and opportunities to learn, but they recognize that the pressure of the pandemic warranted a new rhythm.

Technology was not an entirely foreign classroom feature prior to the pandemic, so some educators, like Ms. Kwensi, adopted and adapted tools they were already familiar with, like "...YouTube...", "...online flashcards...", like from Quizlet, and incorporated "...Teachers Pay Teachers activities... [and] worksheets..." Regardless of the chosen platform, progressive educators recognized how COVID necessitated technology use and thus identified new educational tools and taught themselves how to use and integrate the various platforms into their curriculum. However, doing so required additional effort and a lot of "...trial and error..." according to Ms. Chloe. She explained,

> "...So it required me just to do a lot of research into virtual learning...[W]e had to find different programs that could engage the students, that could...still incentivize them to get their work done. [B]ut again, to be an effective teacher, it took a little bit extra

time... it took some pivoting...[And] all of that takes time and...you gotta be willing to put in the work...if you wanna be effective."

Public education was required to pivot quickly in the name of health and safety; however, progressive educators' desire to replicate the classroom environment through a computer screen required more than the ability to communicate through chat and breakout rooms. Progressive educators quickly realized that if they were going to be required to continue teaching, then they had to figure out how to get their students more engaged.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on public education, most notably demonstrated by the transition to virtual learning. The pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing digital inequities, posing significant hurdles for both students and teachers. The progressive educators in this study adapted to a new educational landscape that required technological fluency, innovative teaching strategies, and a robust student-centered approach. The sudden shift to virtual learning revealed how systemically unprepared the institution of public education was to handle digital disparities and provide adequate digital literacy training. The educators struggled to replicate the classroom environment online and support students in overcoming technological barriers. Nevertheless, through their creativity and determination, they successfully navigated these challenges, often going beyond their contractual obligations to ensure their students received the support they needed.

Furthermore, by identifying and integrating new educational platforms, they aimed to enhance student engagement, foster differentiated instruction, and maintain student-centered practices despite the multifaceted limitations imposed by the pandemic. This section offers valuable insights into the experiences of Black progressive educators during this tumultuous period, emphasizing the need for systemic changes and strategic adaptations to ensure equitable access to education in a rapidly advancing digital landscape.

6.2 Professional Development During the Pandemic

Professional development (PD) is an essential component of a teacher's career. For the purposes of this study, professional development includes formal training courses mandated by the school and district, in addition to the opportunities and supports provided for career advance-

ment within education. The pandemic not only significantly impacted how students learn but also how educators adopt new practices and engage with one another. The participants in this study explained how their PDs were structured during the pandemic, whether or not they found them effective, and recommendations for future professional development opportunities. Additionally, some educators discussed the limited opportunities available to Black educators to advance in leadership.

The structure of professional development

Professional development is essential for continuing education, sharing innovative ideas, and practicing new pedagogical techniques. Each school manages professional development in their own way, however, the educators in this study shared common experiences with how their PD is structured and facilitated. Educators were asked to describe how professional development was implemented during the pandemic and who commonly led their training courses. Ms. Danielle shared the following about the structure of PD offered by her organization,

> "So the... ongoing professional development is where you break up into content [areas] so reading, math, science, [and] social studies. They break up into groups, and...the instructional coach leads those professional developments. Those are the ongoing [PDs] that happen biweekly. There are times where they would ask the teacher like to model what they're doing in their classroom. But as far as leading it, it's the administration, which is the instructional coaches. The other professional developments is like behavior-wise. And that is the behavioral team leader, so the dean of students [and] the behavior specialists. Those... professional developments are only led by them. They're not teacher-led. It is led by the behavior specialists, um, and the head behavior specialists in the school. Another professional development will be something that happens every summer, will return back for the summer for those in service days is, uh, community building within the teachers. And that is led by outside organizations and those will hardly professional developments."

Many participants described the structure of their PD in similar terms. They also shared that PD can be offered by the school or the district and led by various entities from within and outside the

organization. While teacher-led PDs are not out of the question, they are not the norm.

Other participants described their PD as more inconsistent if it even existed at all. Ms. Chloe explained how "...[L]ast year...they...did away with professional development, big mistake!..." She explained the impact on teachers and students when her school decided to get rid of professional development during the pandemic,

> "So... they took away professional development... and, you know... everybody had their reasons. It was in the name of mental health...[T]eachers were feeling overwhelmed, and... the PDs that they were going to weren't helping... [B]ut the impact of that was folks being lost in their scope and sequence, folks not having extra tools or even that, community time that you would have in professional development...where you could actually talk to other educators who are doing what you're doing and...you could share your successes and failures and govern yourself accordingly. [A]ll of that was taken away with doing away [with] professional development. So, I would say a lot of the teachers felt stuck, lost, and just not confident in their content. And the trickle effect of that, which you can see really quickly, is kids feeling lost and not confident in what they were learning."

Ms. Chloe's organization believed they were doing their educators a favor by removing professional development; however, it resulted in a "...mass exodus of teachers because they did not feel supported..." Educators significantly benefit from opportunities to engage with one another and continuously update their pedagogy, and the organization suffers when they do not properly assess what their teachers need. Ms. Brianna, an educator who began teaching at the height of the pandemic, also does not recall her first school offering any professional development. The second school she began teaching at, she described the PD as "...asynchronous through Canvas..." She continued,

> "...[I]t wasn't necessarily we're sitting down and experiencing a professional development. It was like, complete the work online, answer the questions, [and] you get the credit... That's kind of what it still is right now...[and]...it's not ongoing in my opinion, for either school..."

Ms. Charisse and Mr. Stephan, respectively, described their PD experiences in similar terms. Ms.

Charisse stated, "...[I]t's thrown together, and you just attend. You click, and that's it..." And Mr. Stephan explained,

> "...They send out an email...we go to...the school district website and look at some sort of mandatory training where nobody ever pays attention and they just click, click, click and then submit it. So that's the stuff that they've been making us do...[J]ust been...check the box kind of stuff..."

Although professional development can look different at respective organizations, many progressive educators described ongoing PD throughout the school year, grouped by subject area, and led by various educational entities from within and outside of the organization. Unfortunately, not all of the educators in this study experienced ongoing PD, and those who did engage in it at some level reported only having online training. Asynchronous professional development does not always provide the same opportunities for growth as synchronous or in-person learning. Without the chance to ask questions, practice new techniques, or discuss proposed interventions with other attendees, it can be difficult to assess educators' understanding of the material and the effectiveness of the content.

The effectiveness of professional development

Professional development experiences among the educators in this study varied in structure and in effectiveness. Effectiveness in PD can include the quality of the content – whether it is relevant or culturally responsive – the appropriateness of leadership and available opportunities for growth and career progress. Many described how their district or organization introduced new interventions without properly evaluating what exists or how to effectively integrate something new. Additionally, many witnessed how their organizations afforded teachers few opportunities to lead PDs and had limited mentorship available for Black educators seeking leadership opportunities within education.

When asked how effective they found their PD, a number of educators described it as ineffective because of its content. Mr. Stephan stated, "It don't really help if I'm being honest..." According to Mr. Stephan, PD consists of "...a round robin of great ideas..." but few clear directions for how to sustainably implement new interventions. He explained,

> "...[T]hey'll bring somebody in... from the district... [with] a really cool idea, but the thing that we run into is, I have no time to figure out a way to implement this in my classroom. Granted, it'd be a great idea, but it's not sustainable, you know?..."

Educators want to learn new pedagogical techniques, but need clear guidance for how to integrate the methods into their classroom. However, it is critical that the interventions are aligned with the school's population and classroom needs. Ms. Brianna and Ms. Kwensi shared that they attended PDs that were "...not culturally responsive...". Ms. Kwensi stated,

> "...I don't think it was always relevant to our kids or the, the population that we were serving, but we had to participate in it, so, and I didn't feel like my questions were being answered or addressed."

It is challenging for progressive educators to adopt interventions they do not believe will be relevant for their students. However, it can be difficult to get an accurate representation of new interventions without the opportunity to practice implementing them in low-stakes environments.

Effective professional development training gives teachers opportunities to ask questions, learn from other educators, and apply what they have learned. It also provides them with the chance to receive feedback in real time without concern about it being included in their teaching record or formal evaluations. Progressive educator Ms. Chloe expressed,

> "...[T]he reason why I decided to put my little hand in the bag for PD, because either it's not relevant to the folks who are sitting in there... it's not differentiated... it's repetitive or...not engaging. No matter what...there should be multiple opportunities for the folks who are listening to development to engage in the content. So don't sit here and preach to me all day about restorative practices if you don't have a section where I can practice having a restorative conversation. Essentially, don't sit up here and tell me that I need to practice, showing this math problem three ways, if you haven't given me some sample...problems inside of PD to where I can get feedback on how I did...what I said, [and] what I could do better. [S]o...what the impact of that is seeing little to no change in the classroom... which frustrates teachers with the learning process, which makes them not even be in the right head space to learn. So, was PD effective? Not really."

Educators understand what they want out of professional development, yet are so rarely given the chance to share what they need. The limited opportunities further demonstrate this for career growth and access to leadership positions. Progressive educators recognize and value their expertise and that of their colleagues. Consequently, they prefer learning from one another rather than from an instructional or behavioral coach who has not taught in a classroom for a significant period of time. Ms. Danielle explained why PD is not as effective as possible when it is led by individuals who are not operating daily in today's classrooms,

> "...It's not effective when it is led by an instructional coach because you have been displaced from a classroom for so many years. You can visit a classroom but you only visit a classroom for 15 minutes. You have absolutely no idea what goes on from eight to three. I believe that some of those [PDs], content-wise, should be led by teachers...So...[is] the professional development effective right now? No. But if they were teacher-led, yes..."

Progressive educators are able to identify significant issues in education and are motivated to make tangible changes in their organizations to improve the learning environment for their students and fellow educators. However, they must have the necessary support and resources to grow and advance in their careers.

Professional growth and upward mobility

Professional development also includes the opportunities available to educators to advance in leadership. The educators in this study explained how difficult it is for Black teachers to grow professionally because the support is unavailable. Participants discussed how Black educators feel "...stuck..." and are unsure how to progress beyond their current teaching role. Mentorship is a significant component for educators to elevate their skills. However, the limited number of Black teachers in the classroom also yields a limited number of Black educators in leadership. Although participants have not witnessed colleagues intentionally barred from pursuing professional advancement opportunities within education due to their race, they stress that there is a hidden curriculum that creates barriers to the pipeline for Black educators.

Ms. Chloe shared how she has witnessed fellow Black educators within her organization not

progressing. Even though her school promotes PD opportunities and employs instructional coaches to offer support and guidance, she believes that the same skills are prioritized year after year. Ms. Chloe explained how the limited opportunities for skill growth have resulted in a significant turnover of Black teachers within her organization. She explained,

> "...[W]ith our African American teachers...you see...folks feeling stuck...in their role [and] not really being developed [professionally]. So...we preach that we have coaches...who are developing you, 'we have all this professional development,' but you keep getting developed on the same skills year after year...[I]s it the teacher's fault or is it the coach's fault?...[W]hy am I still in the same place that I was three years ago? So... you see the turnover from our people because they don't feel like they're growing or they frankly get tired...of the BS."

Using para-professionals as an example, Ms. Chloe continued to explain limited growth opportunities for Black teachers. She described how "...Paras are... essentially co-teachers to folks who are degreed and qualified..." She explained that "...the passion is there... [and] they have the skillset they need to deal with our scholars... but what are we doing to get them from para to teacher?..." The same question can be asked for what is being done to help get Black teachers into higher positions of leadership within education. According to Ms. Chloe,

> "...You'll see them putting African American teachers in roles like culture, which is basically behavior management versus having them in roles like curriculum and instruction...[Y]ou have to really fight to get a role in curriculum instruction, even if you have your degree in that because they think that it's an easier fix for them to put you in a role like dean of culture..."

When Black educators are afforded the opportunity to enter leadership roles, they are often siloed to the school's culture and climate roles. Although the Dean of Culture is a leadership position, it primarily tackles the behavioral and disciplinary issues that arise in the classroom or school. This suggests that the warm-demander characteristic Black educators are known for is considered valuable when focused on student conduct. However, how their unique perspectives inform their practices is not as valued when considering giving them more power to dictate curriculum and pedagogy organization-wide. Regardless of the job description, for career ascension to even be

possible, educators must know what roles are available to them. When there is limited mentorship to offer guidance and when the organization does not explicitly promote the leadership roles available nor the pathway to eligibility, Black educators are left to fend for themselves.

Mr. Franklin explains how the limited number of Black leaders results in not having enough mentors for Black teachers seeking additional guidance. He explains how critical mentorship is for upward mobility but that the school also has a responsibility to inform its teachers of the criteria and process for career advancement. Mr. Franklin explained,

> "I think since there's...a lack of administrators that identify as African-American, that also leads to a lack of a network for mentorship. 'Cause I think mentorship is very critical in you knowing...what to do next if you...choose to move up...in the ranks. I think...school[s] don't do a good job of being very clear and taking the time to communicate with their staff what that upward mobility looks like...How do I go from a teacher to an instructional leader? What am I being evaluated on? And how do I come."

Mr. Franklin's school has attempted to improve in this area. Rather than the principal having sole autonomy over choosing their "secondary leadership team," the school district sends out a staff-wide list detailing the "...requirements to apply." However, a recommendation from the school principal is still required, which can be difficult to obtain for some progressive educators who may not have the best relationship with their school's leadership.

The effectiveness of PD varies widely from organization to organization for many reasons. The pandemic had a significant impact on the way PD was structured and whether or not teachers had access to it all. The educators who continued PD throughout the pandemic, however, identified limitations with asynchronous online training. Teachers who participated online did not have opportunities to ask questions or to practice what they had learned. They described it as simply checking a box without providing meaningful insight. Unfortunately, in-person PD has been shown to yield similar results, as educators feel that PD has become repetitive and inapplicable to their students and consists of limited chances to apply their new knowledge in a low-stakes environment to receive feedback. As progressive educators, they have identified a gap in their training and have offered suggestions to improve how PD operates in the future.

Recommendations for future professional development

When asked what they would like to get from their PD, progressive educators expressed their desire for ongoing, community-oriented training that is locally tailored to the needs of the school and district. However, firstly, educators must be willing to be engaged in the process. According to Ms. Bethany, "...[I]t's just the nature of the beast. [E]very professional development is not gonna be interesting." She continued,

> "...if...you're not gonna listen and pay attention...it's not [going to be] as meaningful as it could be...Some people are so stuck in their ways that they're not open-minded enough [to] gain as much as there is to gain from it. Even down to instructional strategies that will move teachers away from being traditional educators to progressive educators...[B]ut it requires a teacher to want to change and [them] understanding the importance of change and having that background knowledge..."

A key component of obtaining and maintaining educators' buy-in is ensuring the community-oriented culture amongst teachers is prioritized in PD throughout the school year, not just at its commencement. Ms. Danielle explained how "...It happens only once, and everybody's like, 'Oh, we're feeling the love, we're such a community, and then it dies...This happens every year. So it would be more effective if it was ongoing." Ms. Danielle also recommends that teachers not only lead PDs on curriculum and instruction but also the PDs that focus on classroom management. She explained,

> "...The behavior PDs, like what to do when this behavior pops up or social-emotional learning...should also be teacher-led. Like I said, you all [behavioral specialists] are not in the classroom from eight to three; you're not in the classroom for the whole class period. You don't know what goes on. So if a teacher can lead that, like, 'Hey, this is what I do to get these certain kids to calm down, I believe that will be more effective."

Schools often employ educators to manage curriculum and instruction and behavioral concerns. At times, these individuals may hold dual appointments as classroom teachers and the Dean of Curriculum and Instruction or the Dean of Culture, but that is rarely the case. Outsourcing these responsibilities, on the surface, appears to delegate some of a teacher's duties; however, when

teachers are not asked for their insight, it can seem counterproductive for external entities with limited contextual insight to dictate local classroom concerns. Progressive educators would also recommend professional development training to be more specialized for the needs of the district rather than general strategies and interventions. Ms. Charisse suggested,

> "Tailor it to the needs of the district instead of having these broad...PD[s] about...discipline [and] restorative practice[s]. Well, first, let's look at [the] damn data versus like having a PD, [and] someone's just talking at you."

Progressive educators want to see more from their PD, but it is important that they enter the process with an open mind. Some PDs may be more meaningful than others, but it is impossible to gain anything from the training if an educator is unwilling to learn. Additionally, for ongoing PD to be effective, the maintenance of community amongst educators is a must throughout the school year. Educators rely on one another for guidance and support, and those relationships need to be continuously nurtured and encouraged. Finally, it is critical that PDs are specialized for the needs of the district. For example, if bullying is a significant behavioral concern within an organization, then PDs should be tailored towards anti-bullying strategies rather than general discussions regarding behavior and discipline.

The progressive educators in this study offered these recommendations because they have identified gaps in their professional development training. Throughout this chapter, educators have continuously demonstrated their ability to identify concerns and employ their agency to overcome barriers. This continues to be demonstrated by how progressive educators sought out informal resources and networks during the pandemic. The next section will explore how the Black progressive educators in this study utilized social media and their personal teaching networks to maintain and further their praxis. Additionally, to demonstrate how educators supplemented their professional development during the pandemic, a case will be explored evaluating the reflections of *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* participants.

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically impacted the structure and effectiveness of professional development (PD) for progressive Black educators. The participants in this study highlighted the need for PD that is ongoing, culturally aligned, and community-oriented – tailored to the unique needs of their districts. They criticized the often superficial and redundant nature of their PD,

emphasizing that it should involve pertinent content, allow for meaningful engagement, and provide opportunities for practice application in a low-stakes environment. The educators' experiences during the pandemic exposed the limitation of asynchronous PD and the lack of mentorship and growth opportunities available to Black teachers. The study revealed how Black educators often face further barriers in advancing in leadership roles, particularly those in curriculum and instruction, as their structured approaches often relegate them to roles more focused on behavior management. These issues led to a "mass exodus" of educators from some schools and hindered the progress of those who remained.

Despite this myriad of challenges, Black progressive educators demonstrated their ability to identify gaps in their professional development and employed their agency to overcome them. They sought out informal resources – materials and equipment accessed beyond what is provided by their organization or school district – to enhance their teaching and maintain their praxis. This next research question delves into how these educators utilized social media and personal teaching networks, as well as a case study on the content and reflections of *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* participants, to further supplement their professional development during the pandemic.

Chapter 7

Findings: Research Question 3

Research question: *How did progressive educators utilize informal resources to mitigate gaps in their progressive education during COVID-19?*

7.1 Informal Resources

Given how COVID-19 dramatically reshaped educational landscapes, educators urgently needed to be open to adaptive and innovative learning strategies. Progressive educators committed to maintaining and deepening their critical consciousness found themselves searching for like-minded communities and networks. This chapter explores how educators leveraged informal resources—not formally provided by the district or organization—to bridge gaps in praxis and structural knowledge.

Amid widespread institutional disruptions in the transition to online learning, formal professional development (PD) often failed to address educators' immediate and evolving needs in navigating unprecedented changes. Consequently, progressive educators sought alternative avenues to maintain and enhance their praxis in equity and anti-racism, which were at the forefront of societal discourse amidst a global pandemic and concurrent social justice movements.

Participants in this study illuminated the role of social media, educator networks, and virtual discussion groups as valuable mediums for critical professional growth and community engagement. These informal resources enabled them to remain informed about new and evolving educational policies, exchange innovative teaching methods, and retain a semblance of community to com-

bat physical isolation. However, adherence to these platforms was not without potential risk, as educators expressed fear of institutional retaliation for voicing controversial opinions online.

This chapter examines these dynamics through the experiences of progressive educators who engaged with informal groups and networks and contributed to discussions beyond traditional forums. Through their narratives, this chapter explores the impact of these informal resources on their capacity to sustain and further their commitment to progressive educational practices during the pandemic. The chapter concludes with a case example that encapsulates how educators navigated and enriched their professional landscapes during rapid and unprecedented change.

Social media

Social media has drastically changed how people interact online and build community networks. They have become platforms to share and debate critical opinions on issues that range from politics to education. Educators have also recognized the power of social media as a means of engagement with other teachers and as a tool to remain informed. Ms. Danielle discussed her membership in a Facebook group that helps her remain knowledgeable about the latest issues in education. She shared,

> "...I am a part of the Black Teachers Rock page on Facebook...[T]hey post...what's going on...like different laws that [have gone] into effect for certain states...like...[on] critical race theory [for example]. We are of the states [where] that had [gone] into effect immediately [and] we were like, 'Okay, this is the law, this [is] what [has] happened to us, [so] how can we help each other?'..."

When some school districts faced new curricular limitations due to policy changes regarding Critical Race Theory, educators took to social media to brainstorm how to navigate this shift. Ms. Kwensi said she "...belong[s] to a few social media groups..." as well. She utilizes the platforms to "...stay informed...[about] what's going on in other counties...around the country..." She specifically discussed her participation in "...a Facebook group that would talk about...political issues or policies with the school district..." She shared that these conversations did not stay on the platform, but rather, the group sought opportunities "...to go out and do demonstrations..." to get the community involved in their causes.

Some educators see the value of engaging on social media, while others are more hesitant to utilize such a public platform. Ms. Bethany shared how other educators often encourage her to get on Facebook to engage with other teachers, but her fear of retaliation from her organization keeps her away. She shared,

> "...[T]hey're like, 'Girl, you need to be on Facebook.' And I tell myself, nah, I can't do [that] because...the internet never dies...[and] if you get too rebellious...I just don't wanna get caught up in that stuff..."

Ms. Tracy agreed that everything shared on social media is not always productive. Therefore, it is essential "...to filter out what's what..." She said, "I don't mind being a rebel, but I'm not stupid." Ms. Tracy recalls social media being a major staple during the pandemic, reading a significant amount of "...Twitter chatter..." and engaging on her school district's teacher Facebook page.

Progressive educators utilized social media platforms to remain informed during the pandemic and to develop and maintain relationships with other educators. Though some consider social media platforms more valuable than others, they were an effective tool for educators to supplement their PD during the pandemic. Progressive educators also relied on each other offline to share resources and engage in meaningful conversations that moved their praxis forward.

Teacher networks

Finding new innovative methods to teach complex topics can be a challenge and an additional burden on educators already overwhelmed with too many responsibilities. Progressive educators rely on their broader teacher networks to assuage some of this pressure. Ms. Danielle explained that most of her friends are educators, so she calls on them often to learn what they are doing and figure out how to adapt it to her state's standards. Ms. Danielle shared,

> "...I talk to my friends. All of my friends are educators in Chicago, Jersey, and Atlanta. [So I say] 'Okay, what [are] you doing? Give me your resource[s].' We all switch out [and] give each other resources. So I look for the best resource to teach that standard."

Mr. Stephan shared a similar sentiment, expressing how interaction with his "...fellow Black teacher friends..." has been a more beneficial form of "...professional development..." Like Ms. Danielle,

Mr. Stephan calls on his friends in other states and districts nationwide to get new ideas and resources for his classroom. These networks are important because they provide educators a safe space to voice their concerns and opinions.

For those who consider social media too public, impromptu meetings with fellow educators can provide a private opportunity to express frustrations without fear of retaliation. Ms. Quinta shared how she and her colleagues often left school "...meetings [feeling] frustrated..." and needed more time to debrief. She explained that is when they retreat to their "...informal spaces..." to continue the conversation. Although impromptu meetings among educators are not as public as sharing on social media, educators must also be conscious of where they engage in these conversations. For example, Ms. Tracy explained how "...the teacher's lounge is a forum within itself..." but older educators have warned her to steer clear. She explained that she heeds their advice and instead attends the "...happy hours..." hosted by fellow educators to engage in further discussion.

Anti-Racist Happy Hours

The Anti-Racist Happy Hours were developed in response to the rapidly changing conditions of public education due to the impact of COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement. They aimed to help K -12 educators and academicians develop a shared language around anti-racism in various educational contexts to aid in curriculum development and research design. Seeking a safe space to voice critical opinions, educators, which included teachers, graduate students, and community organizers, gathered for one hour via Zoom to discuss issues ranging from meritocracy to student disability. The sessions were accompanied by a guiding text that provided the theoretical/historical context for the happy hour and corresponding questions to further the conversation. Participants engaged verbally, in the Zoom chat, and through interactive activities, sharing resources and validating each other's ideas and experiences. This section will begin by outlining the structure and composition of the happy hours and significant insights from participants in the Zoom chat. It will conclude with their reflections on the sessions collected via survey.

Session 1: "Education as the Practice of Freedom in the Era of Black Lives Matter."

The theme for session 1 was "Education as the Practice of Freedom in the Era of Black Lives Matter." The guiding literature included *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire. The guiding questions were as follows:

- What does it mean for education to be a practice of freedom?
- How do we create educational landscapes that are considered a community of learning?
- How has the emergence and resurgence of the BLM movement impacted the classroom learning community?
- How can our discussion of BLM as a neo-contemporary Civil Rights Movement in the classroom propel education as the practice of freedom?

Figure 7.1: Class Is Now in Session: Anti-Racist Happy Hour: "Education as the Practice of Freedom in the Era of Black Lives Matter": October 29, 2020 *(*images included with the consent of participants)*

The first session began with a quote from bell hooks' *Teaching to Transgress.* Her chapter on *Building a Teaching Community* perfectly established the underlying motivations for the Anti-Racist Happy Hours and their intended outcomes. In referencing Henry Giroux and Peter McLauren's essay collection, *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies,* hooks states,

> "...Those critical thinkers working with the issues of pedagogy who are committed to cultural studies must combine 'theory and practice in order to affirm and demonstrate

> pedagogical practices engaged in creating a new language, rupturing disciplinary boundaries, decentering authority and rewriting the institutional and discursive borderlands in which politics becomes a condition for reasserting the relationship between agency power and struggle.' Given this agenda, it is crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices talk to one another and collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention. It is fashionable these days, when difference is a hot topic in progressive circles, to talk about hybridity and border crossing. But we often have no concrete examples of individuals who actually occupy different locations within structures, sharing ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection, and shared concern with teaching practices..."

Sharing resources

When discussing how education should be liberatory practice, a K-12 teacher and Dean of Instruction mentioned how their organization is relying on Zaretta Hammond's work, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* to ensure that teachers are well-equipped to build the necessary relationships with their students. A Ph.D. candidate in Kinesiology, inspired to learn more, type in the chat: *"Can you chat the name and author of the book you mentioned...? I'd like to check it out."*. As the conversation shifted to what it means to visualize abolition and how to find the blueprints to do so, a participant added to the chat, *"Read, Against Humanity by Sam Dubal."*

Affirming experiences

The conversation involved complex and sensitive subjects and required vulnerability when explaining one's experiences as a student or teacher in an inequitable system. The chat became a safe space for individuals to share and to be validated. A participant followed up an attendee's statement by typing, *"Whew – ... – this is self-reflective and helpful".* A graduate student who recently transitioned out of public education shared their experiences of continually operating between a rock and a hard place as an educator. Another graduate student followed up their statement by validating how difficult this is to navigate. They wrote, *"You are not alone. You are brave to acknowledge the complexities. Thank you!"* This comment was followed up by a powerful statement from a K-12 educator and school leader who stated that, *"Vulnerability is so essential*

to learning partnerships"

Supplement conversation

When discussing how education can be more of a liberatory practice, a participant explained how, from her experience in public schools, K-12 educators are not taught how to teach critically. Another attendee responded and typed, *"...that is equally true for higher education. Products of a white supremacist system are teaching white supremacy. No one taught these professors HOT TO TEACH CRITICALLY."* As the conversation shifted to why these issues are not given the necessary attention in academic research, a graduate student commented, *"Remember that for some folks these 'huge things' are just thought experiments and not [a] very visceral real life lived world that it is for many of us."*

Summary

The inaugural session of the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* encapsulated the transformative potential of bell hooks' vision articulated in "Teaching to Transgress." The event vividly illustrated hooks' call for "...critical thinkers in pedagogy to unite theory with practice, rupturing disciplinary boundaries and rewriting discursive borderlands." As participants engaged with the theoretical perspectives of Zaretta Hammond and Sam Dubal, they exemplified the ethos of crossing borders and sharing resources to advance liberatory education practices.

The session also served as a testament to the power of vulnerability and affirmation within discussions on dismantling inequitable systems in education. Participants courageously shared personal experiences and reflections, finding solidarity and support in the virtual space. Acknowledging shared struggles and celebrating vulnerability underscored the belief that learning partnerships thrive on openness and empathy.

Moreover, the conversations revealed the urgent need to address critical pedagogy deficiencies at all levels of education, highlighting the pervasive impact of a white supremacist system on educational practices. The exchange emphasized that these issues are not merely abstract thought experiments but deeply rooted in lived experiences that demand immediate action and attention.

Session 2: "Myths of Meritocracy and the Impact of Virtual Learning."

The theme for session 2 was "Myths of Meritocracy and the Impact of Virtual Learning."

Figure 7.2: Class Is Now in Session: Anti-Racist Happy Hour: "Myths of Meritocracy and the Impact of Virtual Learning": November 20, 2020 (*images included with the consent of participants)

The guiding literature included: *The Big Test: The Secret History of American Meritocracy* by Nicolas Lemann and *The Unfillable Promise of Meritocracy: Three Lessons and their Implications for Justice in Education* by Jonathan J.B. Mills. The guiding questions were as follows:

- How does meritocracy serve as a tool for maintaining the status quo, although it is said to be a function of equality?
- How has the reality of distance learning further demonstrated that achieving meritocracy is impossible?
- How have you experienced or witnessed the distortion of the meritocratic process in your academic careers?
- In your experience, what are some non-meritocratic factors that have hindered *meritocratic* opportunities?

Developing a shared language

The *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* provided a unique opportunity for transdisciplinary collaboration and to integrate participants' respective expertise, approaches, and methods to understand meritocracy better. In sharing individual experiences surrounding people's attempts to remain

aligned with a meritocratic system, the group quickly established that there were varying levels of understanding regarding the true meaning of meritocracy and how it operates within education. The goal, however, was to identify how our respective fields engage with the idea of meritocracy, to develop a shared definition or language for understanding meritocracy as a concept, and to discuss how the impact of virtual learning illuminates the myths or unfulfilled promises of meritocracy.

Collaborative activities

The *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* provided a collaborative space for individuals to share their insights while engaging with one another's contributions. Once participants understood the general concept, they were asked to click the link to a Jamboard to share their respective definitions. A Jamboard is a digital whiteboard that allows users to collaborate. Participants shared the following definitions of meritocracy,

- *"Doing/Being the best begets optimal success and progress."*
- *"The myth that privileges are gained only based on merit."*
- *"[U]pward mobility based on your talent or skill level."*
- *"Linear means of building a society."*
- *"Progress based on skill."*
- *"Power, privilege, and success based on [a] false notion of deservingness and hard work."*
- *"[T]he child of archaic protestant views in which one should work for success that is oftentimes given free of charge to others."*

After attendees discussed their definitions of meritocracy, they examined how the myth of meritocracy has been further revealed with the impact of virtual learning. Participants were then asked to define the educational reality for success and achievement on the Jamboard. Attendees completed the following sentence,

Educational success and achievement is based on...

- *"...how people perceive you and how you closely you relate to societies norms."*

- *"...who you know and who knows you."*
- *"...who you know and if people in power can see themselves in you."*
- *"...how close are you to the ideal prototype that American society has created for your race/gender or combination of both."*
- *"...how you speak."*

Summary

The second session of the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* delved into a critical examination of meritocracy and its significant impact, particularly within the context of virtual learning. Operating through the theoretical lens of Lemann's "The Big Test" and J.B. Mills' work on the unfilled promises of meritocracy, attendees grappled with fundamental questions regarding the myth and reality of meritocratic ideals in education. The session underscored how meritocracy often operates as a tool to maintain existing power structures despite claims of promoting equity and equality. As attendees shared personal experiences and observations, it became evident that the pursuit of meritocracy is hindered by systemic barriers and non-meritocratic factors deeply embedded in educational environments.

A vital outcome of the session was developing a shared language and understanding of meritocracy. Collaborative activities, including defining meritocracy and discussing educational success, revealed diverse perspectives and highlighted the complexities in how success is perceived and achieved across academic settings. Participants vehemently challenged conventional notions of meritocracy, acknowledging its inherent flaws and the role of identity, privilege, and societal norms in shaping educational outcomes.

Moreover, the impact of virtual learning catalyzed the unveiling of limitations in meritocratic ideas. Attendees examined how access, resources, and socio-cultural factors further exacerbate disparities, challenging the notion of a level playing field. The second session demonstrated how the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour*provided an opportunity for transformative change in education and beyond by fostering transdisciplinary collaboration and amplifying diverse voices.

Session 3: "Teaching and Reaching Unruly Bodies: Exploring Student Disability Research and Racism in Special Education"

Figure 7.3: Class Is Now in Session: Anti-Racist Happy Hour: "Teaching and Reaching Unruly Bodies: Exploring Student Disability Research and Racism in Special Education": January 29, 2021 (*images included with the consent of participants)

The theme for session 3 was "Teaching and Reaching *Unruly Bodies*: Exploring Student Disability Research and Racism in Special Education." The guiding literature included: *Educating Unruly Bodies: Critical Pedagogy, Disability Studies, and the Politics of Schooling* by Nirmala Erevelles and *How Racism Impacts Black Kids with Autism from the Clinic to the Classroom.* The guiding questions were as follows:

- Why are research and pedagogy critical for understanding student disability, especially as it relates to Black and brown students?
- What is the role of cultural competence in disciplinary policy?
- How do student disability experiences differ between K-12 and higher education?

Research and policy

The third *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* examined research and policy related to student disability and special education. Disability scholars guided the conversation and offered invaluable insights from their experiences and expertise. A disability scholar and a mother of a Black autistic child shared how, in her research, she has come across households where the child is of two parents with a Ph.D., with high-level military credentials and access, or the funds to afford over a million

dollars in care, and their children still faced racism and discrimination in the education system. The following is an excerpt from their opening statement,

> "...[T]hat's what's magical about the space...people feel safe to say the things that are necessary. So, I have some thoughts about why the problem exists because, really, if we look at the data...it shows that 75% of Black children who are put in segregated classrooms end up either incarcerated and or chronically unemployed as adults. And I have to ask you, as a mother of a Black child in a special education classroom, how the hell can you, can you look at me and tell me that's acceptable? And why should my child have to take that chance?... And...part of the problem is that we're not just fighting...the stigma of disability, right? Cause, like [if] little Kale, he has a meltdown...it's called a meltdown. [But if] my son has a meltdown...it's aggressive and violent and problematic because you're at the completion of race and disability. And we come from a long system of conflating race as [a] disability...[H]istorically Blackness is constructed as a disability, as...lesser, as incapable. And even to the point of just thinking that we as a race can't think in the same way, can't achieve in the same way as whiteness has constructed us, right? Well, lay on top of that shit, an actual diagnosed disability...[M]y kid who has autism, who's...15...in the ninth grade, he also has an intellectual disability...So I have a child that not only has autism and flaps his hands, but I also have [a] kid who can't add and...is still learning how to count coins and...has a third-grade reading level...And because we situate our worth within a capitalist paradigm of like, if you can produce in this economic system, then we can somehow maybe find your worth. So if you're an autistic child that's in an intellectual space on the spectrum, that's not questioned. If you're the little professor and you can go work at NASA or you can bankrupt GameStop 'cause you read Reddit...those are the kids we like, right? But the kid like mine...that's a real question...I don't have a child that I can keep safe. I don't have a child that will ever do meaningful employment in a way that will make a living wage. Not only because he can't participate in a capitalist system because he just doesn't function that way, but because we've systemically constructed disability this way..."

Developing equity leaders

To expand the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* network and continue the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* sessions, individuals interested in leading an HH were asked to sign up and provide their topic of interest. Of the 43 individuals who signed up for one of the three *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* – though all did not attend – 16 expressed interest in leading a future session. The following session topics were proposed:

- Decolonizing Research and Education
- Social Justice in STEM
- Environmental Justice
- Defining College and Career Readiness
- Equity and Assessment: Assessing Cultural Responsiveness
- COVID-19: The Impact on Literacy and Low-Income Students
- Screen Time, Break Time, Work Time, and Wasted Time
- Institutional Racism in Education
- Discussion of Colorism and Ethnicity Discrimination
- Disability and Inclusion in Higher Education

Summary

The third session of the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* focused on the complex intersection of racism in special education, student disability, and the critical role of research and pedagogy in fostering understanding and change. Guided by foundational works of Erevelles and insights from scholars in the field, participants engaged in profound discussions. They shared personal experiences that illuminated systemic injustices and challenges faced by Black and brown students with disabilities.

The session opened with a poignant reflection on the harsh realities encountered by families navigating the education system with children with a disability. The personal narrative shared by

the parent-scholar underscored the urgent need to address the confluence of racism and ableism, illuminating how deeply rooted stereotypes and biases perpetuate inequitable and unsafe outcomes for Black and brown students with disabilities. Igniting a call to action, the conversation challenged traditional paradigms and advocated for inclusive practices that honor every student's inherent worth and potential.

Furthermore, given the co-construction of the third *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* alongside parent-scholars and disability advocates, the session catalyzed a movement towards developing equity leaders within and beyond the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* community. The commitment and enthusiasm demonstrated by individuals eager to lead future sessions on decolonizing research and education, social justice in STEM, environmental justice, and other pressing issues undergird a collective dedication to advancing anti-racist education and dismantling systemic oppression in all its forms.

Anti-Racist Happy Hour **Reflections**

Motivations for registration

Respondents were asked about their motivations for registering for an *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* and what they learned during the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* they attended. The results described are based on nine completed reflections collected in 2023. Respondents were asked: *"What motivated you to register for an Anti-Racist Happy Hour?"*. The reflections expressed a range of motivations and were thematically coded into four themes: 1. trust in the facilitator, 2. interest in session topics, 3. research alignment, and 4. organizational limitations. They were presented in ascending order. The table count is greater than nine because some statements incorporated multiple themes.

Code	Theme	Count
1	Trust in the facilitator	2
2	Research alignment	2
3	Organizational limitations	4
4	Interest in session topics	5

Table 7.1: Q3 Themes: *What motivated you to register for an Anti-Racist Happy Hour?*

Trust in the facilitator. Attendees shared that they trusted the expertise of the facilitator hosting the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* and their ability to conduct meaningful conversations about

race in education. A respondent stated, "I love...her scholarship. I trust her to have interesting and insightful conversations about race and education."

Research alignment. Graduate students who attended expressed how the sessions provided them with a space to dialogue with other Black scholars, which was a rare opportunity. Additionally, attendees expressed that the sessions aligned with their research interests and allowed them to deepen their understanding of race. An example reads,

> "It was refreshing to see black scholars in one space doing similar research. In most higher ed academic spaces, I tend to be one of few, if not the only, Black person in the group."

Organizational limitations. Respondents represented several organizations, including public schools, community organizations, and universities. A few attendees expressed that their organizations were limited in facilitating critical conversations about race. For example,

> "I was excited to join conversations with other folks about the topics offered. Because of the pandemic, I wasn't naturally in spaces where these topics were offered thoughtfully, and so I had to seek them out. I say thoughtfully because though there were a lot of "anti-racist" trainings and events in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, the spaces were generally catering towards beginners or white people, and rarely did they go deeper than the basics. At worst, these other trainings could cause harm because facilitators were not prepared to deal with complexity or they outright used triggering and inflammatory language in an effort to shock white people without a thought for the people of color in the room."

Interest in session topics. All *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* attendees were affiliated with education and were motivated to learn more about anti-racism. Respondents expressed interest in learning more about the session topics offered and engaging with other value-aligned individuals. One respondent expressed how they are "...always interested in joining conversations on how to make our schools more Anti-Racist." Another attendee, whose research centers on racism, shared why they were interested in joining a session,

> "My research is centered around expanding the extant psychological perspective of the experiences of racially marginalized individuals within the United States. As a result,

> I often examine how race influences how people identify with others, how they see themselves, and how their environment treats them. I believe that it is important to be as well-informed as possible on the subject of racism. Attending events such as the Anti-[R]acist [H]appy [H]our provides me with the opportunity to meet like-minded individuals and—potentially—learn something new."

Key takeaways from *Anti-Racist Happy Hours*

Based on the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* reflections, 86% of participants expressed that they learned something new about equity or anti-racism during one of the three sessions. 100% of attendees indicated they would attend future virtual *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* sessions. The most significant takeaway from the session was the conversation on student disability. Most respondents expressed how much they appreciated the attention given to such an "...understudied area..." and shared that they "...made valuable connections at this meeting..." The *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* also proved to be a valuable opportunity for graduate students, researchers, and K-12 teachers, who do not normally engage in critical dialogue with one another, to develop a new shared understanding of equity and anti-racism in education. For example, a respondent stated,

> "While I may already be knowledgeable on the subject, that does not necessarily mean that everyone else is the same...[B]eing a graduate student...it's very easy to fall into the trap of assuming that the general population is just as informed...My perspective as a graduate student whose emphasis is on research will be different than the perspective of someone who is a middle teacher [who] focuses on building a comprehensive curriculum. It's extremely important to share experiences."

Progressive educators faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, compelling them to seek resources to develop innovative approaches to maintain their praxis. Social media emerged as a pivotal tool, allowing educators like Ms. Danielle and Ms. Kwensi to stay informed about evolving education policies and connect with like-minded professionals nationwide. However, concerns about public exposure and potential repercussions underscored the complex dynamics of online engagement, with educators like Ms. Bethany opting for offline networks to navigate sensitive topics.

Teacher networks also played a crucial role in facilitating professional development and resource-sharing among educators. Ms. Danielle and Mr. Stephan exemplified how collaborating with fellow educators across different states fostered a supportive environment for sharing best practices and adapting teaching strategies. These networks provided a safe space for progressive educators to voice concerns and seek innovative solutions, mitigating the challenges of adapting to new educational demands.

Ultimately, the pandemic highlighted the importance of informal resources and networks in supporting progressive educators' resilience and professional growth. By leveraging social media and leaning on offline connections, progressive educators demonstrated their ability to navigate and overcome unprecedented obstacles to advance their praxis in the collective pursuit of a liberatory education. The subsequent further illuminated how progressive educators utilized resources not provided by the traditional system to maintain and deepen their praxis. Additionally, the analysis of the content in*Anti-Racist Happy Hour* sessions and the examination of attendees' reflections demonstrated progressive educators' capacity and desire to embody equity leadership roles in education.

The *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* were developed to provide educators – of all varieties – with a safe space to engage in critical conversations about equity and anti-racism in K-12 and higher education. The pandemic necessitated a virtual environment, and civil unrest due to the Black Lives Matter Movement motivated graduate students, researchers, and teachers to enrich their knowledge. The inaugural *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* gathering united a diverse community of voices committed to transformative pedagogy and social change. Inspired by bell hooks' call to challenge norms, participants established the groundwork for ongoing collaboration, learning, and intervention to support equitable and inclusive education. Through transdisciplinary engagement and the

amplification of diverse perspectives, the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* community served as a platform for critical dialogue, collaboration, and advocacy, amplifying marginalized voices, challenging dominant narratives, and fostering solidarity to cultivate liberating educational environments for all. Furthermore, the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* spurred a movement towards cultivating equity leadership. As a collective, *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* attendees demonstrated their dedication to advancing equity, dismantling barriers, and envisioning education as a catalyst for liberation and justice.

The insights gathered from *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* reflections detail attendees' motivations for registration and their significant takeaways from the sessions. Their responses highlight the profound impact of these engagements in fostering critical dialogue and advancing understanding of equity and anti-racism in education. Participants were drawn to the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* sessions for various compelling reasons. Trust in the facilitator emerged as a pivotal motivator, creating a safe and supportive environment for participants to engage with complex issues deeply. Moreover, the alignment of session topics with attendees' research interests and the scarcity of such spaces within their respective organizations underscored the importance of the *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* in providing a platform for critical dialogue beyond superficial conversations on race and anti-racism.

The key takeaways from the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* sessions further signify their impact. A notable 86% of participants reported learning something new about equity or anti-racism, illuminating the depth and richness of the conversations facilitated. The focus on understanding topics like student disability, in particular, resonated deeply with attendees and expanded their perspectives on critical issues often overlooked in mainstream educational research. Overall, the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* sessions served as a bridge between diverse stakeholders in education, facilitating a shared understanding of equity and anti-racism. This transdisciplinary collaboration was essential to break down silos and foster inclusive language and practices centered on equity and justice.

In looking to the future, the overwhelming interest in the continuation of *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* sessions and the commitment to lead more robust conversations underscores this community-centered initiative's enduring impact and relevance. The sessions also demonstrated how educators supplemented their professional development during the pandemic. By amplifying voices, fostering

collaboration, and deepening understanding, the *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* sessions exemplify the transformative potential of collective action in advancing anti-racist education and promoting equity in learning environments.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

The historical evolution of public education in the United States reveals a complex resilience, resistance, and transformation narrative. From the post-Civil War period, when newly freed Black people took charge of their educational destinies by establishing their own schools, to the pivotal *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and subsequent challenges of desegregation, the trajectory of public education mirrors broader societal struggles for justice and equality.

Freedpeople's endeavors to establish "native" schools underscored how they envisioned education as a liberatory pathway, emphasizing leadership, political consciousness, and cultural preservation. Their efforts laid the groundwork for later initiatives such as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), pivotal institutions fostering Black leadership and intellectualism amid systemic barriers. However, the promise of *Brown v. Board*, while symbolically transformative, encountered profound resistance and revealed the persistent inequities shaping educational landscapes for generations.

Central to this narrative are the contributions and obstacles faced by Black educators, who have played a pivotal role in cultivating communities of learning and empowerment. Their long-held commitment to fostering caring relationships, setting and maintaining high expectations, and instilling a critical consciousness has enriched the educational experiences of countless students. Despite the durability of the structural barriers within educational organizations, Black educators continue to play a vital role in advocating for equity and confronting structural inequities.

The examination of racialized organizations, particularly within educational contexts, illuminates the complex ways race and organizational practices intersect to shape educational outcomes

and the experiences of students and educators. Organizations, such as schools, are sites where racial ideologies are maintained and legitimized through practices like academic tracking, disciplinary policy, and curriculum design. Though some educators adopt a traditional paradigm when adhering to these practices, others prefer a more progressive approach.

Moreover, the discussion of progressive educators and their praxis development highlights how some educators employ their agency to challenge and transform racialized organizational structures. Progressive educators are critical in fostering democratic values by prioritizing student-centered learning, challenging traditional educational paradigms, and advocating for equitable, anti-racist practices. Their efforts within education were especially essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the virtual learning environment was challenging to navigate and required strong educators willing to be creative and approach the experience with an open mind.

Utilizing a multi-method approach that included semi-structured interviews, survey responses, and content analysis of *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* conversations, this study captured a nuanced understanding of the experiences and perspectives of progressive educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. The preliminary research conducted through the facilitation of three virtual *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* sessions in 2020-2021 provided essential insights that guided the formulation of research questions and methodologies. The *Anti-Racist Happy Hour* sessions underscored the importance of informal, collaborative spaces for educators to engage with critical literature and safely dialogue about issues concerning equity and anti-racism.

The semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Black progressive educators illuminated their unique motivations and standardized practices. Racialized experiences with positive Black role models in early education, exclusionary practices, and discriminatory curriculum influenced the Black educators in this study to adopt and maintain progressive values that prioritize being student-centered, developing relationships with parents and families, and meaningfully engaging with community partners. The interviews revealed educators' K-12 racialized schooling experiences with their teachers and peers significantly influenced their progressive praxis development. Whether they benefited from strong role models or were determined not to repeat harmful practices they witnessed or experienced, their engagement as students shaped their critical perspectives and, consequently, the practices they adopted. Further, although Black educators possess distinct motivations for their progressive practices rooted in their racialized K-12 experiences, they coalesce

around a standard set of progressive values – student-centered learning, familial relationships, and community engagement – adoptable by any educator committed to progressive pedagogy. With that in mind, this research calls into question not necessarily the limitations of Black teachers in the classroom – through an ongoing crisis – but rather the significant disparities of Black educators in leadership.

From their voluntary participation in *Anti-Racist Happy Hours* to the additional efforts they employed to identify innovative virtual teaching tools, Black progressive educators have demonstrated a willingness and a commitment to continue advancing public education. Their expertise is uniquely informed and can provide valuable insights for all educators seeking to adhere to more equitable learning principles. Though the population of Black educators is small in comparison – resulting in minimal mentorship and representation – there are many existing teachers with the expertise to lead professional development training and offer critical insights required to be in administrative roles that go beyond behavioral management, such as the Dean of Curriculum and Instruction. However, respective organizations must be willing to be transparent with their advancement protocols and procedures. These should be accessible to all staff members regardless of their current eligibility.

The Black progressive educators in this study are poised to be equity thought-leaders in education and represent many other progressive educators across the nation seeking safe spaces to engage in critical dialogue, challenge the status quo, and make tangible changes to the racialized structures that govern public education. Unfortunately, whether the system will ever provide the necessary resources and support to make their efforts less labored or to actualize their vision of a more equitable institution has yet to be seen.

8.1 Discussion

The Progressive Education Network considers the purpose of education to reach beyond academic preparation or capitalistic expectations and is meant to nurture diverse, democratic ideals through the critical analysis of "theory, practice, policy, and politics..." Though all of the educators in this study self-identified as progressive educators and described how they strove to maintain their progressive values throughout the pandemic, there is limited evidence to suggest that they received

the resources and support necessary to materialize their vision of making permanent structural changes to the system. Making such changes requires student input, as they are vital organizational actors and will be the most significantly impacted by any shifts. However, students have to be taught how to critically engage with the world and its social issues and then be equipped with the tools to take action to make a change. Although the progressive educators in this study have demonstrated the willingness to begin assisting their students with the former, they are only scratching the surface, and the latter continues to be even more of a challenge.

The system's entrenched commitment to maintaining the status quo is starkly revealed by the fact that progressive educators in this study were compelled to independently pursue professional development opportunities to foster critical dialogues on educational issues and to identify virtual platforms to uphold a student-centered learning environment. Though the progressive educators in this study understand the importance of engaging in critical conversations and instilling that ideal in their students, advancing that theory to practice in their praxis often goes beyond the required skills of a contemporary classroom teacher. However, those educators who want to be change agents must understand how to analyze existing or proposed policies, compose compelling narratives that challenge their implementation and engage with appropriate stakeholders who can effectuate structural transformation. The acquisition of skills in policy analysis will not only strengthen the leadership potential of educators but also position students to be more prepared to critically engage when called to action.

Since the civil rights movements of the 60s, student-led activism has spearheaded significant nationwide shifts in policy. The nationwide upsurge in mass school shootings has once again propelled everyday students to the forefront of critical social issues involving life or death. As the leaders of town hall meetings and press conferences, student survivors of gun violence have demonstrated the ability to learn how to engage with social issues at the highest levels of governance. Now, although the educators in this study were not primarily concerned with gun violence, many would argue that the structural violence experienced in schools due to the durable racialized structures that hinder wellness and success is also a matter of life or death and requires immediate redress. However, equipping teachers and students with the toolkit to engage with social issues at a higher level requires additional training and development that is rarely offered to teachers in the traditional system.

Future research should prioritize investigating optimal strategies for guiding aspiring educational leaders and identifying the most impactful approaches to uncovering the hidden curriculum that may hinder Black teachers from advancing in their roles. This research agenda should delve into empowering educators to lead professional development sessions and exercise greater autonomy in their ongoing growth regarding maintaining their teaching credentials. Furthermore, research is critical to assess the effectiveness of implementing a critical Ethnic Studies curriculum across educational settings and to underscore the necessity of equipping all educators with comprehensive training in teaching such a curriculum. Lastly, the integration and study of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) presents an invaluable opportunity to explore how this methodology empowers youth to actively address social issues and systemically dismantle deeply entrenched structural barriers.

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