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Why Do They Persist? A Look at Black and Latinx Teacher Persistence in the Inland
Empire

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

by

Alondra Márquez Carter

June 2025

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Suneal Kolluri, Chairperson

Dr. Rita Kohli

Dr. Alice Lee

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2025

The Dissertation of Alondra Márquez Carter is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Para mi Esposito. Thank you for your love and support during this multi-year journey in *our* lives. As my partner you agreed to undergo this endeavor with me, and I would not have been able to make it to the finish line without you. Thank you for the constant nourishment during what often seemed like one of the most intense and long roller coasters of my life. Thank you for helping me up again when this experience frequently knocked me down. If I could give you an honorary degree, I would. Instead, I give you a sincere thank you hoping it conveys even a modicum of what your support has meant to me.

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Dedication

A mis padres. Gracias a sus sacrificios, me dieron la oportunidad de estudiar, y al fin terminar. Espero poder seguir ayudando a brindar oportunidades a otros.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Why Do They Persist? A Look at Black and Latinx Teacher Persistence in the Inland Empire

by

Alondra Márquez Carter

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Education
University of California, Riverside, June 2025
Prof. Suneal Kolluri, Chairperson

This study centered the voices and stories of two career teachers of Color of varying race consciousness to understand how they have persisted in the teaching profession. Recognizing that the teaching profession is an institution not created with students or teachers of Color in mind, their persistence is operationalized within a resistance theory framework. Through a life history approach, this study found that Elizabeth and Lily, this study's participants, have been able to persist largely through two mechanisms: by being strongly motivated by their missions of making a difference in the lives of marginalized students, and by making the profession more sustainable for themselves. Each of these mechanisms demonstrates the varied ways that Elizabeth and

Lily have resisted, making them feel effective in their missions, and motivating their ongoing persistence.

At the same time, though their race consciousnesses allows them to be resistant with regard to social justice, they oftentimes struggle to connect certain issues back to structural racism. Their inability to do so has consequences for the way they teach students, with their behaviors often manifesting as conformist resistance. Teachers of Color like Elizabeth and Lily are valuable educators, and it is important to recognize their strengths as well as opportunities for growth. Thus, this dissertation concludes with implications for how to help teachers of Color grow their race and critical consciousnesses with an emphasis that it be authentic and sustainable for their continued persistence and presence in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Teachers turn over often. In “hard-to-staff” schools these problems are exacerbated since research suggests that teachers tend to leave these schools at higher rates than in other school types (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020; Zhang & Zeller, 2016), negatively impacting the achievement of students in these schools (Ronfeldt et al. 2013; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ladd & Sorensen, 2017; Papay & Kraft, 2015). Commonly, “hard-to-staff” schools are “urban schools with high proportions of students from low-income and nondominant racial and cultural communities” (Achinstein et al., 2010, p. 71). In other words, the students that overwhelmingly make up the populations within these schools are the most adversely affected and tend to be socially-marginalized populations of students. Thus, the perpetuation of educational inequality in American society continues.

However, the marginalization of certain communities in education is not limited to students in schools. Research indicates that teachers of Color¹, especially Black and Latinx teachers (Achinstein et al., 2010), have higher turnover rates than their White counterparts. Although there may be differences in the way that the above finding is explained, critical scholars would likely agree that the lack of representation of teachers of Color in schools is a result of the racialization and racism of peoples in society. Since the inception of this country White ideologies and norms have defined the status quo in

¹ Capitalizing the “c” in Color is done as an act of reclaiming power for groups who have historically been marginalized and affiliate as belonging to non-White racial or ethnic groups (consistent with Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; see also <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>)

institutions (Harris, 1993). As such, educational institutions were not created with students or educators of Color in mind, nor are they typically welcoming, healthful, or sustainable places for educators of Color (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Kohli, 2018; Kohli, 2019), resulting in their “pushout” from the teaching profession.

In spite of the teaching profession being situated in a harmful, racialized reality for teachers of Color, teachers of Colors often join the profession to provide better opportunities for students of Color (Achinstein et al., 2010). They continuously uplift, and advocate for, students of Color in schools (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Gershenson et al., 2016; Redding, 2019). These findings demonstrate the assets that teachers of Color contribute to the teaching force, especially when working with populations of students who have been marginalized within education. Therefore, it is worth investigating why teachers of Color in “hard-to-staff” schools, specifically Black and Latinx teachers in the context of this dissertation, persist in the profession in spite of the adversities they face. Their persistence is worth investigating since it can help inform and challenge the cycles of educational inequality that continue to disadvantage marginalized communities- consisting of students and teachers of Color, alike- within education.

Given the established definition of “hard-to-staff” schools, and the established context of the teaching profession for teachers of Color, the Inland Empire is a region worth understanding. The Inland Empire is a region in Southern California which consists of San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, but whose “heart” consists of the cities in and around San Bernardino and Riverside, proper. In San Bernardino County,

70.9% of students in schools qualify for free and reduced-price meals (FRPM), a proxy for low-income categorization. In Riverside County 65.4% of students qualify for FRPM. These percentages account for 283,253 students and 275,492 students, respectively (NCES, 2022). In addition, the Inland Empire consists of 4.5 million people, which is over 11 percent of the state's population, more than half of whom consist of Black, Latinx, and Native American populations of people (Thorman et al., n.p., 2018). According to Thorman et al. (2018), "these groups make up more than half of the population in the Inland Empire—54% in Riverside County and 60% in San Bernardino County—compared to 45% statewide" (n.p.). In a state that is considered racially and ethnically diverse, the Inland Empire region is more diverse, still.

Additionally, the Inland Empire and its diverse population is continuing to grow. According to the Public Policy Institute of California (Thorman et al., 2018):

Parts of the Inland Empire have particularly high shares of young children. [...] Riverside and San Bernardino Counties have relatively high percentages of young children (6.8% and 7.3%, respectively) compared to the state as a whole (6.5%). Certain areas have even higher concentrations of families with young children: children under five years old make up between 9% and 11% of the population around Victorville, in western San Bernardino County, and the same is true for numerous census tracts around the city of San Bernardino (n.p.).

Why does it matter that the Inland Empire (hereafter referred to as the IE) is a growing region in Southern California? Because in an increasingly diverse state where the number of non-White students make up the significant majority of students in schools (*Fingertip facts on education in California*, n.d.), the IE is representative of even more diversity than the rest of the state, on average. Yet, the counties that make up the IE have significantly large populations of schools that predominantly serve working class students

of Color, as measured by FRPM qualifications and demographic data. Students of Color² tend to be marginalized and largely excluded from mainstream academia, and when students of Color are the students that working-class schools predominantly serve, their disenfranchisement in education has the potential to be exacerbated. Given these trends, this means that many schools and districts in the IE are more vulnerable to teacher turnover and attrition which most often negatively affect the students in these schools. In the case of the IE, these students are more likely to be Black, Latinx, and Native American students (Thorman et al., n.p., 2018).

Furthermore, the Inland Empire is a region worth investigating because of the growth it is experiencing and projected to experience. Since the Great Recession of 2008, people have continued to move out of the large metropolitan area of Los Angeles and into the Inland Empire (Reyes, 2014). While various economic and business-related factors have contributed to the overall exodus of people from this region, the primary factor cited by people leaving is the cost of living characterized by affordable housing outside of these large metropolitan areas (Reyes, 2014; McMillan & Manthey, 2023). According to U.S. Postal Service address change data spanning from 2018-2022, “the Los Angeles metro area, which includes LA and Orange counties, saw the second-largest net loss in households and businesses in recent years. There were nearly 400,000 more address changes away from the area than into the area” (McMillan & Manthey, 2023, n.p.). In fact, according to projections by the State of California Department of Finance, “the

² Students of Color are defined as students of African-American or Black, Latina/o/x, Indigenous, Asian or Asian-American, or other non-White racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Inland Empire today is home to 4,723,216 people. By 2048, Riverside and San Bernardino counties are expected to reach a combined population of 5,692,922 residents” (Yarbrough, 2023, n.p.).

In summation, in the Inland Empire where communities of Color are growing more and more diverse, and in a context in which teachers of Color (ToCs) continue to be pushed out of the teaching profession, it is critical to understand why ToCs elect to persist. This dissertation endeavors to contribute to the larger conversation on teacher of Color retention by specifically examining the reasons that Black and Latinx teachers decide to stay in schools in the Inland Empire that predominantly serve working class students of Color. By understanding the reasons that Black and Latinx teachers remain in these schools, this dissertation intends to complicate and inform larger conversations about the retention of teachers of Color. This dissertation also informs how to empower teachers of Color already in the workforce and years away from the “intervention” site of teacher education programs.

Literature Review

Operationalization of Terms

In the context of this dissertation, “hard-to-staff” schools are “urban schools with high proportions of students from low-income and nondominant racial and cultural communities” (Achinstein et al., 2010, p. 71). The use of the word “urban” in extant literature can mean schools situated within an urban city context, but has been used interchangeably with “high-needs” (White et al., 2020) schools. As such, Anderson and Stillman (2013) express that the definition of an “urban” school is “less about location

per se and more about the structural conditions, including power relations and racial class structures” (p. 7) that exist within them.

In conjunction with this definition, schools that have been defined as “at-risk” schools in the literature, which are “schools that are both majority non-White and have a high fraction of students in poverty” (Guarino et al., 2011, p. 970), also fit the definition. Therefore, “hard-to-staff” schools are characterized as having frequent teacher turnover, and large populations of working class students and minoritized students of Color. While this dissertation will refer to schools with these characteristics as schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, it is worth noting that the terms listed above that are synonymous with “hard-to-staff” may appear as being used interchangeably in the literature that will be reviewed. Consistent with extant literature, for this study “low-income” or “working class” is defined by schools or districts whose population consists of 50% or more of students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals (FRPM), indicating mid-to-high level poverty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Importantly, terms like “hard-to-staff,” “at risk,” and “urban” are used throughout the literature review and theory portions to discuss *extant* literature. However, it is necessary to recognize that these terms are deficit-oriented. For example, the implication of the phrase “hard to staff” suggests that the school, or the students and community that it serves, is responsible for the ongoing issues and challenges that arise in these schools. The use of this phrasing 1) largely overlooks the historical and systemic inequities, like racism, that are responsible for the challenges these schools face, and 2) shifts deficit

ideology and blame onto working class students of Color and their families, thereby problematizing and stigmatizing them. In a study that endeavors to center and empower communities of Color, I move away from the terms “hard to staff,” “at risk” and “urban” schools except when necessary to discuss the research of previous scholars. Noting that these terms are deficit-oriented, and to point to the problematic nature of this terminology, I utilize quotation marks when citing the language of other scholars. To reiterate, when my own voice is centered, I move away from deficit terminology to use descriptive phrasing such as “schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color.”

Although this study is concerned with the reasons that Black and Latinx teachers remain in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, extant literature often refers to various terms pertaining to teacher movement, whether that be within schools or in the profession, in general. Therefore, terms pertaining to teacher movement must be operationalized. “Teacher retention” is defined as teachers who remain *in their schools* as well as in the teaching profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). This contrasts with “teacher turnover,” characterized as teachers who remain in the teaching profession but migrate to other schools or districts, and “teacher attrition,” characterized by teachers who leave the teaching profession altogether (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Since this dissertation aims to discover more about the retention of teachers, teacher turnover and attrition will often be grouped together in the literature review under the category of “non-retention.”

Additionally, extant literature has referred to retained teachers as “stayers,” teachers who have turned over as “movers,” and teachers who have encountered attrition as “leavers” (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Ingersoll, 2001). The terms “stayers,” “movers,” and “leavers” are categorical and denotative, and thus effective terminology when studying the teacher labor market. With regard to this study, however, these terms, especially “retention,” are limited in their ability to capture the essence and phenomena of a teacher’s decision to remain in hard-to-staff schools and in the teaching profession. As such, the term “persistence” must be defined.

According to the Oxford Learners Dictionaries, to persist is “to continue to do something despite difficulties or opposition” (n.d.). In teacher literature, persistence has often referred simply to the act of teachers remaining in the profession (Wheatley, 2002). Wheatley (2002) operationalized persistence to mean “a tendency to persist steadfastly, *until successful*, in the many specific courses of action that constitute teaching” (p. 3). In this dissertation, persistence is neither a verb based on the pure act of remaining in the profession, nor is it based on “success” in the traditional elements that constitute “effective” teaching. Instead, the definition of persistence in this dissertation is defined as “continuing in the teaching profession in spite of the difficulties or opposition that Black and Latinx teachers face as educators,” especially with regard to racialization and working in an institution not created with them in mind. In this manner, persistence is operationalized as a form of resistance. This definition of persistence acknowledges that schools and educational structures are oftentimes harmful to the Black and Latinx

teachers within them (Kohli, 2018; Kohli, 2019). As such, it is worth investigating why they remain in these spaces.

Why Does Teacher Retention Matter?

Although this dissertation is concerned with the importance and impact of Black and Latinx teacher persistence in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, it recognizes that the literature on teacher retention has not always specified findings according to teacher demographic. Many studies have provided findings for either teacher retention or non-retention based on samples of teachers in general, or what is here being called general teacher retention/non-retention, instead of by separating the experiences of teachers by racial and ethnic demographics to more deeply understand the phenomena. Therefore, that more general literature is included here since it still informs the larger conversation concerning the impacts of retention in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color. However, as the literature on teacher retention has evolved, some scholars have shifted their attention to the importance of teacher racial/ethnic demographics as part of the larger conversation. As such, this section begins with the literature describing the impacts of general teacher non-retention on student learning outcomes, and then more specifically discusses the impacts of teacher of Color retention on students of Color and their learning outcomes.

General Teacher Non-Retention on Student Learning Outcomes

Among the reasons that teacher attrition and turnover matter are due to the relationship between teacher effectiveness and teacher experience. Teachers with less experience, and working in schools with higher proportions of teachers who have less

than three years of experience, tend to have high teacher attrition (Shen, 1997). Moreover, teachers with less classroom experience are considerably less effective at improving student outcomes than more experienced teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ladd & Sorensen, 2017; Papay & Kraft, 2015). Therefore, frequent teacher turnover more often negatively affects marginalized populations of students in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color as the teacher workforce constantly shifts, typically leaving them with less effective teachers.

Occasionally teacher turnover or attrition from a school can have positive impacts on the achievement of students within that school. Since teacher turnover or attrition necessarily means that the teacher leaving a school site must be replaced, it may mean that the teacher who has left will be replaced with a more effective teacher (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). However, since schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color frequently hire novice and alternatively prepared teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008), their turnover is more likely to adversely affect student achievement (Watlington et al., 2010). One study showed that the *high* and *frequent* turnover of teachers harms student achievement, finding the effects on student learning to be both significant and negative for test scores measuring math and English language arts (Ronfeldt et al. 2013).

Teacher of Color Retention Outcomes for Students of Color

Academic Outcomes. In addition to consequences to general student achievement in hard-to-staff schools, the demographic composition of teachers has consequences for students of Color in these spaces. “Racial/ethnic minority students are the demographic majority of students attending public schools [...] and comprise the large

majority of urban school students,” (Cherng & Halpin, 2016, p. 407) whereas only around 20% of U.S. teachers identify as a racial or ethnic minority. According to national teacher demographics from the 2017-2018 school year, 79.3% of teachers identified as White, 9.3% identified as Hispanic/Latinx, and 6.7% identified as Black or African American, compared to 2.1% identifying as Asian, and 0.7% identifying as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander or American Indian/Alaskan (Spiegelman, n.d.). What current teacher demographics indicate is that the teacher workforce does not represent the demographic of students in schools.

Why does this demographic imbalance matter? There are numerous benefits to having teachers of Color in the classroom. Cherng and Halpin (2016) discovered that minoritized students perceive Black and Latinx teachers as more multiculturally aware than their White counterparts. Having a Black or Latinx teacher in the classroom can help improve students of Color's perceptions of themselves, and can help to challenge deficit ideologies, while simultaneously leading to the higher achievement and overall well-being of all students (Redding, 2019). With regard to specific student-teacher ethnoracial matching, however, Bristol and Martin-Fernandez (2019) found that in schools with a significant proportion of Latinx students that also had an increased number of Latinx teachers- as compared to schools with Latinx students and fewer Latinx teachers- Latinx students were more encouraged to enroll, and did enroll, in more advanced placement and international baccalaureate courses. For Black high school students with Black teachers, there was increased learning and test score gains (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019).

Additional Outcomes. In addition to items related to positive academic achievement as a result of teacher-student ethnoracial matching, there are various positive, transformational outcomes for students that result from their racial or ethnic representation in their teachers. For example, ethnic matching for Latinx teachers and students leads to “more positive teacher responsiveness, expectations, cultural sensitivity, and academic gains for Latinx students” (Downer et al., 2016, as cited in Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019, p. 149). Similarly, Black students with Black teachers are encouraged and held to higher expectations than Black students with non-Black teachers (Gershenson et al., 2016).

Furthermore, a study consisting of ten-years’ worth of data from New York City schools found that teacher-student ethnoracial matching for Black, Latinx, and Asian American students and teachers led to a decreased likelihood of exclusionary discipline practices for students of Color, such as a reduction in their suspension rates (Shirrell et al., 2021), which is often the result of negative racial stereotyping (Steele, 2010). As each of these examples highlights, teacher-student ethnoracial matching positively impacts the experiences of students of Color, but has powerful benefits for Black and Latinx students specifically, who are often negatively perceived, marginalized, or discriminated against (Blazar, 2021) in educational spaces. Black and Latinx teachers often have a cultural understanding of Black and Latinx students that their White counterparts may not understand, thus leading to increased expectations and outcomes for Black and Latinx students through improved teacher mindsets and practices (Blazar, 2021).

Taken together, the literature reveals that there are many reasons for teacher turnover in hard-to-staff schools, and that the students in these schools who are affected are predominantly working class students of Color. Teacher turnover and attrition have negative effects on the academic achievement of these students. Hard-to-staff schools are more likely to be staffed by Black and Latinx teachers, which can have positive effects on the emotional, developmental, and academic outcomes of students of Color, yet they remain heavily underrepresented in the predominantly-White teacher workforce. Therefore, it is worth investigating why Black and Latinx teachers remain in the teaching profession and in hard-to-staff schools, specifically, where their presence, mentorship, and instruction can positively impact students of Color.

Literature on Teachers in Schools That Predominantly Serve Working Class Students of Color

As aforementioned, this dissertation is concerned with the importance and impact of Black and Latinx teacher persistence in hard-to-staff schools. While the previous section outlined why teacher retention in schools matters, this section dives into the literature on why teachers have decided either to leave or remain in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color. Again, while this dissertation recognizes that the literature on teacher retention has not always specified findings according to teacher racial or ethnic demographics, it includes these studies because they were inclusive of teachers of Color and inform matters of retention. Therefore, this section is broken into two main parts. The first part of the literature describes why teachers leave, generally, described as general teacher non-retention in schools that

predominantly serve working class students of Color. The second part concerns why teachers remain in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color and is broken into two subsections. Consistent with the progression of extant literature, the first subsection begins with studies that have described why teachers have remained regardless of race or ethnicity; that body of literature is inclusive of teachers of Color but does not specifically distinguish why they might stay in schools on the basis of race or ethnicity. The second subsection describes why teachers of Color, specifically, have decided to remain in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color.

General Teacher Non-Retention in Schools That Predominantly Serve Working Class Students of Color

Research suggests that teachers tend to leave “hard-to-staff” schools at higher rates than in other school types (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020; Zhang & Zeller, 2016). The reasons for turnover in these schools can be for a variety of reasons. For example, teachers leave schools if there is not enough economic payoff. Teachers want to be paid enough for the work that they are doing, both in adequate pay and adequate benefits (Papay et al., 2017). If teachers perceive that the economic payoff that they are receiving is unlevel with the work that they are doing they are more likely to turnover or attrit.

With regard to “hard-to-staff” schools in California, conversations about higher pay to incentivize and attract more qualified teachers are frequently being had. This finding is contentious, as it pertains to the topic of differentiated pay for teachers rather than the currently-used salary schedule based on teacher education level and experience (Hong & Yee, 2023). Some argue that a teacher’s salary or pay is only a mild factor in

their decision to leave (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2007), corroborated by past research showing that teachers were more likely to leave due to dissatisfaction pertaining to various aspects of the teaching profession, including performance pressures, than because of financial reasons (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). However, in instances where teachers have cited other variables as their primary reasons for leaving, dissatisfaction with teacher pay has been cited as an important variable and its impact in a teacher's decision to leave or remain should not be overlooked (Olsen & Anderson, 2007; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2020). Other reasons for turnover or attrition include general dissatisfaction with school leadership, collegiate relationships, or school culture (Simon & Johnson, 2015). When teachers feel unsupported in their relationships with school administrators, colleagues, and students, they are more likely to turnover or attrit.

In addition, a major reason that teachers turnover in “hard-to-staff” schools is due to student academic performance. While some teachers may prefer to work with “lower-performing” students,

the majority are likely to prefer assignments to ‘easy-to-teach’ students [...] because they are more likely than disadvantaged students to come to school ready to learn, to have access to more educational resources such as books and computers at home, to be motivated to continue on to further education, and to achieve at high levels (Clotfelter et al., 2004, p. 252).

Therefore, teachers leave “harder-to-staff” schools with more disadvantaged students and lower student academic performance. Oftentimes, these schools rely more on the hiring of new teachers with little experience (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2012) or unlicensed teachers to fill vacancies (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Those who are unlicensed, or not fully

prepared prior to becoming the teacher of record in the classroom, or alternatively prepared are more likely to turnover than those who are prepared through traditional certification. Oftentimes, these are Black and Latinx teachers (Redding & Smith, 2019; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

In addition to hiring more unlicensed and alternatively prepared teachers, “hard-to-staff” schools are more likely to hire Black and Latinx teachers, in general. When Black and Latinx teachers enter the teaching profession, they are most likely to be placed in low-income and “hard-to-staff” schools (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Garcia & Weiss, 2019). In fact, research shows that teachers of Color in general “disproportionately teach in high-minority, low-income schools” (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. v) and that “three in four teachers of color work in the quarter of schools serving the most students of color nationally” (Carver-Thomas, 2018, p. 1). As these studies demonstrate, teachers of Color overwhelmingly accept jobs in schools characterized as “hard-to-staff.”

However, research has found that “turnover rates are 50% higher for teachers in Title I [low-income] schools” and “70% higher for teachers in school serving the largest concentrations of students of color” (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. v). These findings suggest that “hard-to-staff” schools, which are characterized by both of the aforementioned components, have higher rates of overall teacher turnover. Given these findings, the more frequent hiring of Black and Latinx teachers into “hard-to-staff” schools with high turnover and attrition rates might contribute to the continued underrepresentation of Black and Latinx teachers in the workforce. However, past research has shown that the turnover rates of teachers of Color are “about the same as

those of all other teachers in high-poverty and high-minority schools” (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017, p. v), with more recent research indicating that teachers of Color are more likely their White counterparts to remain teachers in these schools (Andrews et al., 2019; Carver-Thomas et al., 2020; Garcia and Weiss, 2019). So while some research has found that teachers of Color turnover at about the same rates as their White counterparts in “hard-to-staff” schools, more research has found that teachers of Color are more likely to remain in these spaces. As Achinstein and Ogawa (2011) explain, it may be that teachers of Color are more likely to remain in these spaces to advocate for their students of Color since that is what draws them to teaching in the first place, and to help transform their students’ educational experiences.

Retention of Teachers in Schools That Predominantly Serve Working Class Students of Color

General Teacher Retention. The literature on teacher retention in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color has not always focused on the specific recruitment and retention of teachers of Color. In the past, much research on teacher labor markets had been aimed at general teacher retention, attempting to understand what factors or variables kept teachers in the classroom regardless of a teacher’s racial/ethnic composition and regardless of school type (urban, suburban, rural, low-income, etc.). For example, Johnson and Birkeland’s (2003) longitudinal study on general teacher retention for the first three years of a novel teacher’s career in Massachusetts found that the role of professional culture is important in the decision of a teacher to remain in schools. It found that of all of the factors related to a teacher’s

decision to stay, “teachers weighed, more than anything else, whether they could be effective with their students,” describing the “many ways in which the working conditions in their schools—teaching assignments, collegial interaction, curriculum, administration, discipline—either supported or stymied them in that search for success” (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003, p. 583). Although this study was about general teacher retention, the researchers’ main finding was extended to a small population of four White teachers in “urban” schools where

more than half of the students were minorities and more than three-quarters qualified for free and reduced-price meals. Those four teachers attributed their satisfaction to factors similar to those cited by teachers in wealthier, less diverse schools: supportive administrators and colleagues, clear expectations for students, and safe, orderly environments (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003, p. 603).

This study demonstrated that there are certain variables (e.g. supportive administrators and colleagues, professional cultures and environments) that, though not specific to teachers of Color working in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, can be beneficial to the general retention of teachers across school contexts.

Teacher Preparation. Although a large body of literature on general teacher turnover and/or attrition exists, fewer studies have specifically investigated why teachers remain in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color. Freedman and Appleman (2009) followed 26 novice English teachers in California through their fifth year of teaching, post-credential, from the MUSE teacher preparation program at UC Berkeley. This study builds upon a previous study done with UCLA’s urban teacher education program (TEP) in which graduates were followed into the second through sixth years. Each of the teacher education programs was designed to specifically prepare

teachers for work in an “urban” setting, and teacher candidates selected them because they had experience in an “urban” context and wanted to continue to serve in these contexts. In fact, “approximately 70% of the cohort entered with experience in urban settings or schools, generally as tutors, teachers’ aids, or other kinds of assistants in the schools or as youth workers in varied urban out-of school programs” (Freedman & Appleman, 2009, p. 328). By choosing to work in “urban” education and selecting a TEP that would specifically prepare them for a career in such a site, teacher candidates effectively self-selected in a way that may not be representative of other reasons that teachers remain in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color.

Nor surprisingly, Freedman and Appleman (2009) found that “teachers stay in high-poverty, urban schools at greater than usual rates [after graduating from] from both MUSE and UCLA” (p. 328) teacher education programs. These findings may be explained by two main reasons. Firstly, high retention can be explained in part by the self selection of teachers into the program, indicating their initial desire to accept jobs in “urban” contexts, and in part because many of the students were given grants for matriculation at Berkeley or UCLA so long as they remained in high-poverty schools for four years post-credential, and debt forgiveness for every year that they taught (Freedman & Appleman, 2009). However, it might also be explained by the following factors which were intentionally and deliberately included in the TEP:

- (a) a sense of mission, which was reinforced and developed by the teacher education program;
- (b) a disposition for hard work and persistence, which was reinforced and developed by the teacher education program;
- (c) substantive preparation that included both the practical and the academic and harmony between the two;
- (d) training in assuming the reflective stance of a teacher researcher;
- (e) the opportunity, given the high demand for teachers in high-

poverty schools, to be able to change schools or districts yet still remain in their chosen profession; and (f) ongoing support from members of the cohort as well as other professional networks across the early years of teaching (Freedman & Appleman, 2009, p. 329).

Both the deliberate nature of training in the program and the ongoing support for teachers beyond their time in the program contributed to their overall retention in “urban” contexts.

Freedman and Appleman’s (2009) study was important because it created a nuanced reframing of “urban commitment” for graduates of their programs who left the teaching profession but continued in “urban” education within a different capacity. Although more teachers stayed in “urban” schools for the first five years of their careers as compared to teachers trained in other TEPs, they did not have an infallible retention rate. Instead, this study recategorized “movers” and “leavers” to “shifters” and “drifters”, respectively, because it found that regardless of whether the teachers remained in the teaching profession, they remained in “urban” education and honored their original commitment (Freedman & Appleman, 2009). This recategorization has helped to explain the nuances of teacher decision-making in “urban” schools contexts as research has demonstrated that non-retention from graduates of these TEPs does not equate to leaving “urban” contexts altogether. Instead, at the five-year point (at the time of the study) nationally, 54% of teachers were still teaching in “urban” contexts, as compared to 73% of teachers who had graduated from the MUSE program (Freedman & Appleman, 2009).

Freedman and Appleman’s (2009) study was not the first to find that a sense of “urban commitment” helps to increase teacher retention in these spaces. Olsen and Anderson (2007) conducted a very similar study with UCLA’s Center X program and

found that “urban teachers will remain in urban education if they can adopt multiple education roles inside and outside the classroom and receive professional support during the whole of their careers, not just the beginnings of their teaching” (p. 5). This study demonstrated the importance of harnessing a teacher’s “urban commitment” throughout their careers through ongoing support and professional development opportunities. In each of the studies listed above, the importance of having a “commitment” to the students and to working in “urban” education was present and was enough to retain educators in some capacity. They found that even for those who left the classroom as a teacher remained committed to working in “urban” contexts, many returning to become administrators or researchers in “urban” education (Olsen and Anderson, 2007).

Quartz and the TEP Research Group (2003) also conducted a combined study of quantitative data concerning the retention rates of “social justice” “urban” teachers prepared by UCLA’s Center X TEP and qualitative data concerning the type of preparation and ongoing support these teachers received. This study found that after the first five years of teaching (including the first 2 years in which candidates are in the program) 70% of Center X graduates, as compared to 61% of teachers nationally at the time of the study, were still teaching in “urban” school settings (Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003, p. 104). Interestingly, this study found that

teachers from high-poverty urban schools are more likely than the average teacher to cite students’ lack of motivation and discipline problems as reasons for their dissatisfaction. Given this link between deficit conceptions and urban teacher attrition, we suggest conversely that non deficit conceptions may be a crucial factor in retaining good urban teachers” (Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003, p. 106).

This finding can be tied back to positive, counter-deficit mindsets and recognizing the strengths and assets of the students in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color.

As a whole, general policy recommendations for increasing teacher retention in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color consist of: strengthening Grow-Your-Own and teacher residency programs (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Guha et al., 2016; Silva & Gleason, 2015), increased pay (Papay et al., 2017), close mentorship and induction (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Odell & Ferraro, 1992; Watlington et al., 2010), increasing teacher professional development programs (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003), and specifically preparing teachers for work in an “urban” environment through teacher education programs based on pre-service teacher self-selection and an “urban commitment” (Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Olsen & Anderson, 2007; Whipp & Geronime, 2017). These recommendations are often born out of connecting teacher experiences back to their preparation programs to inform policy (Anderson & Stillman, 2013; Carver-Thomas, 2018; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Whipp & Geronime, 2017) and do not necessarily account for teacher decision-making or experiences *while* in the classroom. To reiterate, neither do these recommendations necessarily isolate the experiences of teachers of Color, but instead generally refer to ways that promote overall teacher retention in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color.

Teacher of Color Retention in Schools That Predominantly Serve Working Class Students of Color. Fewer studies have specifically sought to understand the retention of teachers of Color in schools, and without necessarily connecting matters of retention back to their teacher preparation programs. Instead, the studies that have investigated the retention of teachers of Color in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color have found that their retention is more connected to their ability to establish meaningful relationships with students, each other, and the larger community in which the school is situated.

For example, when reviewing the literature on the attrition of new teachers of Color, Achinstein et al. (2010) found that teachers of Color were more likely than their White counterparts to “work and remain in ‘hard-to-staff’ urban schools with high proportions of students from low-income and nondominant racial and cultural communities” (p. 71). Reasons for this include that new teachers of Color were more likely to go “into their initial schools with commitments to serving students of color through culturally relevant teaching and attended preservice programs focused on such practices” (Achinstein et al., 2009 as cited in Achinstein et al., 2010, pp. 88-89). This study found that teachers of Color were more likely to remain in these spaces than their White counterparts because they either aspired to, or were committed to, creating better educational opportunities for students of Color. In spite of these greater “humanistic commitments” than their White counterparts, Achinstein et al. (2010) found that the retention of teachers of Color could also be affected by “school-level conditions related to financial, human, social, and cultural capital” (p. 71). This study thus revealed how the

different types of capital that exist in a space can inform a teacher's decision to leave or remain in it, and also called attention to a greater need for researching the "humanistic commitments" of teachers of Color in relation to students of Color.

Furthermore, one study by Kokka (2016) investigated why teachers who taught the high turnover subjects of math and science, and were predominantly teachers of Color, remained in "one under-resourced public school in the United States with high retention rates" (p. 170). This study found that the subject area the teacher taught in played less of a role in their decision to retain or attrit. Instead, their decision was more related to their autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and the consequences of these three psychological needs on their satisfaction. With regard to autonomy, Kokka (2016) found that teachers appreciate administrative support when student behavior is concerned but that they prefer administration to step back when matters of curriculum and lesson planning are concerned. This kind of administrative support encouraged teacher retention in Beachside High School (BHS), Kokka's site of investigation, as teachers leaned into their expertise. Additionally, and significantly, Kokka (2016) found that teachers' familiarity with the community, social-emotional rewards such as "thank you's" and "aha moments" (p. 173)- rather than high student achievement-, relationships with students and feelings of belongingness, and, for many teachers, a desire to "give back to the community" (p. 176) all contributed to the high teacher retention rates at BHS.

In essence, each of these studies demonstrated how the retention of teachers of Color is related to the quality of their relationships with administrators, their students, and the communities in which their schools are situated. Understanding more about the

quality of the relationships that teachers of Color have in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color- manifesting in humanistic and “urban” commitments- help to explain why teachers of Color persist in a profession that can otherwise be very harmful to them.

Recognizing that the profession can be very harmful to teachers of Color, as the next section does, it is important to consider that the teaching profession is not neutral. Thus, this study frames teacher of Color retention as an act of resistance. The following section will further inform this rationale.

The Ongoing Condition of Teaching for Teachers of Color

Pushout

As extant literature suggests, there have been many policy recommendations for retaining teachers in “urban” and “hard-to-staff” contexts, with a large body of this literature being non-specific to the experiences of teachers of Color. However, when considering the experiences of teachers of Color within schools, one must consider the racialized nature that these institutions are nested in.

Within extant literature on teachers of Color (ToCs), there exists the notion of teacher “pushout” for teachers of Color based on the ongoing presence of hostile racial climates (Kohli, 2018; Kohli, 2019), toxic work conditions (Carter Andrews et al., 2019) racial subordination (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020), or other mechanisms that challenge the integration, wellbeing, or sustainability of educators of Color (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Kohli, 2018; Kohli, 2019). “Pushout” can occur both in the pre-service stage or in the in-service stage. In the pre-service stage of teaching “within a context that privileges

Whiteness, teacher candidates of Color have reported feeling invisible, silenced, and isolated” (Amos, 2010; Haddix, 2010, as cited in Kohli, 2019, p. 40). This can lead to their “pushout” prior to becoming the teacher of record in a classroom, and contributes to the underrepresentation of teachers of Color in schools.

The pattern of “pushout” can be more salient for in-service teachers, however, as they encounter things like racial battle fatigue (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020; Smith, 2004). One example of this is that of Ms. Shakur, a Black teacher, who decided to leave her school “because she could not take the disrespect anymore” (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020, p. 969). Ms. Shakur described her ongoing experience with racial stereotyping, having her authority and expertise undermined, and encountering racial microaggressions from her White colleagues in the school in which she taught (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). Unfortunately, despite loving her students (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020), Ms. Shakur left her school because she was being disrespected and diminished in a school environment that favored Whiteness and dishonored her as a result.

The narrative and reality of teacher “pushout” for TOCs is important because it shifts the blame of turnover and attrition from the responsibility of the teacher of Color to the responsibility of ongoing racialized structures that adversely affect these teachers, forcing them out of the profession. Additionally, reframing creates an opportunity for TOCs to become empowered and fight the adverse racialized structures. For example, through the use of counter storytelling narratives, studies have found that teachers of Color can empower themselves in the profession through critical professional development (Kohli, 2019), by increasing their racial literacy (Kohli, 2019; Guinier, 2004

as cited in Pizarro & Kohli, 2020), by building communities of racial justice solidarity and a commitment toward racial justice with networks of friends (Kohli, 2018; Pizarro & Kohli, 2020), and by building awareness of racism in schools (Kohli, 2018; Carter Andrews et al., 2019). These methods can lead to better social and emotional working conditions in the pursuit of social justice.

It is important to note that this body of literature does not explicitly isolate the experiences of Black and Latinx teachers, nor does it explicitly occur within the context of schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, but rather interrogates the harmful effects of prolific racist structures and institutions on the teachers of Color within them. This body of literature also calls attention to the importance of racial literacy and critical consciousness as methods toward educational, and societal, liberation. Teachers can become empowered in the classroom as they foster the skills, knowledge, awareness, and language to criticize and *act* against the structures that subordinate them and their students in schools. At the same time, their empowerment does not necessitate that they remain, or persist, in the teaching profession.

A study by Kohli et al. (2019) recognized the difficulty and labor that goes into helping teachers cultivate a critical consciousness, suggesting that teacher education programs recruit and support educators who are “already engaged in developing their critical consciousness” (p. 24). This study’s participants included many teachers in the mid-career stages of their lives working as teachers and activists in various capacities. However, as Kohli et al. (2019) highlight, these teachers had been cultivating their critical identities and literacies throughout their lives, so it is something that they began

with and might have motivated them to help transform educational spaces, as many educators of Color aspire to do in varying degrees. Their critical consciousness may be a vehicle for persistence in their case, as it informs them how to make change in the lives of their students and communities in the ways that they recognize and are able to attend to. This study offers strong direction for teacher education programs and their role in the fight for social justice, and recognizes the enduring difficulty of helping teachers cultivate a strong critical consciousness.

This former point, in particular, aligns with literature on the role of justice-oriented teacher education programs as they relate to helping teachers and educators develop or strengthen their critical consciousness (Brown, 2014; Kohli, 2009; Kohli, 2012). I want to state clearly that the role of a critical consciousness and praxis (Freire, 1970) are both important and necessary for the fight for social justice. However, taken together, some tensions in the literature begin to emerge: 1) the work on cultivating a racial literacy recognizes the importance of having justice-oriented educators and recognizes how they can be empowered within the profession and with the help of justice-oriented TEPs, but does not necessarily have implications for their long-term persistence in the profession; 2) up to this point much of the research on teacher labor markets had been very neutral, seemingly attending to the factors that either push teachers out of the profession or aid in their retention as if they exist in a vacuum. The context is presented as neutral, rather than existing in institutions not created with teachers of Color in mind. In a large body of literature on teacher labor markets, the latter point is highlighted and exacerbated by the comparatively smaller body of literature that

looks at teachers of Color retention, specifically; 3) one article describes the experiences of critically conscious, women of Color educators who have been teaching and participating in activism for years (Kohli et al., 2019). In the case of those educators, activism was a part of their identities and upbringing. However, not all teachers of Color are critically conscious educators, so it is worthwhile to understand how teachers of Color of varying race consciousness persist in the profession.

Situating This Study in Extant Literature

To recapitulate, when investigating matters of teacher retention much of the existing literature has lumped together the experiences of teachers without accounting for the specific experiences of what it means to be a teacher of Color in schools, and how that affects their retention. The pushout framework acknowledges the racially charged and oftentimes harmful experiences that teachers of Color encounter in the profession. Understanding this framework leads to the acknowledgement that when teachers of Color remain in the classroom, or persist, it is more often a matter of enduring a harmful or otherwise difficult environment for the sake of something that they deem worthwhile or necessary. Therefore, it is important to isolate and understand the experiences of teachers of Color in these schools. Doing so challenges the homogenizing of the teaching experience and underlines their resistance (including motivation) in response to racialization in the lived experiences of teachers of Color.

Furthermore, many of the existing studies have focused on why teachers leave rather than why they stay, thereby assuming that there is a direct inverse relationship between the two; that is, if researchers can understand why teachers leave, that

information can inform why they should stay. This is not necessarily the case, and this study aspires to understand what can be learned from those who decide to stay through persistence. Thus, this study endeavors to understand why teachers of Color are staying since they do stay in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color more than their White counterparts. Instead of surveying all racial and ethnic groups that fall under the label “teachers of Color,” however, this study will specifically focus on the experiences of Black and Latinx teachers since they have the highest turnover rates of ToCs in schools.

Finally, in addition to specifically understanding the experiences of why Black and Latinx teachers stay in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, this study aims to understand why they stay beyond the initial high period of turnover or attrition and in the long term. Most of the literature has focused on early-career teachers, trying to understand how they can intervene before they decide to leave. Instead, this dissertation will focus on Black and Latinx career teachers who have stayed beyond the first five years in the profession. What can their experiences teach us? Further rationale for this study and its contributions can be found in the “Methodology and Methods” section of the paper.

Prospective Contribution

To reiterate, this dissertation aims to further inform our understanding of teacher persistence through the perspective of Black and Latinx teachers in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color. This dissertation also aims to

understand how Black and Latinx teachers persist in their schools and careers despite the structural racism (e.g. pushout) in which the teaching profession is situated.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are the following:

1. How do career teachers of Color who teach in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color navigate the profession?
2. How did their race consciousness and approach to resistance inform how they persisted in the profession?

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This dissertation is grounded in resistance theories and the spirit of counter-deficit³ frameworks that have challenged harmful dominant ideologies about people, namely students of Color, who lie at the intersection of minoritized racial or ethnic groups and other forms of oppression (e.g. class, gender, etc.) in society. As Kolluri and Tichavakunda (2022) state, counter-deficit frameworks are “‘asset-based’ frames that elevate the strengths of racially minoritized, working-class students and families” (p. 2) as they navigate oppressive systems that were not created with them in mind. In the educational institution, resistance theories and counter-deficit frameworks have largely been extended out of critical race theory (CRT). CRT is a framework that asserts that racism is a pervasive and permanent fixture in society (Bell, 1992). Grounded in this knowledge, resistance theories and counter-deficit frameworks exist to push-back on the hegemony that exists within society’s institutions by highlighting the often-overlooked strengths and knowledges (capitals) that marginalized communities carry.

This section dives into the theoretical framing for this dissertation. It begins with a brief overview of critical race theory (CRT) in education. The explanation of resistance theories for social justice comes next, as they have stemmed from the CRT frameworks. Resistance theories of social justice ground this dissertation study to understand the persistence of career teachers of Color as a form of resistance. As mentioned in Chapter

³ Consistent with Kolluri and Tichavakunda’s (2022) work on counter-deficit research in education, the term “counter-deficit” is used to encompass the lenses, frameworks, and research that reject or challenge deficit thinking of minoritized communities within education. “Counter-deficit” is used throughout this paper in lieu of “anti-deficit” to be distinguished from Shaun Harper’s (2010) Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework, from which this dissertation also draws. The use and rationale for Harper’s (2010) work is explained in the next chapter.

1, the definition of persistence in this dissertation is defined as “continuing in the teaching profession in spite of the difficulties or opposition that Black and Latinx teachers face as educators.” This definition of persistence centers the teachers’ agency and desire to persist in a profession where they feel that they are making a difference in the lives of marginalized students. Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief explanation of counter-deficit frameworks which help to position this dissertation as a work meant to honor and recognize the assets that teachers and communities of Color carry in “urban” contexts as it relates to their resistant behaviors and their persistence in the profession.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework that emerged out of critical legal studies to assert that racism is a pervasive and permanent fixture in society (Bell, 1992). As such, CRT as a framework is predicated upon centering and understanding the experiences of people of Color within the context, and past contexts, of a society that favors White privilege and domination (Harris, 1993). A major concept in CRT is the concept of Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), which asserts that “legal legitimization of expectations of power and control [...] enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of White privilege and domination” (p. 1715).

The structures that lead to teacher of Color attrition and pushout become more obvious in the context of CRT and Whiteness as property because it highlights how, since the inception of this country, White ideologies and norms have defined the status quo in institutions (Harris, 1993); therefore, non-White individuals become undervalued and exploited. In the context of the teacher labor markets in education, the “pushout” of Black

and Latinx teachers is characterized, for example, by their constant placement in under-resourced schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Garcia & Weiss, 2019). These schools are often characterized by high levels of turnover and teacher shortages, resulting in higher amounts of labor for the Black and Latinx teachers hired. In this sense, they are devalued and overworked.

As the example of teacher pushout demonstrates, Whiteness as property demonstrates the racist structures that exist within education for teachers of Color. Yet, the goal of this study is to understand teacher of Color persistence. As such, this study will use outgrowths of CRT to investigate why Black and Latinx teachers persist in the teaching profession in spite of the structural racism they must navigate when they choose to be in these spaces.

Critical Race Theory in Education

Extending CRT into the context of education, CRT “challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism as it relates to education by examining how educational theory and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 2). To help accomplish this, there are five themes that guide and inform the CRT of education, adapted by Solórzano and Yosso (2001) from the tenets that guide CRT:

1. **The Centrality and Intersectionality of Race and Racism:** According to Solórzano and Yosso (2001) “A CRT of education recognizes the central role racism has played in the structuring of schools and schooling practices, and that racism intersects with other forms of subordination including sexism and classism” (p. 2).
2. **The Challenge to Dominant Ideology:** “CRT examines the system of education as part of a critique of societal inequality. In this, critical race educators challenge

dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding culture and intelligence, language and capability, through research, pedagogy, and praxis” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 2).

3. **The Commitment to Social Justice:** “A critical race framework is committed to social justice and offers a liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 2).
4. **The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge:** “CRT recognizes that the experiential knowledge of women and men of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, practicing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 3).
5. **The Interdisciplinary Perspective:** “CRT challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most traditional analyses and insists on analyzing race and racism by placing them in both an historical and contemporary context using interdisciplinary methods” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 3).

As these five themes suggest, CRT in education aims to disrupt and challenge the mechanisms that reinforce racism and White supremacy in educational settings by centering the experiences of people of Color. In doing so, this framework operates as a critical lens to reframe, challenge, learn, and heal.

Resistance Theories

The resistance theories primarily used in this dissertation build off of the principles of CRT. However, the origins of resistance theories with regard to education begin with Henry Giroux. Building off of Marxist theory, Giroux (1983) argued that ideology occurs at the unconscious, common sense, and conscious levels- if education remains at the unconscious or common sense levels, then educational institutions remain sites of reproduction of the status quo and inequality. However, as educational institutions, and their agents (e.g. teachers and students), move toward consciousness, they recognize, critique, and act against (resist) systems of power and oppression.

Giroux (1983) critiqued that “ideology in the most traditional and orthodox Marxist sense has been primarily concerned with relations of domination rather than with the relations of struggle and resistance,” (p. 14). As such, those notions of ideology “suppress the possibilities of mediation and resistance” (p. 14) in educational institutions. In response to the tensions that were noted, Giroux (1983) asserted that schools, though sites of oppression and social reproduction, can also be sites of resistance, transformation, and liberation: student behaviors can manifest as oppositional behaviors, and agency is not something that only belongs to the dominant class, but something that all actors have as they navigate society’s institutions. Although Giroux's (1983) work outlined the potential for resistance in society’s institutions, it was limited in the kinds of oppression discussed.

Resistance Theory Framework

Building off of Giroux’s resistance theory is Solórzano and Delgado Bernal’s (2001) work on transformational resistance. This work extended resistance to include resistance’s transformational potential in educational institutions and society that strive for social justice. According to Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001),

resistance theories are different than social and cultural reproduction theories because the concept of resistance emphasizes *that individuals are not simply acted on by structures* (emphasis added). In contrast, resistance theories demonstrate how individuals negotiate and struggle with structures and create meanings of their own from these interactions. These theories represent a significant advance over more deterministic reproduction models of schooling by acknowledging *human agency* (p. 315).

Human agency refers to the skills and confidence to act on behalf of one (Solórzano and Solórzano, 1995). Thus, resistance theories recognize and honor the agency of actors as

they navigate circumstances, institutions, and structures with an active role to play as participants. These theories recognize the many ways that actors can tap into their own “confidence and skills” to navigate their conditions, rather than simply being acted upon.

Solórzano and Delgado Bernal grounded their resistance framework in CRT and LatCrit frameworks. Because of the overlap between the tenets of CRT in education and LatCrit theories, the main tenet changed (as compared to the aforementioned tenets of CRT in education) was “the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism.” This tenet was updated to “the centrality of race and racism and intersectionality with other forms of subordination,” including subordination that reflects the lived experiences of Latinx people, including gender, language, and immigration status. Thus, by situating their resistance in CRT and LatCrit frameworks, Solórzano and Delgado Bernal were able to account for intersectional identities and forms of subordination.

Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) extended their notion of resistance to include transformational resistance in response to the limited, but growing, body of research on resistance that focused primarily on “working-class males and their self-defeating resistance” (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 309). For example, Willis (1977) centered the experiences of students, working class boys, who resisted school culture. This type of resistance reinforced their social position, by relegating them into low-wage positions in manual labor- in this way, the boys’ resistance was self-defeating because it reinforced their oppression. Not only did studies like Willis’ (1977) focus on self-defeating behaviors and resistance, but they did not account for intersectional identities or other forms of oppression, such as those which occur on the basis of gender,

language ability, etc. Furthermore, previous studies focusing on self-defeating resistance only focused on “information about how youth participate in oppositional behavior that reinforces social inequality instead of offering examples of how oppositional behavior may be an impetus toward social justice” (pp. 309-310). Thus, many resistance theories were limited in their representation and often perpetuated oppressive perceptions through their examples of oppositional behavior.

Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) built upon previous resistance theories to demonstrate the varied ways in which Chicano and Chicana students might navigate oppositional behavior. In doing so, they expanded the work of resistance theories to be more inclusive of intersectional identities utilizing Delgado Bernal’s (1997) resistance framework. This framework articulates four types of student oppositional behavior that emerge from navigating schooling experiences- reactionary behavior, self-defeating resistance, conformist resistance, and transformational resistance. For Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, the types of student oppositional behavior exist along a two-axis quadrant characterized by two criteria adapted from Giroux’s (1983) assertion that resistance has two intersection dimensions: a critique of social oppression (and no critique of social oppression, on the other end), and a motivation by social justice (and similarly, no motivation by social justice). Social oppression is defined as the subordination of people at the intersection of their racial and ethnic identity and their socioeconomic, gender, language, and/or immigration statuses. Secondly, social justice refers to “a) the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty and b) the empowering of underrepresented minority groups” (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 313).

Reactionary behavior is characterized as neither having a critique of social oppression nor being motivated by social justice. Reactionary behavior is not resistance because it is missing both criteria for resistance- a critique of social oppression and a motivation by social justice. An example of reactionary behavior “is the student who acts out or behaves poorly in class, the schoolyard, or the community and has no critique of the social criteria that may contribute to her or his disruptive behavior” (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 317). Self-defeating behavior is characterized by having a critique of social oppression but lacks being motivated by social justice. An example of this form of resistance is “the high school dropout who may have a compelling critique of the schooling system but then engages in behavior (dropping out of school) that is self-defeating and does not help transform her or his oppressive status” (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 317). Conformist resistance is characterized as being motivated by a desire for social justice, but by not having a critique of social oppression (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001). An example of conformist resistance is “An example is the student who thinks the best way to change the high drop-out rate at her or his school would be to offer tutoring and counseling so that the dropouts can adapt to the ways of the school”; importantly, while “some social change is possible through conformist resistance, without a critique of the social, cultural, or economic forms of oppression, it does not offer the greatest possibility for social justice” (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 319).

Finally, transformational resistance is characterized as agents “having *some* [emphasis added] level of awareness or critique of her or his oppressive conditions and

structures of domination and must be at least *somewhat* [emphasis added] motivated by a sense of social justice” (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 319); this is the type of resistance with the greatest potential for social change as it aspires for social justice (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001). Transformation resistance “is similar to Robinson and Ward’s (1991) resistance for liberation, and similar to Yosso’s (2000) resilient resistance,” (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 320). Resilient resistance dictates that “the strategies students use ‘leave the structures of domination intact, yet help the students survive and/or succeed’” (Yosso, 2000, p. 181 as cited in Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 320). In resistance for liberation, “‘Black girls and women are encouraged to acknowledge the problems of, and to demand change in, an environment that oppresses them’” (Robinson and Ward, 1991, p. 89 as cited in Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 320). Transformational resistance can either be internal or external to the resistor. Internal transformational resistance

appears to conform to institutional or cultural norms and expectations, however individuals are consciously engaged in a critique of oppression. Students maintain both criteria of transformational resistance, yet their behavior is subtle or even silent and might go unnamed as transformational resistance. One example is the Student of Color who holds a critique of cultural and economic oppression and is motivated to go to graduate school by a desire to engage in a social justice struggle against this oppression. This student might hope to give back to her or his community through a service profession in the teaching, medical, social work, or legal fields. The student maintains both criteria of transformational resistance, but on the surface, her or his behavior appears to conform to societal and maybe parental expectations. That is, they are doing well in school, pursuing a higher education, and their outward behavior may not overtly indicate any semblance of social justice. This is not conformist resistance because on further and deeper analysis, the student does in fact have a social justice agenda to “give back” to her community in the form of education and social service.” (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, pp. 324-325).

External transformation resistance, on the other hand, is a more overt version of resistance behavior which accounts for both criteria. An example of this form of resistance is the “civil rights worker who participated in boycotts and demonstrations in the hopes of securing the integration of public facilities. This type of resistance differs from internal transformational resistance because it is openly visible and overtly operates outside the traditional system” (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, pp. 325-326). This type of resistance can manifest in many forms, including “political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that social justice is possible through resistant behavior” (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 326).

It is important to note that the four types of oppositional behavior are not static or fixed, nor are they the only forms of oppositional behavior of resistance that exist (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001). The examples above were included to help the readers distinguish between and demonstrate the various manifestations of oppositional behavior as they manifested in students’ educational experiences in schools. Because this dissertation’s “Chapter 4” is written in narrative format that centers the stories of the protagonists rather than analysis, these in-depth examples were also included to help the readers recognize the oppositional behaviors of teachers navigating the profession.

(Re)Imagining the Resistance Theory Framework

Nearly twenty years after the resistance framework was created, various authors, including the original authors, revisited the resistance theory framework to add some important clarifications. After nearly two decades of this framework, many educators and

researchers have been misapplying it. As such, Hannegan-Martinez et al. (2024) made important contributions that are worth attending to. Firstly, the authors emphasize that student oppositional behavior is fluid and unfixed- this means that it is counterproductive to assign people to only one quad. This also means that the quads are a way of analyzing behavior rather than measuring how “‘down’ or ‘transformational’ a person is” (Hannegan-Martinez et al., 2024, p. 2072). Instead, the resistance framework is meant to offer a framing to help us understand how people navigate their experiences as people of Color, honoring their survivance in oppressive spaces, based on the behaviors that they exhibit in response to oppression and injustice. Importantly, no one person is entirely transformational, and Hannegan-Martinez et al. understand that we “honor the humanity of people struggling to resist systems of domination while simultaneously being inundated in it—we are all complicit” (2024, p. 2088).

The notion that those participate in oppositional behavior can simultaneously resist and reproduce oppression is an important point that introduces the second main contribution of Hannegan-Martinez et al.’s (2024) work: in the ongoing battle for educational and societal liberation, we must not “shame, diminish, plot, or label,” (p. 2073) the efforts and oppositional behaviors of students of Color. Instead, educators should contextualize those behaviors and work with students to cultivate and grow oppositional behaviors toward transformational resistance through critical pedagogical ruptures- based in culturally sustaining curriculum, *convivencia*, and commitment to social transformation- that nurture “all forms of resistance towards transformation” (Hannegan-Martinez et al., 2024, p. 2066).

Considerations for Counter-Deficit Frameworks

Matters of race are inextricably linked with the existence of counter-deficit frameworks in education. In their review of counter-deficit literature, Kolluri and Tichavakunda (2022) ground their work upon the notion that racial oppression in schools is racist in both ideology *and* structure. However, the majority of the literature reviewed focused explicitly on an ideological understanding, revealing how “racism is primarily understood by way of ideology and seldom by way of structures” (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2022, p. 1). Given these findings, this article argues that ideological understanding is the body of counter-deficit work is important, but not enough. For example, “when schools focus energy on emphasizing cultural assets of their marginalized students, they may neglect to criticize the social conditions that marginalize them” (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2022, p. 21). The structural understanding of how racism is understood is heavily overlooked in this body of research, but is very much necessary since the way that people understand an issue guides the way they ameliorate or rectify it. Therefore, while ideological understandings of racism are an important first step, they are insufficient for creating tangible, structural changes within education to empower communities of Color.

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, counter-deficit research largely focuses on students, and to some extent their parents or families (for a review of the literature see Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2022). Although some research has been conducted on the strengths and capital of teachers, often the very body of work attempting to counter deficit ideologies about students views “urban” teachers through a

deficit-lens, blaming them for failing to recognize the assets of students (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2022). While some teachers do indeed fail to recognize the assets of students, the body of work blaming “urban” teachers largely overlooks the unequal structural system in which schools operate (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2022). Although there are certainly White teachers in “urban” schools, the majority of the teachers in “urban” schools are teachers of Color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Carver-Thomas, 2018). Therefore, by shifting deficit lenses onto teachers in “urban” schools, scholars and society alike are majorly shifting deficit ideologies onto teachers of Color in these schools, thereby perpetuating deficit lenses and further marginalizing and discrediting communities of Color in education- the very thing that counter-deficit frameworks exist to do. Ultimately, the blame shifted onto the teachers in “urban” schools must consider that “like students, teachers in marginalized communities are negotiating racist systems that engulf both them and their pupils” (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2022, p. 24).

Taken together, these critiques reveal some of the limitations of counter-deficit work: it largely ignores racist structures in educational institutions, therefore failing to create tangible, structural change in educational institutions; it blames “urban” teachers, predominantly consisting of those of Color, for the failure of students in “urban” schools; and it largely ignores that the teaching profession, just like for students of Color navigating education, is nestled within structural racism.

Teacher Resistance and Counter-Deficit Framing

While many studies center the experiences and behaviors of students and youth of Color in oppressive structures through the framing of resistance (Hannegan-Martinez et al, 2024; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Tuck and Yang, 2011), few studies currently center the experiences of teachers of Color through this framework. Two studies have demonstrated how teachers of Color can act as facilitators and co-constructors of resistance for their students (López et al., 2024; Pham, 2022). These studies are valuable and demonstrate how teachers can play an important part in helping students foster a more justice-oriented understanding, but they do not explicitly focus on the resistance of teachers of Color. Few others have explicitly centered the resistance of teachers of Color. For example, Carter (unpublished manuscript) centered the agency and resistance of teachers of Color as they decided whether to remain or leave the profession. That study informed the complexities of teacher attrition and turnover, revealing the importance of continuing to center the voices of teachers of Color as they navigate and resist in the profession. Another study by Kirmaci (2023) centered the experiences of an in-service Latina teacher to understand how she was conformist and transformationally resistant as she interacted with various roles in educational structures. This study demonstrated the power of both life history research and resistance theories for understanding teacher resistance and decision-making, as this dissertation does with regard to teacher of Color resistance and persistence.

Given extant literature on the retention of teachers of Color in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, and given the non-neutral condition

of teaching for teachers of Color, it is worth understanding their experiences through the framing of resistance for social justice. For example, literature shows that many teachers of Color enter these schools and the profession with noble goals of making a difference in the lives of students like themselves (Achinstein et al., 2010; Kokka, 2016), challenging the effects of racism to create better opportunities for their students. That is resistance. Furthermore, they do make a positive difference in the lives of students of Color (Bristol and Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Redding, 2019) This is valuable, and a form of resistance. How else might the resistance of teachers of Color manifest, and how might this inform our ongoing understanding of how teachers of Color navigate racist structures?

To further justify resistance frameworks for this study it is important to return to the literature review of this dissertation. As aforementioned, teacher labor markets generally situate the attrition and retention of teachers of Color as neutral- there is hardly a critique of the structural racism that teachers are up against in the profession. On the other hand, there is a body of literature that suggests how teachers of Color can be empowered within a racist profession (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Kohli, 2018; Kohli, 2019), but it does not necessarily have implications for the persistence of teachers of Color.

To address this tension and merge the two bodies of literature, my dissertation centered the stories and voices of two career teachers of Color who entered the profession with goals of social justice in the form of empowering the lives of their working class and students of Color. These teachers have varying levels of race consciousness, referring to

their awareness of how racialization and racism affects individuals and structures in society. They demonstrated how they are resistant in various ways, even without a strong critique or articulation of structural oppression. As Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) state, that for transformational resistance to take place, “*some* [emphasis added] level of awareness or critique of her or his oppressive conditions and structures of domination and must be at least *somewhat* [emphasis added] motivated by a sense of social justice” (p. 319). By centering the stories of two teachers of Color who have resisted and persisted in the profession, we find that resistance theories are messy (Tuck and Yang, 2011). They reveal, for example, the ways that agents can reinforce and reproduce oppression (Covarrubias & Revilla, 2003) in their fight for social justice.

Similarly, the participants in my study revealed the relationships between their race consciousness and their resistance, demonstrating that they attend to the issues of injustice that they recognize and can control, mostly those relating to interpersonal matters. Their resistance, in turn, makes them feel effective in, and satisfied with, the change that they are making, motivating their persistence. At the same time, their race consciousness has implications for the issues that they do not attend to, relating to structural understandings of injustice. Taken together, this study has important implications for how to direct future research as it relates to these topics.

Theoretical Framing

This section outlines how the theoretical frameworks come together to inform this dissertation. This dissertation is primarily grounded in Solórzano and Delgado Bernal’s (2001) resistance theory for social justice framework. However, this work endeavors to

understand how career teachers of Color who work in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color have persisted in the profession. I recognize that counter-deficit research on these schools has shifted the blame of the “failures” of these schools to teachers (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2022), consisting predominantly of teachers of Color (Carver-Thomas, 2018). In so doing, a large body of counter-deficit research has become antithetical to that which it endeavored to do- “to challenge racism in schools and improve opportunities” (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2022, p. 1) for marginalized populations of people. In contrast to the bodies of work that have come to blame teachers of Color, this dissertation endeavors to take an asset-orientation of their persistence in schools. As such, this study endeavors to highlight the strengths of teachers of Color who persist in the profession and honor their contributions for informing literature.

Furthermore, I understand that teachers of Color are choosing to persist in a profession not created with them in mind and nestled within structural racism. At the same time, as Chapter 1 demonstrates, there is a small body of literature that focuses specifically on the long-term retention of teachers of Color. Oftentimes, this body of literature seemingly focuses on the retention of teachers of Color in an isolated context, not considering the difficulties and adversities of the profession for teachers of Color. As such, this dissertation builds off of resistance theories in literature to contend that teacher persistence is resistance. In framing the conversation in Solórzano and Delgado Bernal’s (2001) resistance theory framework, this dissertation can inform and reconceptualize existing literature on what is generally referred to as teacher of Color retention.

Finally, to frame the assets of teachers of Color and to understand their resistance in the profession, this work and its methods are grounded in the CRT principle of “the centrality of experiential knowledge.” This work endeavored to understand and honor the persistence of teachers of Color by centering the voices and experiences. The following chapter outlines the methodology and methods that were employed in conjunction with the theory discussed in this section.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework

A large inspiration for this dissertation work is drawn from Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework. Harper's (2010) anti-deficit achievement framework demonstrates how psychological and sociological theories can be utilized to challenge prevalent deficit narratives through the alteration of paradigms based on the ways in which questions are asked. This anti-deficit achievement framework is accomplished, in part, through critical race counterstorytelling:

Storytellers also present, from the viewpoints of persons of color, realities not commonly acknowledged in courts, policymaking, and publishing. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) adapted the approach for use in educational research. They deemed it a useful means by which to examine, critique, and counter master narratives (also known as majoritarian stories) composed about people of color (Harper, 2015, p. 145).

A good example of how the framework is utilized is in Harper's 2015 study to disrupt the mischaracterizations and deficit narratives of high school boys of Color in the "urban" school setting (violent, inadequate, etc.). Rather than asking why deficit-based situations occur, the framework "flips" the matter to identify, understand, and promote the assets of those being studied. For example, Harper's (2015) study demonstrated how "instead of asking, 'Why do so many drop out of high school,' we wanted to know what helps Black and Latino males graduate" (Harper, 2015, p. 143). Thus, in the context of Black and Latinx teachers with relation to their persistence, I wanted to understand their perspectives about why they choose to remain.

Research Design

This dissertation implemented a qualitative, life history methodology to understand the experiences of Black and Latinx teacher persistence in the teaching profession. The methods for data collection employed included preliminary questionnaires to initially determine the participants. The participants consisted of a small number of teachers who identify as either Black or Latinx and have been teaching in their school for more than five years. The participants and I engaged in a series of what in conventional research is called interviews, but manifested instead as guided conversations (Cole & Knowles, 2001) in the form of *pláticas*. Throughout the duration of the study, I also observed the teacher participants in their classrooms and school events, and they occasionally engaged in a journaling process to reflect upon their experiences as teachers. As discussed in this section, I incorporated these techniques to ensure that I was centering and empowering the teachers' voices while highlighting their identity, stories, and experiences (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Lanford et al., 2019). After all, the purpose of a life history inquiry is to “[gain] insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other humans” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11).

Life History

Life history research is a form of research that entails collecting rich, detailed, in-depth data about a person's life, or a period within it, to understand how individuals are influenced by, and make decisions within the context of, larger societal forces. This methodology blurs the line between researcher and -participant, challenging notions of

conventional “scientific” research (Cole & Knowles, 2001) to demonstrate how autobiographical work occurs at the intersection of the researcher and the participant’s identities.

The goal of this research is to understand the participant's life and experiences over time to inform the present; in order to do this well, this type of research typically requires having a small number of participants, or even just one. To understand and begin to make meaning of the participant(s)’s experiences, the researcher might integrate conventional anthropological methods of data collection. These can include interviews, observations, collecting diaries, medical records, photographs, etc. The final life history should not highlight certain points, but should instead demonstrate the complexities and truths of a person’s identity and experiences, focusing on “depth over breadth” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 67) and a quality relationship. Lanford, Tierney, and Lincoln (2019) summarized the purpose of life history research well by stating that:

An individual who is the subject of a life history should not have their experiences truncated and summarized, with specific characteristics highlighted for their potential generalizability (Behar, 1993; Bourgois, 1995; Lincoln, 1997). Rather, a life history honors the multiplex perspectives, behaviors, and insights that constitute a person’s identity. It also rejects the notion that an individual passively reacts to outside political and social forces; instead, it surmises that individuals have the agency to comprehend and impact their environments (p. 460).

Since the purpose of life history research is to deeply understand the experiences of the participant, life history research blurs the conventionally strict boundary of “empirical” research which stipulates a hierarchy between researcher and participant, resulting in a unilateral, potentially detached or aloof relationship in which the researcher draws information from the participant. Instead, life history research is explicit in its

intention to challenge “claims of researcher ‘objectivity’ in the study of human lives” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11). It challenges the power dynamic and hierarchy of conventional research by co-creating knowledge with the participant and centering the principle of mutuality (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Mutuality entails making mutual decisions with the participant in the “information-gathering phase of researching” (p. 71).

The concept of mutuality is not inherently contrary to empirical research. In fact, within life history research the researcher can adhere to research protocol while honoring mutuality and developing a good relationship with the participant(s) (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Therefore, this research is not built by the researcher for the participant, but is instead a highly reflective process in which the researcher frequently checks in on their identity and biases throughout the process, and also checks in with the participant(s) to check for meaning and accuracy in the retelling of their lives. In essence, this work is an autobiographical intersection of the identities of both researcher and participant as they understand a particular phenomena. Furthermore, this process restores authority to the participant (Cole & Knowles, 2001) by allowing them to check for clarification, verification, and validation along the way.

Although there are many similar components between an ethnography and a life history inquiry, they are quite different in their intent. Both use typical anthropological fieldwork techniques of data collection such as interviews, observations, document analysis, etc. However, while the ethnography focuses on particular contexts or cultures from the “inside” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 79), the life history inquiry does not see context as the unit of analysis. Instead, context is an important reference point, but the

true purpose of life history research is to “understand an individual’s life and experience” (p. 79) while making meaning of the influences of history on their lives, thereby making broader contextual meaning.

In this sense, understanding one individual’s life and decision-making can provide insights into the broader community context. As Cole and Knowles (2001) state, “to understand some of the complexities, complications, and confusions within the life of just one member of a community is to gain insight into the collective” (p. 11). This is not because to “understand *one* is to understand *all*,” but because understanding the complexities of one individual’s life can move us toward “understanding the complexities of lives in communities” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11).

To reiterate, this form of research endeavors to center the experiences of the participant(s) to co-create meaning and knowledge in context. This manifests as having a small sample of participants, oftentimes just one, and emphasizing depth over breadth (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Thus, this typically means spending quality amounts of time with a participant to understand their experiences, all the while engaging in a reflexive process that honors their voice and consideration with regard to the meaning being made by the researcher. Consistent with Burawoy’s (1998) argument for reflexive social science research, and consistent with Lanford et al.’s (2019) above explanation of life history research, I am using life history research to understand why teachers of Color persist in the teaching profession and to center their experiences as much as possible in order to avoid removing the power of the participants’ voices or experiences by

summarizing, paraphrasing, etc. The next section indicates which anthropological fieldwork techniques will be utilized in the research, and the rationale for each.

Data Collection Methods and Rationale

Methodological “Fit”

To reiterate, this work will employ a life history methodology, which will employ guided conversations, manifesting in *pláticas*, observations, and occasional journaling for gathering data. This decision has not been made haphazardly. In their work, Lamont and Swidler (2014) argue for a “methodological pluralism,” arguing that methods debates are really theory debates since what is being argued about is the best “fit” for pursuing answers to theoretical questions using data collection techniques (methods). Therefore, what researchers should be after is the best “fit” for answering their theoretically-guided research questions. This section outlines some considerations for employing a life history methodology, and reiterates why I decided that it was the best “fit” for this dissertation.

Rationale for Life History Research. Life history research was the best fit for understanding why teachers in one hard-to-staff, “urban” school in the Inland Empire persist in their schools and in the profession for a variety of reasons. Firstly, this research centers on the experiences of the individual, allowing for an in-depth understanding of their decision-making across time. Not only does this allow for deep, quality relationships with a small number of participants to occur, allowing for rich data and understanding with regard to the research questions to emerge, but it also has implications for informing the larger community. For example, the literature review in this study reveals that we know, with more or less predictability, why teachers of Color enter the profession. We

know, again with more or less predictability, which factors affect their retention or attrition. What we do not know in as much depth, is how teachers come to make their decision to remain in the classroom, or why they choose to resist or persist. We do not necessarily understand the boundaries or limitations in their decision-making for what we might call mechanisms of persistence in as much depth. Thus, engaging in this type of research has the potential to more deeply inform our understanding of teacher of Color persistence.

Secondly, this type of research serves as a counternarrative across multiple dimensions, making it an ideal methodology for pursuing the work of this dissertation. The first dimension of life history research as counternarrative is described in its makeup. The life history research methodology is in and of itself a counternarrative to dominant methods of research, as described in the relationship between researcher and participant. As an intimate way of doing research with participants and centering their voices and experiences, it has the potential to be emancipatory. This is a feature highlighted by Lanford et al. (2019) when they “demonstrate how life history can serve as a platform for individuals who would be otherwise marginalized by expansive generalizations and exclusionary protocols.” (p. 459). Finally, it is in and of itself a counternarrative to dominant forms of research in its final form. While conventional research can be written for a variety of audiences, life history research is intentional, once again, in who it is created and written for. By being written up in a narrative style of writing, this form of research is intended to be more accessible to individuals outside of academia, extending

knowledge to larger society and once again challenging the stringent nature of conventional research.

While the components listed above illustrate how life history research is in and of itself a form of counternarrative against dominant research methodologies, there is a second dimension in which life history research enacts counternarrative: in the actual stories presented in life history research, which is consistent with CRT in education's tenet of "the Challenge to Dominant Ideology" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). This second dimension of counternarrative is yet another reason that life history research was selected as the primary methodology for pursuing this dissertation. For example, life history research and the counternarrative stories presented within it can serve as a form of advocacy as seen in Orr's (2001) work with Aboriginal communities and what is termed "First Nations" (Orr, 2001). In this work, Orr (2001) presented a counternarrative as to what constitutes and is considered knowledge. A similar counternarrative was presented in Will's (2001) work within the context of nursing. In each of these examples, we see how the stories presented in life history research act as a counternarrative to challenge conventional notions of knowing and being, to present the untold stories of marginalized communities. Through life history research not only is new knowledge having the opportunity to be shared with larger communities, but the centering of typically muted voices are the ones telling their own stories and offering valuable perspectives.

Since this dissertation is concerned with understanding the persistence of its participants, which includes centering their voices to understand their decision-making and learning about counter-deficit ideologies, the counternarrative is a crucial component

of this life history research. By truly building a quality relationship with a few participants, the richness in storytelling is bound to emerge. The readers will get to intimately understand the experiences of each of the participants as they share their stories about persisting in a profession not created with them in mind, and we as a larger society will begin to understand the complexities and intricacies of what it means to persist in the profession as a teacher of Color.

In summation, by understanding more about the autobiographical life histories of teachers, we have the potential to better understand the mechanisms of persistence that teachers of Color negotiate. This work, then, serves not only as a way of more deeply understanding the lives in context (Cole & Knowles, 2001) of Black and Latinx teachers, but also as their autobiographical counternarratives. This work centers their voices, and it stands in opposition to more "scientific" research that can be cold and apathetic, often overlooking these communities and the capital that they contribute to society.

Preliminary Questionnaires for Teacher Selection

To identify which teachers would qualify for the study, a preliminary electronic questionnaire was distributed to a handful of teachers in Canyon Elementary School, described below. These teachers were identified with the help of a former career teacher who worked at Canyon Elementary. Once the teachers had been contacted, and if they expressed interest and replied, I distributed an electronic questionnaire to determine their eligibility. As DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) state, the type of methods used depend on the population being studied. Since I am aware that email correspondences are likely a

necessary part of the day-to-day job responsibilities for teachers, distributing the survey via email was a convenient and accessible way for teachers to access the questionnaire.

Because I am investigating matters of persistence for Black and Latinx teachers, it was important that I identified Black and Latinx teachers who had been teaching in their respective schools for more than five years, indicating either mid-career or career teacher status. The rationale behind this time frame was twofold. Firstly, research suggests that the turnover or attrition of teachers from the profession will usually occur in their first three to five years (Ingersoll, 2003; Guarino et al., 2006; Borman and Dowling, 2008). The majority of the research samples on teacher retention consist of novice teachers within their first three to five years. Research suggests that about 20% of new teachers abandon the profession within the first three years, and as many as 46% leave within their first five years (Henke et al., 2000; Ingersoll, 2003; Olsen and Anderson, 2007). If teachers have spent more than five years at their respective schools, they are likely to have stayed for a number of reasons that can inform teacher persistence in these schools.

Secondly, by ensuring that teachers have remained in their schools beyond the initial five-year timeframe in which turnover and attrition are highest, I wanted to ensure that the participating teachers have persisted in these schools by their own volition. A secondary goal of working with teachers who have remained in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color beyond the five-year timeframe is to mitigate or altogether eliminate the likelihood that they have remained in these schools solely because of the extraneous variables of state or federal teacher loan forgiveness programs. According to the California Department of Education (*Loan cancellation*

resources, n.d.), teachers who work at low-income schools that satisfy the following criteria for five consecutive years are eligible for loan reduction or forgiveness:

The CDE uses student eligibility for Free and Reduced Price Meals (FRPM), part of the National School Lunch Program, as its measure of low income. For a school to be eligible, over 30 percent of its age 5 through 17 enrollment must be FRPM eligible, **and** the school must be part of a school district that is at least eligible to receive Title I funding.

As the CDE criteria demonstrates, the schools that qualify for teacher loan reductions or forgiveness are those defined as “hard to staff” or “urban” schools. This is unsurprising, given that the teacher loan forgiveness program is a policy response that serves as an incentive for teachers to enter “hard to staff”, “urban”, or “under-resourced” schools that might otherwise experience teacher shortages and staffing problems. In the context of this study, however, ensuring that teachers have been in the teaching profession and in “urban” contexts beyond their first five years demonstrates that they are not simply doing so to satisfy California teaching contract policies that qualify for loan-forgiveness. In other words, these teachers are not simply “completing a sentence” or using schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color as a stepping stone before moving onto another school or district.

Interviews- Guided Conversations

Once the participating teachers were identified, we engaged in three guided conversations. With the consent and written permission of the participants, these guided conversations were recorded. Recording the audio was done for the benefit of the researcher for data analysis purposes, but also for the benefit of the participant so that

they could review the audio files or transcripts if they desired to as we constructed their life history and made meaning of their experiences (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

Guided conversations in life history research take the place of more formal interviews and can be defined as a conversation with a purpose. The goal was to have a minimum of three, one-to-two hour long (Cole & Knowles, 2001) guided conversations with every participating teacher to center depth over breadth.

The initial interview was guided by a few questions listed on an interview protocol. However, as life history research is iterative, so can be the questions that guide conversations. Cole and Knowles (2001) state that one conversation may leave the researcher with many more questions than can be answered with a quick follow-up with the participant. Therefore, they suggest that these unanswered questions be the guiding questions for the next conversation- a building block, of sorts. This did occur throughout the research process.

To create the initial protocol, I utilized Mason's (2002) multi-step model of planning and preparation for qualitative interviewing (Figure 4.1, pp. 69-72). Mason's model (2002) helps to streamline the questions that were asked in the guided conversation setting by following a logical progression of question development to ensure that the questions asked emerge from, and are related to, the overarching research questions.

Pláticas. As mentioned, this dissertation utilized guided conversations as its primary method of collecting data. However, given the researcher's identity and the identities of the participants that they worked with, the guided conversations in this

dissertation manifested as *pláticas*. *Pláticas* are characterized as being a "friendly, intimate and mutualistic" (Valle & Mendoza, 1978, p. 33) way of engaging in conversation during the data collection process. Furthermore, *pláticas* are grounded in feminist research methodologies that argues that "new knowledge is uncovered by looking in liminal spaces and interstitial gaps for 'the unheard, the unthought, the unspoken' (Pérez, 1999, p. 5 as cited in Fierros & Bernal, 2016, p. 101). Therefore, Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) argue that while *pláticas* are a Chicana/Latina feminist method of collecting data, they are also a methodology since they are "an extension of particular ways of knowing" (p. 102). In essence, *pláticas* are a form of interviewing that extend from a lived, cultural practice⁴. Together, these components demonstrate how *pláticas* are a more culturally appropriate methodology for engaging and uplifting Latinx communities by inviting participants to engage in conversations in a more personal and mutual (reciprocal) manner, and by centering their voices in the research process. They also align well with the principles guiding life history research, which are a commitment to researcher-participant relationality, mutuality, empathy, care, sensitivity and respect (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

According to Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016), *pláticas* stem from a Chicana/Latina feminist method of interviewing that "enabled us to make sense of the historical and theoretical foundations and complexities of testimonio as methodology by merging our personal experiences to them" (p. 99). Thus, *pláticas* are more than just an

⁴ This dissertation will utilize *pláticas* to collect data and has conceptualized them as outlined by Valle and Mendoza (1978) and Fierros and Bernal (2016). Not all research or researchers have conceptualized *pláticas* in the same manner. For an overview of how *pláticas* have been conceptualized over time, see Fierro and Bernal (2016).

interviewing method. *Pláticas* are a way of integrating our shared experiences, knowledge, concerns, etc. with the research process in a less stringent, personal manner that “highlights the importance of relationships and reciprocity” (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 104) as compared to the more “conventional” interview process. In this manner, *confianza* (trust) between those engaged in the process is able to be established, and it is the presence of *confianza* that shifts the interview into a *plática* (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

In addition to the presence of trust, *pláticas* are characterized as being more culturally appropriate since they focus on the “cultural formalities of the interview process” (Valle & Mendoza, 1978; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 107). The “cultural formalities” of *pláticas* refer to more personal conversations containing elements of *respeto* (respect), care, and reciprocity, manifesting in a three-part method as outlined by Valle and Mendoza (1978):

- 1) ***La entrada***: in this first part, a conversation about how the interviewer and interviewee are connected or linked to each other usually occurs. This part usually includes the discussion of a mutual contact.
- 2) **The *Amistad* interview**: the second part of the *pláticas* method is made up of the “‘proper’ interview and informal ‘conversation byplay’ that takes place before ‘getting down to business’” (p. 25). The informal portion might include an exchange of information that is not directly related to the questions on the interview protocol, but is still important.
- 3) ***La despedida***: the final part of the *pláticas* method is the parting step, which includes an exchange of appreciation between the parties. This step may include a more personal conversation about things such as family, or may include the “sharing of family and home relics by the interviewee, and sharing of gifts” (p. 103).

Finally, although Valle and Mendoza (1978) outlined the steps of the *pláticas* method, Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) argue that many scholars, including Valle and Mendoza, have utilized *pláticas* in research only as a method and nominal methodology, without accounting in their work for the epistemological positioning that makes *pláticas* a methodology. As such, Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016) established five principles for *pláticas* as a Chicana/Latina feminist methodology:

- 1) The first principle of a Chicana feminist *plática* methodology is that the research that the work is situated in draws from Chicana/Latina feminist theory. Oftentimes the Chicana/Latina feminist theory occurs in tangent with other critical frameworks that center the experiences of marginalized people as a way to expose systems of oppression that benefit “privileged others” (p. 109).
- 2) The second principle is that the *plática* methodology “has a relational principle that honors participants as co-constructors of knowledge,” who contribute to the “meaning making process” (p. 111). This principle dictates that the relationship between researcher and participant be grounded in respeto (respect).
- 3) The third principle states that “a *plática* methodology makes connections between everyday lived experiences and the research inquiry” (p. 112) rather than assuming that a participant's lived experiences do not relate to the research. Instead, this principle views them as integral to the research process.
- 4) The fourth principle is that “a *plática* methodology provides a potential space for healing” that can be “cathartic” (p. 113).
- 5) The fifth and potentially most important principle is that “a *plática* methodology relies on relations of reciprocity and vulnerability and researcher reflexivity” (p. 114). This principle highlights the importance of trust in the *plática*, and believes that trust can only be achieved through reciprocity. Instead of holding all of the questions and minimizing their voice, as in a conventional interview, the researcher is allowed and encouraged to engage in a conversation that allows for “a talking back and forth” (p. 114) to help achieve that trust.

Although the work of this dissertation is closely aligned with the methodological principles outlined by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016), it does not perfectly meet all of them. Therefore, this dissertation utilized the *pláticas* method, but cannot claim to adopt a

true *pláticas* methodology. Even so, by adhering as closely as possible to the methodological principles as outlined above, I was able to establish reciprocity and trust with the study's participants to co-create knowledge that informs wider scholarship and policy that aims to honor and empower them.

The rationale for utilizing *pláticas* in this dissertation was the following: *pláticas* are consistent with both counter-deficit frameworks and CRT principles in which the storytelling and counternarratives of the participant are centered; I was interested in engaging the experiences of teachers of Color and sharing my privilege and resources to center their voices and experiences; *pláticas* are consistent with the cultural identity of the researcher and one of the teachers⁵ participating in the dissertation study. I recognize that *pláticas* were created as a more culturally relevant way of interviewing Latinx communities, and that this dissertation is interested in understanding the experiences of both Latinx and Black teachers. However, since *pláticas* are a more personal method for interviewing, and because *pláticas* as a method are consistent with both counter-deficit frameworks and CRT principles of centering experiential knowledge and countering White, dominant methods (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), the *pláticas* method will be extended to understand the experiences of Black teachers, as well. Ultimately, *pláticas*

⁵ The researcher understands that “Latinx” is an umbrella term often used to homogenize various peoples and cultures who come from vastly different backgrounds and histories, who uphold different practices and traditions, etc. The researcher also recognizes that Latinidad can manifest very differently across individuals and groups. Therefore, while the *pláticas* methodology is meant to be a more culturally appropriate way of engaging in research with the Latinx community, the researcher is not employing this methodology with an assumption of homogeneity, or with the intention of homogenizing. Rather, this methodology is employed because it is a methodology that can intentionally center and uplift this study's research participants, and because it is a methodology that promotes their humanity through the fostering of respeto and confianza.

are not only consistent with the principles of life history research, but they are a more culturally-relevant way of engaging in guided conversations with the participants.

Observations

In addition to the *pláticas* method of exchanging dialogue, I observed the participants in their classrooms and during other school functions. The rationale for including observations was to help establish trust in my methods, and because “social explanations and arguments require depth, complexity, roundedness and multidimensionality in data,” (Mason, 2002, p. 86). I made the decision to only observe, rather than to participate in their classrooms during the time that observations would take place.

Journaling

In some bodies of teacher research, journaling has been used as a method for aiding in the development of critical reflection (Corbin Frazier & Eick, 2015) and “emotional intelligence” (Kremenitzer, 2005) of teacher with regard to their teaching practices, as a tool for the professional development of preservice teachers (Dreyer, 2015), and for understanding the attitudinal dispositions of preservice teachers on student learning (LaBelle & Belknap, 2016). As evidenced by these examples, reflective journaling can be used in a variety of ways.

In this study, journaling was used as a way for teachers to enhance reflection by checking-in with themselves and reflecting upon their lived experiences (Boud, 2001) in the classroom. They were primarily asked to reflect after interviews, providing them with the opportunity to reflect upon and learn from their experiences and feelings (Boud,

2001), and sometimes being used as an opportunity for clarification about some of the topics which came up in our conversations. Thus, teachers journaled on “reflection topics” (Knowles, 1992) that helped to inform the ebbs and flows of being a teacher of Color in a complex profession, and to better help us understand their persistence in the profession. Ultimately, the goal of these reflections was for teachers to have a more consistent opportunity to detail and reflect upon their experiences in the classroom. Additionally, for the researcher, these journal entries served as personal documents that helped to explain the teachers’ “actions, experiences, and beliefs” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 134) with regard to their persistence.

Research Context

Why the Inland Empire?

The sample for this study consists of general education, public elementary school teachers teaching in hard-to-staff schools in one district of the Inland Empire. This section outlines why and how the sample for the study was chosen.

To reiterate, this study defines “urban” schools as those in which 50% or more of students qualify for free and reduced-price meals (FRPM). Across databases, FRPM is a “proxy measure for the concentration of low-income students” that emerged from the passing of the National School Lunch Act of 1964 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), mid-to-high poverty schools are those in which 50 to 75% of students qualify for FRPM, and high-poverty schools are those in which 75% or more of the students qualify for FRPM (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

Because this study is concerned with teacher retention in hard-to-staff schools, the Inland Empire was chosen as the region of analysis because it is a diverse, quickly-growing region that has a high percentage of working class students. The Inland Empire is a region in Southern California which consists of San Bernardino and Riverside Counties, but whose “heart” is the region encompassing the cities in and around San Bernardino and Riverside cities, proper. In San Bernardino County, 70.9% of students qualify for FRPM, and in Riverside County, 65.4% of students qualify for FRPM; these percentages account for 283,253 students and 275,492 students, respectively (*Free and reduced price meals*, 2021). Furthermore, the majority of the students from working class backgrounds within the Inland Empire are students of Color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). As previously mentioned, these characteristics are the criteria used to distinguish “urban” and “hard-to-staff” schools from nonurban schools and are the reason that schools in the Inland Empire are being selected for analysis.

District and School Selection

Given the size of the Inland Empire, the concentration of schools within it that are considered hard-to-staff, and its geographic proximity to the researcher, a school district that met the criteria for the study was selected as the site of analysis. This school district has been given the pseudonym of Inland Empire Unified School District. Inland Empire Unified School District consists of approximately thirty schools, serving a diverse population of about 30,000 students.

According to data from the California Department of Education, between eighty and ninety percent of students in the Inland Empire Unified School District (hereafter

IEUSD) qualified for free and/or reduced-price meals during the 2021-2022 academic school year. Thus, the majority of the schools within this district are considered “hard-to-staff,” “urban” schools. As such, participants of this study were teachers of Color from an elementary school in IEUSD that have been teaching in their respective schools for a minimum of five years.

The teacher participants for this study teach in an elementary school in IEUSD that is considered “urban” and “hard-to-staff,” consistent with the criteria outlined in this study. Like the school district in which they are situated, the elementary school has been given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Table 1 denotes the descriptive data for the elementary school, hereafter named Canyon Elementary School, in this analysis.

Table 1: Descriptive Data of the High Schools for the 2022-2023 Academic School Year*

School	Student Enrollment	Student of Color** Enrollment (percentage of students)	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students*** (percentage of students)
Canyon Elementary School	~700	~99%	~91%

*The values above have been approximated to uphold the anonymity and confidentiality of participants in this study; the percentages have been approximated to the nearest one percentage point.

The phrase “students of Color” denotes any student who does not racially or ethnically identify as White. According to the racial/ethnic categories utilized in this source of data, this includes students who identify as American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or of two or more races. *the label “socioeconomically disadvantaged” is articulated by the California School Dashboard. The value denotes the number of students who qualify for either free or reduced-price meals under the National School Lunch Act of 1946, or the number of students whose parents do not have a high school diploma.

Data Collection

The decision and rationale for the research methods in this work are explained above. This section is meant to summarize the data collection of this work, as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Data Collected

Number of Participants	2 teachers total.
Number of <i>Pláticas</i>	4 meetings: 1 introduction meeting, and 3 <i>pláticas</i> with each participant. The second <i>plática</i> with one of the participants was split into two parts to accommodate their schedule.
Duration of <i>Pláticas</i>	1. ~30 minute, initial meeting 2. ~1- 2 hours 3. ~1- 2 hours 4. ~1- 2 hours
Observations	I completed approximately seven hours of observation, per teacher, in their respective classrooms, and an additional seven hours for each teacher in other school functions.

As Table 2 demonstrates, two teachers from Canyon Elementary School participated in this study. I initially reached out to four teachers, but one did not respond and the other was unavailable to participate in the study. The participants of this study are Elizabeth, a Black career teacher currently in a reading specialist position at Canyon Elementary School, and Lily, a career teacher who teaches kindergarten Spanish-English Dual Language Immersion (DLI). Both participant names are pseudonyms selected by the participants.

To capture their stories and experiences, we met for an hour at least once a week (excluding holiday breaks that occurred in the fall and winter seasons) over the course of three months. Consistent with both the *pláticas* method (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016)

and the life history research methodology (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Lanford et al., 2019), it was critical to earn the trust of the participants and to build a quality relationship with them. This could not be achieved in one interview with each person. Neither could one interview inform the complexity of the phenomena or of their lives. Therefore, the initial meeting with each teacher was used both as a consent session and a preliminary meeting, a sort of *entrada* prior to engaging in the full *pláticas* session. The initial meeting was an opportunity for study participants to learn more about the research, and to ask questions as we began to converse and develop *confianza*.

In total, the participants and I engaged in three, one- to two-hour *pláticas* with each other over the course of about three months, resulting in six *pláticas*, for the sake of this section referred to as “interviews.” The question of “how many interviews” one should use in qualitative research is a commonly occurring question (Baker & Edwards, 2012) and across multiple disciplines (Guest et al., 2006; Galvin, 2015). Although many researchers do have a specific number of interviews that they might suggest be conducted, Baker and Edwards (2012) surveyed multiple qualitative research methods experts to find that the simple answer is often “it depends” (Baker & Edwards, 2012). In the case of this dissertation, the question of “how many interviews” was informed by “epistemological and methodological questions about the nature and purpose of the research” (Baker & Edwards, 2012, p. 42) including: the number of interviews necessary to complicate the phenomena; the number of interviews necessary to develop *confianza* with the teacher participants; and the number of interviews that were sufficient to investigate and inform the research questions and greater phenomena without becoming

overly taxing for the teacher participants. Although this list of considerations is not exhaustive, it demonstrates some of the rationale for settling upon the number of interviews listed in Table 2. By holding three main interviews with each teacher participant, I was hoping to build a “narrative based on ‘richness, complexity and detail’ rather than on statistical logic,” as expert Jennifer Mason states (Baker & Edwards, 2012, p. 5).

Gaining Access

The last section outlined the data collection methods and goals of this dissertation, and the rationale behind their employment. This section outlines how I gained access to the school site using the cooperative style, resulting in support.

Cooperative Style of Gaining Access

Oftentimes with regard to fieldwork and how to gain access, researchers must consider whether they will do so in an overt manner or a covert manner (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest that while “some excellent research has been conducted undercover (e.g., McPherson, 1972), our advice to the novice is use the overt approach,” (p. 79). The overt approach ensures that the novice researcher is being honest with study participants. It is also oftentimes necessary, as institutional review boards reviewing research proposals are less likely to approve or permit a study using a covert approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Furthermore, the overt approach is consistent with what Bogden and Biklen (2007) refer to as the “cooperative style” of gaining access in qualitative work. This style ensures the researcher has made their research interests known to the people who will be

studied, and it seeks their cooperation to varying degrees. It is the opposite of styles consistent with using covert methods of gaining access, which may use more confrontational or deceptive methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Instead, the cooperative style is more commonly used in qualitative research and “has its origins in anthropology as well as the Chicago School of sociology tradition of conducting fieldwork” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 79). Succinctly put, the cooperative method of gaining access is not only consistent with the principles guiding life history research, but it is also a requisite component for actually engaging in life history research which requires the cooperation and co-production of knowledge with participants.

Gaining Support

This section outlines some general tips that researchers recommend for gaining support that guided my ability to gain access to this dissertation’s study site. In the preliminary stages of gaining access, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest,

In making these preliminary inquiries, you are interested in getting not only of the formal system, but also of the informal system. You are looking for tips, like the name of someone in the system who is particularly receptive and helpful. If you get such advice, and it seems reasonable, call or visit the person to discuss what you are thinking about and to hear what the individual has to say (p. 80).

Essentially, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) recommend gaining the support of an initial contact who can help the researcher begin to make sense of the research site and how to maneuver within it. In my case, my point of contact is a former career teacher in the district and at Canyon Elementary School. Although this teacher is now retired, they continue to be involved with Canyon Elementary and know the staff and culture well.

Although I had the support and guidance of a former Canyon Elementary teacher, I had some knowledge and experience with the district and school already. For my part, I was a substitute teacher in the district for a few years, working primarily in elementary schools and holding occasional long-term assignments; I would regularly hold assignments at Canyon Elementary due to my close personal relationship with the former teacher, and because of connections that I was able to build while there. Unfortunately, my direct work in the district ended abruptly with the school closures that occurred in March of 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Since the structure of schooling in the district was amended through the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, my work as a substitute teacher would not be required until the following school year. In the fall of 2020, I was a substitute teacher in the district through an online, remote modality for a few months before stepping away to focus on my doctoral degree. Despite this, I was able to cultivate good relationships with some students, teachers, and principals in the district and school. Canyon's administrators ultimately offered their support and allowed me access into their school site (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), where I was able to begin recruitment.

Data Analysis

This section outlines the data analysis process in greater depth.

Coding, Memoing, and Theme Analysis

Once I was ready to begin analyzing the data that had been collected, and ready to establish codes and build upon memos, I began with reading all of the field notes that I had written. According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011), the data analysis process is

one of “close, intensive reflection and analysis” in which the “researcher combines this close reading with procedures for analytically coding field notes” (p. 172). According to Emerson et al. (2011) these “procedures” for analytic coding entail open coding, focused coding, code memos, and integrative memos. These procedures require that the researcher begin by open coding and familiarizing themselves with the data, reading through the fieldnotes in a line-by-line manner to begin generating ideas. In this stage, any ideas are initially welcome as the researcher “gets to know the data” (Emerson et al., 2011). Once saturation occurred in this phase, I began to select themes based on “which ideas to explore further and which to put on the backburner, at least for now,” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 188).

As I began to identify themes to pursue, I moved onto more focused coding, once again reading my fieldnotes in a line-by-line manner, but this time “analyzing on the basis of topics that have been identified as being of particular interest” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 172). This was done in tangent with their written code memos, which are more systematic and theoretical, tied to “phenomena, topics, and categories created by rereading and closely coding fieldnotes” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 172). It is in this manner that analytic points in the data begin to develop.

The more complex step in this process required connecting analytic points through the connection of integrative memos. According to Emerson et al. (2011), integrative memos “relate or integrate what were previously separate pieces of data and analytic points. These [...] seek to clarify and link analytic themes and categories” (p. 172). By doing so, I was able to draw connections between my fieldnotes and the

theoretical concepts guiding my work. In life history research, this manifests in deep, thematically interpreted data in relation to “relevant discipline-based theories” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 13). While this section outlines the process for data analysis, it was also an iterative process which entailed that I revisit certain steps in the process at various times to make sense of the data.

Finally, life history research is written up in a narrative style of writing (See Chapter 4). Because the ultimate goal of this research is to understand the lives of participants in context to generate knowledge and help provide meaning to the present, (Cole & Knowles, 2001) rich theory production becomes secondary. This is not because the production of rich theory is unimportant, but because the primary goal of life history research is to gain information and knowledge to understand how one life can help us to understand phenomena beyond it.

Reflexivity and Positionality

One of the ways that the researcher or ethnographer creates, changes, or reconceptualizes the phenomena is through the knowledge and experiences that they bring to their research in the form of positionality. There are many elements that contribute to a researcher’s positionality when they begin interacting with the community that they are studying, including race, class, gender, etc. (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Furthermore, the life history methodology is inherently autobiographical work in which the identities and experiences of the researcher and participant intercept (Cole & Knowles, 2001). So, when I considered my positionality as a qualitative researcher with

regard to the populations that I worked with, I considered matters of identity and power.

In this section I outline my positionality before the research.

Identity

I am the third child of four born to Mexican immigrants, and Spanish is my first language. I am a proud Chicana, and I heavily identify as being part of the bigger Latinx community. However, I grew up in a predominantly White city in Southern California. Because of this, I can recognize that my national identity, like that of other Latinx individuals, is in part a product of complex historical, political, and assimilationist practices (Henry, 2003) in this country, all of which vary in degree depending upon a multiplicity of factors for each individual. Thus, while I identify as Latinx and grew up in the Inland Empire (IE), the pocket of the IE that was my world growing up may have shaped me in very different ways than Latinx teachers who grew up in more diverse communities in, or like, the IE. Thus, I am reminded of Wolf's (1996) words about being an "insider and [an] outsider simultaneously" (p. 117, as cited in Henry, 2003, p. 235). I am aware that there are facets of my identity that I may share with the teachers that I study, and facets that we do not share. These facets had the potential to facilitate or limit my access to insights that participants may have, but I believe they were mitigated through communication, trust, and transparency, variables that I co-created with the participants.

Furthermore, this dissertation necessarily touched upon subjects related to race and ethnicity as the teachers and I worked together to understand their experiences as teachers of Color in schools situated within contexts that favor Whiteness. Talking about

matters related to race and ethnicity can be difficult and tense (Pollock et al., 2010), but it is “critical” to constantly reflect on our “own race, gender, experiences, and other identity markers [...]; this is a constant and iterative process” (Howard, 2017, p. 37).

As I reflect upon these points I acknowledge two truths that are critical to this conversation: 1) As a second-generation immigrant, I identify as a person of Color because my cultural roots as a Mexican woman are strong and constantly shaping how I navigate society, but 2) race is something that is socially constructed, and oftentimes we are assigned into racial categories that we do not self-identify with by others based on the way that we are perceived. As such, I acknowledge that the last name that I adopted through marriage is an identifier that can separate me from both the Latinx and Black communities through the labeling of “other,” or as a person with a closer proximity to Whiteness. I also understand that although I do not identify as White, my skin color has afforded me many privileges that are also proximal to the White privilege that dominates society. Therefore, I understood that conversations about race, ethnicity, and power might be difficult to have if the teachers that I worked alongside were hesitant to share with me because they perceive me as “other.”

As I reflect on the data construction and collection process, I believe that the participants and I were able to have honest and open conversations as the result of the *confianza* that we established.

Power

Married to the concept of identity is the idea of power. As Henry (2003) states “before doing fieldwork, I always imagined the field as a place that exists separately from

‘home’ and where I would have authority and legitimacy [...] [and] need to be in constant check of the power that I held [...] ” (p. 237). As Henry (2003) would learn, however, “the field is a complex site of power” (p. 237). In many ways, the power one perceives, or does not perceive, themselves to have is tied to facets of their identity.

As a daughter of immigrant parents, I was taught to respect (and more tacitly, fear) authority figures, in whatever form they manifested. I was raised to be a rule-follower who did not engage in conflict or disagreement, deferring instead to figures whom I perceived as having authority. In many ways, this has influenced me as a young researcher. Although, as Henry (2003) stated, my research participants may have perceived that I have authority and legitimacy as a researcher, I perceived the teachers to be the ones who held the majority of the power. If “power” is defined as authority or legitimacy that manifests as resources or influence, they held the metaphorical cards in my ability to understand their experiences.

The reason for this perception is that I have situated myself as a researcher who studies the retention of teachers of Color in “urban” schools. However, I have not identified as being a teacher of record in the classroom in these schools, instead serving in these schools in various capacities. During my undergraduate education, I spent five years in the classrooms of various schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color in the IE as a tutor, mentor, and substitute teacher. During this time I learned about the power that a quality and equitable education can afford people, especially those who tend to be marginalized. It is through this experience that I decided to become an advocate for teachers and students of Colors by becoming a teacher myself,

and trying to do my part to give back to not only my people, but the communities that I had grown up in. During the early stages of my teacher education program, however, it became evident that the program would not be sustainable to the mission that I wanted to pursue. The program seemed to reinforce the status quo and harmful practices toward people of Color in education. As such, I decided to bypass a career in teaching and shifted instead toward a career in research that might help to empower marginalized communities in educational spaces. Ultimately, I recognized that some of the teachers that I would work with may not have perceived me as someone who understands what it is to be a teacher in the classroom, and that they might be hesitant to share their experiences with an “outsider.” However, to mitigate these concerns, my aim was to earn their trust through genuine rapport that sought to understand their experiences and center their voices, rather than my own.

Despite my perception of the power that the teachers I aimed to work with hold, I also understood that I have power as a researcher. I also recognized that the teachers whom I worked alongside of may have perceived me as an authority figure since the work that we engaged in together will be published as research to the public. I understand that this may have affected the way that we related to one another, and it may have affected some of the responses that the teachers shared during our conversations together. As Burawoy (1998) states, it is critical to understand and be aware of the domination, silencing, objectification, and normalization that can occur as a result of the work that researchers do (Burawoy, 1998). As such, the ultimate goal for myself as a researcher was to acknowledge the power that I hold as a researcher, and not to intimidate or

manipulate the participants that I interact with, but rather to co-construct knowledge with them through an ongoing, open exchange that ultimately empowers them and highlights their voices. I believe my participants and I accomplished this goal.

The next chapter includes the findings of the dissertation, presented in narrative form.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter dives into the findings that emerged from the *pláticas* between the researcher and each of the participants. It is an exposition and narrative of the participants of this work, Elizabeth and Lily. My job as the researcher is to share their stories as best as I can. These are not my stories, and the participants are the true protagonists of this work. As such, I center their voices⁶ as often, as directly, and as genuinely as possible in the retelling.

Elizabeth

Part 1: “Island” Life and Upbringing/Values

Elizabeth was born and spent her upbringing on “the Islands” in the Caribbean. Elizabeth began our first *plática* by fondly describing the culture of the Islands, beginning with how tight-knit the community is. Laughing, she remarked “you do know a lot of people. If *you* don't know them, *they* know your family!” This notion of intimacy and connectedness is something that would become a running theme among Elizabeth’s stories of growing up on the Island. For example, as she described returning to the Islands for a class reunion, she detailed how the majority of her classmates still live there and are committed to maintaining that closeness:

Anytime they hear of anybody coming to visit, you know, they always plan something so we all get together. Yeah. So that's pretty cool. And we only had two classes of each grade level. Most of the people who are still living at home [...] are so close. It's something to be envious of because they are so close like a family and then the people who were in my class, we're not. Like, [my class] didn't come to the reunion. Or when we have a little group chat thing going on

⁶ Although in my identity as a scholar I use the terms Black and Latinx, Elizabeth and Lily fluctuated between using the terms “African American,” “Black,” “Latino/a/s” and “Hispanic.” The terms used to represent ethnic or racial groups in this chapter are consistent with the protagonists’ use of language as I try to center their voices and conceptualizations.

they're not a part of it. We're planning our next reunion and none of them are interested. And all the people from [the other class], they're always in it together. They always meet up somewhere.

Perhaps because of the close-knit nature of community on the Islands, cultivating community is something that is important to Elizabeth in her role as an educator.

Status. Aside from the tight-knit nature of Island culture, Elizabeth described how the Island she grew up on had a large religious presence which influenced her community and its values. The idea of status, in particular, was relevant to her upbringing in that religion and church. She expressed that church leaders and other people in positions of power would try to maintain the idea of status. As she described the role of status in her upbringing, she challenged it by explaining that her parents are intelligent, but not “formally” educated people. Their lack of concern for status and hierarchies ultimately allowed her the freedom to pursue a career that she was interested in, after encountering “prejudice” in another:

Well see- and from the Island and growing up in church- status is a big thing. You have the people like our principal- he has... how many kids does he have? Maybe he had six or seven, and they all are doing things that are, what would you call it? You know, “high ranking” type things. Like, the daughter is the doctor, [and] I think one of his sons might be a PhD, so he is big into [status]. Plus, he has his degree and stuff like that, you know? So, my parents didn't have a degree. My mother got her GED. And I don't know what my dad has... but, I mean, they're smart people. But they didn't have that [formal education] because we weren't from, you know, the United States of America. Like, we were from The Island, type-thing, and deeper down where it's just a whole different system. I think you went to school 'til third grade and that was it. But, of course it's different now. But yeah, that was it at the time. Plus you, you had to go help with household things after a while. Yeah. So it's a big deal if you have your doctorate or if you are a doctor or somebody big like that. But when I told my parents I didn't want to be a doctor, they didn't have a problem with it. But that same principal- he won't say anything to me, but he shows off his kids.

Status is something that many people on the Islands endorse. Yet, Elizabeth's parents did not seem to be governed by it, and perhaps it was partially due to their influence that Elizabeth does not care for it. What at first appeared to be a neutral lack of participation in prioritizing status would later become an active disapproval of the idea. Returning to the topic of status later on, Elizabeth shared how members in the church community would say things like ““Oh, you know so and so is a doctor?”” She shook her head in disapproval, stating in response to them, “Blah, blah, blah. Ok? Up to this age you're *still* saying that? [...] I'm like ‘*whatever!*’ You know?” Laughing, she continued, “Like, “psst, who cares?” That kind of thing. Whatever. But, yeah, status is a big thing.” Elizabeth's disapproval of status became apparent after a few discussions of the role that it played in her life, particularly as she navigated experiences that were peripheral to the church community that she grew up in. Perhaps because of the attitudes of her parents, or the fact that she had a “rebel-like” class, Elizabeth did not, and does not, care for status. This theme would become a central part of her mission statement as an educator- and key to the way she navigates the profession to this day- challenging the notions that status and labels attribute to children and their ability to learn.

Respect. In addition to navigating the values of community and status, respect is an important value to come out of Elizabeth's upbringing on the Islands. Respect could manifest in various forms on the Islands. For example, she laughed as she shared about the importance of acknowledging others in a direct vicinity, emphatically saying “Oh! *Pssh!* In the Island if you don't say hello, you in trouble. Somebody be cussing you out!” She would continue her explanation, jokingly pretending to be somebody in mock

outrage stating “‘I said, ‘*hello*’ and you just *passed* me by?!’ Oh no. You *have* to say ‘hello.’ ‘Good morning.’ ‘Good night.’ ‘Good afternoon.’ You walk into a store? Oh yeah they’ll be like ‘*good afternoon!*’ You know? That kind of thing.” Elizabeth then went on to explain the importance of respect as it manifests in her pedagogy and mission statements, stating “That’s why I tell my class- I’m like ‘when you walk into a room, you say ‘hello.’” Elizabeth continued, “You know? You met us all here so you have to say ‘hello.’ ‘Good morning.’ Whatever. Yeah. So... no, they’re big on that. It’s very polite in the Islands.” Responding to the role that respect has played in her career, particularly with regard to why she decided to teach elementary school, she playfully replied,

Oh, that was my thing: kids. [...] I believe in respect and you got to give it to me because I’m gonna give you respect. So, I cannot do high school. I will lose my credential! Nuh uh. I don’t even want to go past third grade. Yeah. Third grade right now is kind of rough. I’m not in the classroom, but I would say my class would not be that way because of how I start them off. I see a lot of kids just... [*trails off, shaking her head*] nuh uh. I’m like “*whaaat?*” No. No, no. That doesn’t fly with me.”

One of Elizabeth’s values as an educator is respect- and mutual respect, at that. She demands respect and does not tolerate disrespectful people, or people who “mess around.” Like the values of community and status, respect would appear consistently throughout Elizabeth’s stories. These three Island values- whether they manifested in an appreciation of them, or a challenge of them- impacted Elizabeth and would relate to her mission as an educator, which is an important key to her persistence in the teaching profession.

Part 2: The East Coast and Navigating Higher Education

New Beginnings. Despite her appreciation for her home, Elizabeth knew she would have to move away someday because “you can't do college there. And I knew I was going to college.” She stated that “if you're from an island, you more or less gotta go somewhere because you know you don't have as much [opportunity] there. So you go explore other places.” For Elizabeth, this meant moving to the United States mainland once it was time to pursue higher education.

Elizabeths' first visit to the contiguous United States occurred when she moved to the East Coast to pursue higher education. She explained the initial culture shock of moving to a large, loud place, and the difference between Island culture and city life:

That was... was that my first time coming to America? I think so. So well, when I say “America,” [the] Islands *is* America, but it is an island, still... so the Continental U.S. Yeah, that was my first time coming to the States [...] And the funny thing is my flight was from [the Islands] to New York. I had a cousin there that was gonna pick me up from the airport. I was gonna stay there for a little bit and then, I don't remember, I guess drive down to [the state where the university was] with them or something. But New York. What a culture shock. That was... all the car horns blowing. Yeah, I wasn't used to that. So that was a problem. I was happy to get out of New York. Being in [the other state] was a little bit more relaxed. [...] Yeah, I was happy that it wasn't the same. But yeah, I didn't know what I was getting into there, either. [...] So coming from a little island, you know, where if it's quiet, it's quiet all day, all night, kind of thing.

Although she was raised in a United States territory, Elizabeth's story is consistent with that of many first- or second- generation immigrants and first-generation college students navigating the higher education landscape for the first time. She only applied to one university- the small, private “church school” where her sister was already attending- remarking that she was “lucky they accepted me because I didn't even think you have to [apply to] more than one [school].”

Navigating “Turning Points.” As Elizabeth shared stories about her first year navigating higher education at the “church school,” she revealed the first major turning point in her professional life, stating,

Actually, I wanted to be a doctor so I majored in pre-med. Yeah, I wanted to be an oncologist. But my first year at [the church school], I had an advisor. And I'm gonna say he was prejudiced because [...] it wasn't a freshman class but he put me in it. There were six people in the class because it was a private church school, so it's not a big enrollment. But it was six of us in a class and there were three of us who were freshmen and- all three were Black- and, um, the other three weren't. But they weren't freshmen. They were upper class, you know? And so we were *lost* in the subject. And I remember telling [them]- it was two guys that were freshmen with me. And I was like, “This is ridiculous. I'm not going to stand this!” And they wanted to stay there. I think they stayed. I had a D up at the midpoint or something like that, but then I got out. I think they stayed and got their F's. But yeah, I got out of that one. So yeah. When I would see that guy at church, too, I was like “mm. Mokay. You knew that wasn't a class for us, but you put us in there anyway.” Why, you know?

In this first major turning point, Elizabeth described how she and the other Black freshmen were forced into difficult classes in their first year, essentially being set up for failure. Although she decided that she was “not going to stand” it, and withdrew from the course, that was a major experience that would lead to her switching her major and preemptively exiting the medical profession in that first year of college. Furthermore, this significant turning point in Elizabeth’s early academic career was an example of a “prejudiced” situation where she would directly encounter the consequences of people's gatekeeping and deficit perceptions of her.

This major turning point in Elizabeth's life revealed two things. Firstly, Elizabeth would become motivated to challenge situations like these where people are presented with, or deprived of, opportunities on the basis of their race or other labels that society attributes to them. Secondly, this example revealed how Elizabeth made sense of race as

a Black woman navigating society. She would demonstrate time and again that she viscerally feels the effects of racism, not struggling to identify its interpersonal manifestations. Yet, Elizabeth would explain that she could not always identify racism in more subtle, harmful interactions. When asked one day if she considered herself a critically conscious educator, she responded “I would have said ‘yes’ sometime ago until I see the young people today. How woke *they* are.” She paused before continuing, “I was like, oh, ‘I don't know nothing about all of that.’ They just see things. You know, ‘Oh, this is racist,’ or ‘this happened,’ and I'm like ‘oh, is that what that was?’ You know, I don't see it.” As she continued to tell me about her understanding of race, she remarked,

And so I'm thinking that's because I grew up in the Islands where everybody, pretty much, was Black at that point [...]. Or if they weren't Black, they grew up around Island people. So everybody's just- our culture is Island, you know? So, everybody was the same. That's why I think I don't know a lot about all that.”

Educational Career and Mission Statement. After Elizabeth left her initial major at the church school, she described another turning point, stating “then my dad told me I would have to pay my own tuition. So I left. I went to [a state school] so that's where I finished and got my degree from.” Knowing that she wanted to work with children in some capacity, Elizabeth transferred schools, changed her major to education, and held multiple jobs to self-fund her academic endeavors. It was during her first year as an education major that Elizabeth would establish her mission statement.

Elizabeth's Mission. While discussing her educational trajectory, Elizabeth discussed her mission statement, saying, “You know it's funny because we had to do that in college and I kept the same thing. I just said ‘every kid can learn,’ you know?” She smiled, continuing, “‘Every child can learn.’ It's up to us to find that spot, that place to

encourage them, or whatever, to learn. I'm not saying that all kids can be a rocket scientist, but they can learn.” At first, Elizabeth’s mission statement sounded simple and honorable. However, it is more than that. It is a multifaceted statement rooted in resistance based on her own experiences navigating society as a person of Color.

For example, Elizabeth mentioned that it is important to her to teach in “diverse” schools. Describing what the term “diverse” means to her, Elizabeth explained,

As far as the field of education goes, for me, the term “diverse” means that students come from varied backgrounds, races, and socio-economic statuses and with a varied range of academic abilities. I wanted to teach in schools that were very diverse because as I think back to my earlier years, I remember being judged as to whether I was capable of completing work based on my race and socio-economic status. I wanted to teach to show my students that they were capable of anything that they put their minds to. I wanted to teach them how to believe in themselves and how to find answers that they needed through their own self searching. I wanted to teach them how to be independent/ self-sufficient. I promised myself that I would treat all my students equitably and show them through demonstrations and affirmations that I believed in them and what they are capable of.

The term “diverse” for Elizabeth means a complex encapsulation of intersectional parts: race/ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and ability. While the term is a label used by Elizabeth to categorize populations of students within schools, it is not meant to be a euphemism. Instead, the term “diverse” is a label that guided Elizabeth toward working in schools with children who might have had similar experiences as her as a working class person of Color, fighting to exist and succeed in a society that was not made with them in mind. Her goal then, like that of many educators of Color, is to advocate for, and empower, students of Color; it is transformational. While Elizabeth’s explicit mission statement is about ensuring students learn well for the sake of academic- and eventual, life- success and opportunity, her mission is embedded with care for, and relationship

with, her students. However, she believes deeply in equality and ensuring that all students can learn, so her mission is not exclusive to students of Color. Elizabeth wants to ensure that *all* students in schools that predominantly serve marginalized students can be equipped with the tools to learn, grow, and be successful for themselves within this society.

Elizabeth's mission as an educator is twofold. Firstly, she fundamentally believes in, and cares about, her students. She believes in their cap/abilities, and that it is therefore her responsibility to help her students succeed as she works toward her goal that "every child can learn." She achieves this through academic gains, care, and relationship. Secondly, when inquiring further to determine where that mission came from, one will find that it is rooted in her own experiences navigating an unjust society as a person of Color. She advocates for her students so that they can challenge the negative and harmful perceptions that exist about them in society, and so that they may become "successful" regardless of the labels that might be attributed to them. For Elizabeth, the deficit notions attributed to a student's status and labels do not matter to her, since every child is capable of learning and being equipped with the tools to be successful. Thus, driven by her mission, Elizabeth positioned, and continues to position, herself as a champion and advocate for students in "diverse" schools to be able to transform their opportunities and lives.

Part 3: The First Fifteen Years of Elizabeth's Career

Upon graduating with her bachelor's degree and teaching license, Elizabeth spent the first fifteen years of her teaching career in the school where she completed her student

teaching. Describing that period in her life, Elizabeth generally had great things to say about the profession based on her experiences. The school in which she taught was well-run, she had supportive families, and state policies were conducive to her mission as an educator. However, things did not begin on a good note- once again, Elizabeth had to navigate some adversities and advocate for herself as she began her career.

“I Knew I Was Resilient.” As Elizabeth began to share a story about another turning point in her life, she disclosed how she was hired into the school where she student-taught, and how she was hired before completing her degree:

the principal loved me *then*, and I didn't even have to do any leg work to get a job. She called Personnel and said she wants me to be working at her school. And Personnel called me and said, ‘Sarah wants you there. So just come in and sign new paperwork.’ [I thought] ‘*Okay! Yeah!*’ So then I did, but then when I started working there, she had a lot of problems with me.

Explaining what those problems were, Elizabeth relayed that they mostly had to do with the principal, a White woman, questioning or second-guessing her often, asking things like “why are you doing that?” and “what's this about?”

Elizabeth caught onto the principal’s behavior, and developed a plan to overcome the behavior. Elizabeth determined that Sarah, the principal, “had her favorites,” one of whom was a kindergarten teacher. Elizabeth was hired to teach kindergarten, and it happened that the grade levels planned together. Therefore, Elizabeth decided that she would “[write] everything [the other teacher] wrote, exactly.” However, when the principal would return their plan books, Elizabeth had questions and notes in hers, but the “favorite” teacher did not, despite that they had both turned in the exact same notes. Elizabeth stated “and so I knew that was a problem then.” The “problem” that she was

referring to would not immediately get better. Elizabeth would share that it “got to a point where it was myself, and another guy- was the two Blacks- and usually when you're not tenured, you can't switch schools. But Personnel told us we could if we wanted to because it got that bad.” Elizabeth explained, “I didn't because I don't like change like that. So I stayed, but he left.” In spite of the adversity Elizabeth and the other Black male teacher encountered, Elizabeth determined that she wanted to stay in the school because she does not like change. In this example, Elizabeth resisted being forced out of the school by her administrator's bully tactics and decided to stay. While Elizabeth alluded that Sarah's treatment of her and the only other Black teacher was “a problem,” she did not explain that she viewed the administrator's behavior as being related to race, or being “prejudiced.”

As Elizabeth shared the story, she described how matters with the principal would evolve, and how she had decided to remain in that space:

When I stayed, there was a time that [Sarah] had to go and leave. And so she had an interim person there- he just happened to be a Black man, you know? And so he had to do my observations. And he loved *everything*. [...] All his comments [were]: “This is great!” And then she came back and everything was good after that. She loved everything then, too. So I'm like “*okay!*”, you know? What made the change? So that was a turning point. But another turning point that happened was, our playground for Kinder was right outside our back door. And my kids were outside with my aide- because we all had aides for the whole day- and my aide was with them outside. And it's just our playground, so it's not like the whole school is there. And, [the principal] walked into the room. [...] And she said, “[the aide] can't be out there with the kids!” I'm like, “why not? She takes them places all the time.” I forgot what else she said, but I had an answer for her: kind of like I stood up to her. So, ever since that, too, we were fine. It was all different after that. And the years after that we were good. As a matter of fact, when she retired, and we were doing our little party for her, they had me speak about her. [...] So that's how the change came around, like from being the way she was with me to us being *good enough*, you know, that I'm speaking at her retirement.

This example of another turning point in Elizabeth's life demonstrated a few different things. Firstly, she was- and is- a good teacher, and that was affirmed when the interim principal, a Black man, recognized and praised Elizabeth for her work. Although Elizabeth was determined to remain in the school and "prove" herself regardless, the principal recognized her skill. Praising Elizabeth's skill as undeniable may have been partially responsible for the reason that Sarah would no longer challenge Elizabeth upon her return; Sarah could not continue to question or undermine Elizabeth since Elizabeth had openly and undeniably proven her strength and abilities as a teacher. Secondly, this example demonstrates how Elizabeth would regularly advocate for herself. Rather than leaving the school when Sarah was initially undermining her, and rather than apologizing for having her aide watch the children at recess, Elizabeth stood up for herself and pushed back. She would not allow herself to be steamrolled or pushed out of the profession by the administrator. Finally, the last few examples demonstrate that whether or not the interactions with Sarah were rooted in racist perceptions and behaviors, Elizabeth did not acknowledge them as such. Elizabeth did not claim that the adversities she had encountered with Sarah were related to her identity as a Black woman, despite the fact that the only other Black teacher at the school had faced the same behavior and left.

Responding to why Elizabeth thought that the principal had treated her the way that she did, Elizabeth said that she was unsure. She stated that some people on campus thought it could have been because Elizabeth was having her first child out of wedlock, and that Sarah, who was very religious, might have had a problem with it. Regardless of

the reason, Elizabeth was undeterred. She decided to persist in her school in spite of being scrutinized by Sarah because it motivated her:

Actually, what it did was make me work even more. And that's a problem we have in the Black community because usually we have to prove ourselves to people. And it's not right, but that's usually, you know- we always seem to have to go a step above everybody else just to get recognition for things that other people aren't even doing.

It manifests as “working harder. That's how we get to be, let's say, ‘average’ versus people who aren't even doing that [and] are above us, you know, as far as above average in the eyes of the person in charge.” Because of the deficit notions of people in the Black community, Elizabeth wanted to prove Sarah wrong, stating “Well, I guess I like a challenge. [...] I didn't know that at the time, so. Yeah...” Pausing briefly to collect her thoughts, she remarked, “But I knew I was resilient, that’s for sure. I knew that part. I mean, I did work three jobs when I was in college, but that didn't affect anything, you know?”

Despite acknowledging that she was undermined and scrutinized by her first principal, this conversation with Elizabeth revealed that while she viscerally understands how society can mistreat members of the Black community, she would not be forced out of her position. Although Elizabeth acknowledged that it is a problem that Black people have to work harder in society, she defiantly decided to work to prove her administrator wrong. Amidst the unfair standards, Elizabeth defiantly welcomed challenges, advocated for herself, and labeled herself as resilient. These characteristics would help her navigate teaching where her mission, the challenge of helping every child to learn- and advocating for them as an extension- would drive her and help her persist in the profession.

Teaching on the East Coast. Despite the adversity that Elizabeth encountered early in her career, she enjoyed teaching on the East Coast. She spent the first fifteen years of her career teaching kindergarten and first grade in the same school where she was hired. On the East Coast, things were very different from California. The educational structure and policies of the school she was in on the East Coast were very conducive to helping her carry out her mission as an educator because they prioritized the students, gave Elizabeth time to be effective as a teacher, and allowed her creativity to enter the classroom.

“It’s About the Students and Their Learning.” As Elizabeth shared her experiences as a teacher over the past three and a half decades as an educator, she would often compare her experiences in the classroom on the East Coast to her experiences in Southern California. She loved teaching on the East Coast because she believed that the structures and policies were “about the students” in her former school. For example, the teacher-to-student ratio in her first school was small. “My principal believed in small class sizes so we were twenty-to-one the whole time I was there. They still are. So the kids learned. All my kids were readers, [...] reading above or on their level.” Not only were the class sizes smaller, but the teachers also had all-day aides, as aforementioned, to facilitate the teaching and application of concepts. The smaller class sizes were also conducive to in-depth activities and centers, such as Elizabeth’s “reader’s workshop, writer’s workshop, and different stations” that really helped students learn.

As Elizabeth described the strengths of teaching on the East Coast, she described how she navigated federal policies that may have impacted her desire to remain in the

classroom over the years- particularly with regard to the pressure put on teachers to perform. Discussing the No Child Left Behind Act, Elizabeth said, “That was a lot of crap. But the problem with that was when I got [to California], because I didn't have that problem back there.” The pressure to perform was not a problem for Elizabeth on the East Coast because her school’s structures and policies naturally paved the way for student learning. Therefore, Elizabeth did not feel that she struggled

because with 20 kids in the room, everybody was reading. I was able to give you more attention, and I had an aide with me. I teach you, and then I send you to my aide to get reinforcement on what I just taught you. And we didn't have a curriculum that we followed, we just knew our standards, and this is what we have to teach. So we found the best way to teach it. And so, I didn't feel the pressure and stuff like that like I feel here. With the big class sizes here, you don't have time to meet one-on-one with students, you know? If you try to do that, you know, you might do that, but then you left a lot of other kids [behind].

On that note, and recognizing how important smaller classroom ratios had been for helping Elizabeth to successfully navigate the teaching profession on the East Coast, she returned her attention to her current frustration with Californian classroom policies saying “education there versus here: it's about the students [on the East Coast]. It's about the money here. Big Business here. And that’s all it is, ” she said, gesturing with her hands. “Yeah, it's not about learning. That's how I see it. It can't be about learning if you're gonna stuff thirty kids in a classroom, or thirty-two kids in first grade or second grade. You can't want them to learn, really.” Elizabeth’s examples demonstrate how strong school policies that prioritize student learning helped her to navigate neoliberal federal policies which historically were crushing to teachers and schools. Furthermore, the school structures and policies in Elizabeth’s East Coast school helped her prioritize her mission of “every child can learn” since the policies helped her be successful as a

teacher. Another thing that helped her feel like she was effectively carrying out her mission was getting back some time.

“We Had Time.” In her school on the East Coast, Elizabeth and her colleagues were given time: time to spend with students, plan, and collaborate with other teachers. For Elizabeth, being given time directly translated to “doing right” by the students. For example, as Elizabeth already shared in her story about confronting Sarah, her principal, teachers had all-day aides at her first school. This allowed Elizabeth more support and time to work directly with more students, which reflected in their learning. Furthermore, the aides were substantial in providing time for teachers to plan together and collaborate because teachers did not have to cover “recess duties or anything like that. The aides did that.”

In addition to being able to lean on the help and support of an aide throughout the day, another way Elizabeth’s first school returned time to the teachers was by hiring teachers to teach non-core subjects like arts and physical education (P.E.). This gave the teachers time to plan together because “the kids were gone. So you, you’re not teaching that. [...] You have teachers who went to school for that. So we had a music teacher, we had an art teacher, we had a P.E. teacher.” Elaborating further, Elizabeth continued “They used to do like a block schedule, so if my kids would go to music, the music teacher just sent them to P.E. right after. So that’s like an hour right there of planning time.” Couple this with the fact that the students went to P.E. a few times a week, and suddenly “in a week you had a good amount of planning time.”

As aforementioned, for Elizabeth this planning time was essential for facilitating her mission as an educator by allowing her the space to center the student and their learning. She described how this extra planning time helped her and other teachers grade more collaboratively, attentively, and fairly, describing the process:

so we used to read the writing together because we had that chunk of time. And how we graded our writing was, um, I'll grade my writing and put my score on the back. I'll give my papers to you. You give it what you thought, put your scores on the back, then we meet and we see what scores each other gave it. If it matched, then [...] it was "calibrated."

She continued, explaining the process in case teachers disagreed on a student's score:

"And then if we didn't agree, we'd look at it again and talk about why we did this and that, and then come to a consensus together. So then it was more fair, right?" She continued, "Because it's not just me, it's both of us. [...] But we had *time* to do that, you know? [...] That's how you gonna do better with your kids, you know?" Thus, Elizabeth was grateful for the time given back to her and her colleagues because then they could work together to plan and grade student work, resulting in more fair processes and discussions for the student's benefit. Processes like this, in turn, helped her feel like she was effectively carrying out her mission.

Finally, as Elizabeth continued to discuss her time teaching in her school on the East Coast, she responded to whether she thought her mission was easier to apply there than here in California. She was not coy in her response, laughing as she said,

Oh, *definitely*! Pssh. Yeah! That's not- yes! Definitely. I was so disappointed when I moved here with the education system because back there all you hear about is "California! It's on the cutting edge of this..." So everybody thinks it was "all that." Then I move here, and I'm like: "what? What are you doing? Why are we teaching this book thing, you know?" And everybody's in a book and we don't

have time to do small groups. And they put so much in your day you don't have time to relax as you teach. [...] There was no time to do that here, you know?

As evidenced, a major component in helping Elizabeth carry out her mission as an educator was being given the time to plan and collaborate with peers, which directly benefited the students and their learning.

The Freedom and Creativity to Teach. Elizabeth disclosed that in her East Coast school, not only were the structures and policies different from those in Southern California- despite teaching in schools with a similar “culture”- but the style of teaching was very different, also. She was given more creativity to teach. For starters, her East Coast school did not have a curriculum that they had to follow. Instead, “We just taught the standards. We just found activities to go with the standards to teach it. So we did themes [and] everything was around this theme.” Reflecting, she shared, “Like, I did dinosaurs. I did bugs. I did space. [...] I had some big umbrella themes- but everything dealt with that. Math, reading, spelling, science, whatever. Everything was on that topic. And the kids did well, you know?” Elizabeth believes that the students did well because teachers had more freedom to be creative, creating topics that were interesting and accessible to students. For example, she explained that the students would be open and interested in trying more difficult tasks, in this case reading, because “let's say it might be a harder book, but if I like dinosaurs, you know, ‘I want to learn how to read this book.’” This was in comparison to her students in California, where Elizabeth expressed some frustration about relying on things like Accelerated Reader programs that would dictate which books students could read. Elizabeth felt like relying on programs like her current school format does has the potential to leave students being restricted- their curiosities

stifled- unlike in her school on the East Coast.

Furthermore, the East Coast school format was more conducive for Elizabeth's own creativity in the classroom, beyond the academic. Elizabeth is very creative and has a passion for design, even minoring in interior design in college. Her creativity shows in her personal style, her classroom, and in her school activities. Bringing her creativity into her profession is something that has helped sustain her throughout the profession over the years. She semi-jokingly told me that on the East Coast she used to get "carried away" with her projects, stating "if I [did] a solar system, [I'd put] black paper all over the ceiling [and] punch little holes where the lights are so [students] can see the light coming through like the stars." Her voice and face growing in excitement, she continued "We made the orbit, and put the planets out of paper maché up there. You could look up and all this stuff was there. Yeah, we went crazy!" Elizabeth described how she also had a lot of fun with the dinosaur themes, stating "I used to make life sized ones. [We wondered], the pterodactyl wingspan was how big? So we made one and put him up on the ceiling." Remembering another dinosaur, she explained "And then I had one that was outside the door- a stuffed dimetrodon [...]. Because we were in an indoor classroom, we had the hallway. So, yeah, he was on the wall leading up to our door, his full size." As Elizabeth described her creativity manifesting in this space, she shared that she loved it, but that it took "all her time." In spite of how time-consuming these projects were, Elizabeth said "But I didn't mind doing it because I knew what it would do, you know? How the kids would learn more." She was happy to apply her creativity if it meant it would help her carry out her mission and that the students would learn more, stating "Yeah, the kids love

that stuff. They remember a lot more when they're just involved [...]. You drop them in that whole environment.”

As evidenced by Elizabeth’s stories, her mission as an educator was facilitated by the structures and policies of her East Coast school: the classrooms were smaller, teachers and staff were given time to plan and collaborate, and Elizabeth was able to bring her creativity and joy into the space. Noticeably, Elizabeth’s attitudes and perceptions were contingent upon whether her mission as an educator had been promoted or hindered by the policies and structures in place.

Part 4: Teaching in Southern California Through the Present- Canyon Elementary School

After fifteen years of living and teaching on the East Coast, Elizabeth got married and relocated to Southern California. She had interviewed at a few schools while honeymooning in California prior to the move, and thus had a job waiting for her when she arrived in California. She has now been teaching in Canyon Elementary School for just over twenty years. Her current assignment is as a reading specialist at the school.

“Business Over Learning.” As Elizabeth’s previous stories indicated, she was disappointed when she moved to California and got involved in their education system, predominantly because she believes education in California to prioritize “business over learning.” As an educator whose mission is “all students can learn,” it came as no surprise why Elizabeth was disappointed: an education structure that seemingly prioritizes policies that hinder learning to save money over the students who it claims to serve prevents her from being the most effective teacher she can be.

Starting Over. When Elizabeth moved to California she experienced an initial “culture shock.” As aforementioned, she was expecting California’s education system to be impressive since in educational spheres people talked about it being on “the cutting edge” of education. Instead, she found the academic structures and policies to be so different from those on the East Coast that she essentially had to relearn how to teach:

You just think that [California was] all that. And then I got here and I'm like, “ummm.” Yeah. No. This is not how I learned how to teach. No. That was a big deal for me. And when I first moved I had so many books- like I told you, I did dinosaurs and all that- I brought all that stuff with me. [...] Boxes were here before I moved here. Then when I started teaching, I was like “I can't do any of this stuff.” So I actually gave away all my books to the public library. Yeah. And then after a while I started saying “maybe I should have kept them. I could probably try to do [something].” But it was too hard trying to do *all* what they want you to do *plus* do that. And there wasn't enough time in the day.

Elizabeth felt like she could not apply her teaching strategies in this space because the curricular expectations and pacing were so different. Consequently, Elizabeth concluded that her start was rocky, and that “As far as education, I was very disappointed,” she said, shaking her head. “Nothing that I did [on the East Coast]- the way I taught and stuff like that- I [wasn’t] able to really transfer [it] here. [...] Yep. So that was really, really tough.” She commented that she was “starting from scratch. And it wasn't a good scratch either.”

New Challenges. As we spoke, many of Elizabeth’s frustrations with the challenges that she had encountered emerged. Firstly, Elizabeth told me “in those fifteen years I [taught] kinder and first. And that's all I did for fifteen years. When I came here- this is my twenty-first [year]-” she said, counting the following off on her fingers, “I've done kinder, first, second, intervention, third, [and] now reading specialist. Six things! You know? But that's how they do it and it doesn't make sense!” The consistency of her

assignments on the East Coast enabled Elizabeth to become an effective teacher, as aforementioned, because she was able to hone her teaching strategies and “find the best way to teach” her students. In California, however, her assignment distribution was not conducive to honing one grade level, which Elizabeth found could thwart her ability to successfully carry out her mission.

Similarly exasperating, “the student-teacher ratio was thirty to thirty-two students for every teacher with no aides in the classroom.” Furthermore, “teachers had to follow a pacing guide that often moved so fast that students were left with very little understanding of the concept being taught.” Both of these things were a “culture shock” that affected academic factors, as well as relational ones: “Even when they do the pacing guide, they don't factor in you got kids who are not going to understand what you just did, and you might have to slow down, or speed up, or do it again,” she said, exhaling. “Yeah, so, it's all about just going and going, and they don't factor in kids might have questions, or interruptions, or whatever, you know?” The fast pace did not even consider that students would want to chat with Elizabeth, as young children often do. Elizabeth expressed this idea and stated that she would feel the pressure and urgency to hurry them up, stating “It's like, ‘Okay, you finished? Okay! Let's move on!’ You know? [...] Because you're watching the time. You're watching, ‘where am I now? Like, oh I'm far behind because the guide says I should be here and there.’” Because there was no time for checking in with students, it meant that they were falling behind academically *and* that no relationship with them was being built, key elements of her mission. Furthermore, for Elizabeth, this meant she felt “a lot of pressure,” and that “then when you leave those

kids behind, that's when you get your behavior issues because they say, 'I don't know what's going on. I'm just going to do my own thing.'”

There were many issues that Elizabeth had to navigate when she arrived in California: she had a new, strict curriculum that made her feel like she was starting her career from scratch- she could not use her old resources or as many of the teaching strategies she had learned over the years; her new school followed a fast pacing guide, and without the help of aides, she felt that she was leaving many of her students behind. She felt ineffective as a teacher when she arrived in California in spite of being a seasoned teacher because she felt that her district’s and school’s policies were about moving quickly and prioritizing money, manifesting in the withholding of resources that could support the teacher and the students. Finally, to make matters worse, “the district kept piling more and more requirements for teachers to do with little to no resources. I quickly realized that in California, at least in my district, education was not about student learning. It was all about business and making money.

“I Was Not Born to Be Subtle.” In spite of the rocky start to her educational career in California, and in spite of the initial hampering of her mission based on educational policies, Elizabeth would become a leader and advocate in her school community. Rather than burning out or being pushed out of the profession by adversities, she would stand up for herself and her students, fighting to carry out her mission effectively.

Understanding Elizabeth’s Mission in Action. To reiterate, Elizabeth’s mission is about advocating for, and empowering, students. She was once a student who

experienced negative behaviors on the basis of her identity as a working class, Black individual, so Elizabeth promised herself that she would become an educator who uplifted *all* of her students. Equality is such a central part of her mission that when asked if she considered herself to be an advocate for underrepresented students, Elizabeth responded,

I'd say that. But the way I run my classroom though, is that the kids don't even know who's Black or White, kind of thing. Everybody gets treated the same-same expectations of everyone. Same "no excuses" for everybody, kind of thing, you know? The consequences were the same for whatever rule you broke. Didn't matter who you were. Now, people say everybody can't be disciplined in the same way because it depends on the circumstances. If I knew someone had a certain situation or whatever, I'd talk to them *privately*. But kind of like in front of the class, you get the same type of treatment that everyone is getting. Because I don't want people to think, "oh, she treats him better than me," or "how come *he* gets that? *She's* letting *him* do that." But that person would know that I understood, but I still had to [enforce a consequence]. Like, let's say eating breakfast or something. You might say "okay, breakfast is done at 8:10." And then someone comes in *at* 8:10, and you know that they haven't eaten. So I might sneak them something and say, "okay, go outside and eat it real quick and come back." So nobody else knows that they still got to eat. But I know that they need to eat, so I'm not gonna *not* give them [food]. But my rule says "ten after." So everybody needs to know "now I can't come to school late and still get food."

While she did say that she considers herself to be an advocate for underrepresented students, Elizabeth was quick to recenter the notion of equality in her response, implying that she is an advocate for all students. Elizabeth does not want any student to feel that they are being mistreated, or being treated unfairly compared to another student. Furthermore, treating everyone equally ensures that she can outline and enforce her own policies, which helps her to be an effective classroom teacher. Although she described an equitable and caring approach with the example of giving the late, hungry student breakfast, she promotes a baseline of equality.

While a baseline of equality is central to Elizabeth's mission as an educator, she often expressed her disappointment with teachers who were inequitable, particularly with regard to students of Color: "Yeah, it's hard sometimes [...] with different races- how they treat your children. I wanna say 'my children' because they look like me. And there's not much you can do." Pausing to consider, she shared, "I mean we try talking to 'em but sometimes they don't get it because in their eyes, 'Oh, I'm not prejudiced,' or 'I'm not racist,' or 'I treat everybody the same.' Like, *no*, you don't. You really don't." For Elizabeth, equality means treating everyone the same so that all students have the opportunity to succeed. When students of Color are singled out, she is disappointed because she understands how teacher's attitudes and perceptions about- and subsequent behaviors toward- those children will hinder their opportunities for success in society. Yet, she does not feel that there is a lot that she can do about other people's perceptions or actions, in spite of how much she personally advocates for her students.

For example, Elizabeth described witnessing a colleague's reaction to a Black student that they did not like: "One time there was a teacher- good friend of mine- but, um, somehow she didn't like this one little boy who was African-American. She was White. She didn't know I was walking in the door behind him." Bracing, she said "When I knocked and they opened the door and he walked in- [the] look on her face. I walked right in behind him, so I saw that look. I was like 'he's doomed.'" Elizabeth described feeling heartbroken at the teacher's reaction to the student, saying "It is. So that's all you'd hear her talk about is this one boy who, 'doesn't do nothing. He can't do this.' You hear [about] all his behavior issues. We hear nothing good about what he *can* do."

Shaking her head, she said “So yeah. But I saw that look. And if *he* saw that look, then he feels hopeless in that room, you know: ‘I can't do anything right.’ Yeah, so...”

When following-up about interactions like this with Elizabeth, asking her about racial inequality and injustice, and whether she feels that she has a responsibility to teach or respond a certain way to address it, she said:

Well, being in elementary, our curriculum is more or less set. Um, [...] we're still just teaching whatever it is they told us to teach, you know? I do try- like a question might come up. We have a little African-American boy, in that class over there- his hair is twisted. [...] And he was telling me “oh they said this about my hair,” or whatever, because the kids didn't understand his hairstyle or something, you know? And so I explained to them what it was, and that that's what we like to do [in the Black community]. And so [they] don't have the right to say whatever [they] want about his hairstyle. That's *his* choice. That's what he wants to do. You know? So like that- I tried to, not advocate, but to explain things to others. Educate them when they say certain things about the culture or something like that. And the African-American boys or girls, [...] they'll come to me with certain things that people say to them. I guess to see my response or to see what I say about it. [Anyway], so he felt like he could relate. So I was doing that so that the others could see we have that connection or whatever, and nothing's wrong with what he had in his hair or that kind of thing. So yeah. So in that light I try to be as real as I can, you know? Embrace the culture as much as I can. Um, I don't think I go above and beyond to talk about things. I do it if something comes up, more or less.

Elizabeth is conscious about in/equality, but views it as something that is mostly interpersonal and therefore worth addressing as it “comes up.” She admits that because her curriculum is mostly fixed, her responsibility is to teach it well, rather than try to change it or make it more critical. Therefore, while her behavior toward students is transformational, her behavior toward in/equality in the curriculum is generally conformist and responsive. Thus, Elizabeth is not overtly critical or justice-oriented in what she teaches. While she is concerned with how to create change in the lives of her students, she believes that the best way to accomplish that is to teach them well, within

the standard curriculum. She is concerned with ensuring that she is a good and equitable teacher because she believes that is the best way to transform the lives of all of her students.

In spite of Elizabeth's baseline of equality, her pedagogy does leave room for racial equity on the basis of her understanding of society's deficit views of students of Color. She explains how she navigates racial perspectives in a "good" way, describing a common occurrence among Black parents at her school, saying,

I know a lot of times African-American parents like that I am [Black] and if their child is coming to that grade, they want them in the class because they don't see too many of us. Like here at our school, we have what? [A few] of us? That's not a lot in a big school like this. It doesn't match the [...] population, you know. I mean I know it's mostly, um, Hispanic but we do have quite a bit of African-Americans so we should have [more Black educators], especially some males, too. But you don't find that too much. So you do have those parents who want their child in the class for that reason. [...] But of course when you're in the class you know everyone and you look at them as the same as far as ability or, you know, that you're gonna try to reach each student. So you're not really looking that way. But for some reason, um- not for some reason, I know the reason- [parents] think their child will get a better shake: that I'll expect more from them or I'll expect them to do their best, you know? I'm not going to sugarcoat things just for them, because you do have that on the other end, too: teachers who are from a different culture who think that, "uh, they can't really do it." So then they'll dummy it down [...] when that child is *very* smart and *can* do it. No. Or you have the same teacher who might say, "they can't do anything," and so they don't even push them to do anything. You know? That kind of thing. So, yeah. And when I do look at those kids in my class- African-American kids- sometimes I do push them a little more because I know what it's like to have teachers who don't think you can do anything, or to have teachers who don't think you're going to amount to anything. So I do try to push them to be smarter, and to want to be smarter. And to learn as much as you can learn. Yeah. Because, you know, that's what's gonna carry you in life, so...

Elizabeth generally tries to be equitable so that all students can learn to the best of their abilities to be successful in society. Yet, because Elizabeth is aware that many teachers have deficit views of Black students, and because she actively rebukes those deficit

perspectives- knowing how capable her students are- she admits that she will oftentimes “push” her Black students a little more or a little harder than other students. She wants them to continue to grow “smarter” and to cultivate a love of learning because those are the skill sets that will enable them to succeed in society and in life, allowing them to “amount to” whatever they want to.

Challenging the Perception that Students Cannot Learn. A quintessential part of Elizabeth’s mission is that all students can learn- and learn well- and that it is the educator’s responsibility to find a way to reach and support the student in that process. Yet, Elizabeth would often encounter teachers who complained about students’ lack of ability, stating “‘cause sometimes teachers are like ‘he don’t know nothing. He can’t learn.’” She would challenge these teacher’s perceptions, pushing back with “‘Well, I mean, what are you trying?’ or ‘Is there something else that you can try to help with to fix that? What kind of lessons are you teaching? Is he interested in your lessons?’” For teachers to complain about a student’s inability to learn meant that they were essentially giving up on their students. In doing so, the teachers are more likely to leave students behind, and force them to forfeit their learning. So rather than commiserating with a complaining peer, Elizabeth would challenge them to try a new approach to reach a student; this is something that Elizabeth practices to ensure that she is successfully carrying out her mission of teaching and advocating for students and their learning.

When Elizabeth comes up against challenges to student learning, she has multiple contingency plans to support her students in their learning. For students experiencing “academic challenges”, she would begin with

the normal steps of one on one tutoring, conferencing with the student and or their parents, [then] allowing that student more adult support through an aide and finally, arranging [...] a Student Study Team meeting where other experts can share more “best practices” that may help in my efforts.

Thus, she would begin by working more closely with the student, and gradually introducing more resources according to their academic needs, culminating in external support for the student, if necessary. With regard to “behavioral challenges,” Elizabeth told me “One of my strengths as a teacher is having very good classroom management. I usually don’t have an abundance of student behavioral issues.” However, when behavioral challenges arose with any student, Elizabeth had a plan:

I would conference with the student and their parents and develop a behavioral contract [...] where we would focus on his or her day either broken up into sections or the entire day on a whole [...]. In my experience, the behavioral contract was usually very successful. My classroom was also very busy which left little time for students to misbehave.

By having a plan for the challenges that inevitably come up in the classroom, Elizabeth has been able to continue her mission of supporting her students’ learning endeavors. She has plenty of strategies for intervention ready to deploy so that she can practice what she preaches, challenging the notion that children cannot learn.

Challenging Administrators. In addition to challenging the notion that students cannot learn, Elizabeth has had to challenge administrators throughout her career to advocate and pursue her mission. In her current position as reading specialist, Elizabeth has had to challenge her principals and her district’s interim superintendent to advocate for her fellow reading specialists.

Elizabeth says that the former principal “was a nice guy, but not a good leader.” She would often confront him about the way that he was doing things, especially when it

affected her and her fellow reading specialists. For example, planning time is vital for “doing better with your kids” with regard to teaching and learning, and at Canyon Elementary School, “they don't want to even give you planning time.” Elizabeth stated “When I was in the classroom, I made my own planning time because when I put my kids to work in groups or with a partner, I [could] do something else. So that [was] like my planning time.” She explained how as a reading specialist, things are a little different because “you don't have any planning time because you're just seeing [kids] back to back to back. Our time is different.” She continued, “When we asked [the former principal] for planning time and he didn't want to give it, that was hard. I wasn't there [...] and he told them he wanted them seeing groups from bell to bell. That's what he told them.”

When Elizabeth came back, and “we were back into the routine, I was like, ‘this is ridiculous. I feel like a hamster on a wheel.’ So I went to him and I'm like, “hey, we need some planning time.”” After a lot of back and forth between the principal and her reading specialist colleagues, Elizabeth ultimately succeeded in getting them their planning time, stating,

So I was like, ‘okay, so on Fridays we're not gonna see anyone after one [pm]. Let's use that for some planning time.’ Because we need planning time, too. Because we're seeing, like, a class load of kids- thirty kids in a day. And they're not on the same level, so that means you're planning. And then they're coming from different grades. So that's a lot of planning.

Elizabeth served as the advocate for her colleagues because “ I knew how to handle him. I got along fine with him. For some reason, I don't know, they thought he was scared of me. I don't know why,” she told me laughing, “maybe because I speak my mind? I don't know. But, yeah, I could handle him. I didn't like some of the things he did, and I'd go

talk to him about certain things.” Elizabeth is not afraid to speak her mind and resist the desires of her administrators, particularly when their desires inhibit her or her colleagues from doing their jobs, or pursuing their missions, to the best of their abilities. This is especially true considering that teachers are the “experts” in the classroom “in the trenches with the kids, and we [know] what [is] going on with whatever it [is] we [are] teaching.”

In addition to standing up to her immediate administrators, Elizabeth is no stranger to taking the fight to the district level. Her position is currently in jeopardy due to more teachers pursuing a reading specialist authorization and budget cuts. Rather than waiting to see what happens to her position, however, Elizabeth is in conversation with the interim superintendent, pushing back on their beliefs:

I heard [the interim superintendent] saying class size doesn't matter because teachers are teaching the same way. So I was like “Oh, so we’re doomed.” If [they] think that really makes sense, okay. [...] And when I wrote to [them], [they] said that because these teachers- a lot of them- went and did their [reading authorization] training, they can do their [own] small groups now. I told [the superintendent], “unfortunately, I'm disappointed. I'm hoping that the district would notice that, yes, they have the *ability*. But when you have a large class, you really *can't* do that.”

Elizabeth knows that large classrooms are not conducive to teaching reading to the students, especially not when students require individualized help. Rather than accepting that her position might be made obsolete, she understands its benefit and continues to challenge the district. She shared her critique, saying “we're paying for two superintendents. They want to quit reading specialist, but we're paying for two [...] and they don't see that's a problem. Who's it benefiting? The kids? No. Keep the reading specialists. That'll benefit your kids, not paying two superintendents.”

Throughout her career, Elizabeth has demonstrated that when policies and structures do not work in favor of her mission- her professional purpose- she fights back. She fights perceptions, administrators, and she fights for her ability to do her job well. The plaque in her classroom among her personal things that says “I Was Not Born to Be Subtle” is a fitting symbol of her advocacy as she pursues her mission. Ultimately, her mission is a main vehicle for persisting in the teaching profession:

The thing that keeps me in this profession is the challenge of being the one responsible for my students’ learning. I find it incredibly rewarding when I can develop resources that encourage and motivate my students to want to learn and find out more. I try to instill in my students that learning is a lifelong process and that they should always be motivated to learn all that they can.

Leveraging the Position of Reading Specialist. Elizabeth has been in her reading specialist position at Canyon Elementary School for the past few years. Because a reading specialist’s time is “different” than that of a regular classroom teacher, Elizabeth has found this position to be conducive to her mission as an educator. The flexibility it provides also offers more space for Elizabeth’s joy within the profession.

The Reading Specialist Position. Elizabeth’s mission is the driving force for her as an educator. When asked whether she believed her mission had been supported by the reading specialist position, namely if she was able to become a more efficient teacher, she said, “I don’t know if [the teaching] was more [efficient] now than before. I think before [I] was doing fine, also. But before there was more learning in all things, versus now it is just in reading: focus on reading.” Smiling, she said “I do see the growth in the students. Not just academic growth, [but] like, confidence. And when they get that confidence,

they do a lot more other things.” Elizabeth explained the growth of students by highlighting a breakthrough that one student had after working closely with her:

When we were done, [...] his dad was like, "I can see the difference." And it wasn't necessarily that he was reading real fluent at that point, or nothing, but even his confidence was different. And he was trying more, and he felt better about reading on a whole. And that's part of the goal of reading because if you're confident, you're going to try. You're going to make those mistakes. You're going to *want* to make those mistakes. You're not gonna *not* try because you're scared you're gonna make a mistake. You're gonna try to remember the patterns that we're learning and all that and try them in words. So I see that a lot, and that's very satisfying.

When students are able to apply that curiosity and confidence beyond their learning, in this case reading, that is what Elizabeth's mission as an educator is about: empowering students beyond the material so they can develop the skills to ultimately be successful in life. She explained,

That's what I always tell them: “when I teach you something, it's not just for right now. It's so that you can use it in different areas and when you're doing all kinds of things. Because if you can do that, then that means you really learned it, and you can translate that knowledge into something else.”

While observing Elizabeth work with her small groups, the physical manifestations of her mission as an educator became apparent. One day, Elizabeth was teaching a young group of students a reading rule concerning single-syllable words ending in double consonants, or “twins” (e.g. “sell”). After practicing a few examples with the students, Elizabeth asked the students to provide some examples. When one student provided an “incorrect” example, Elizabeth said “not quite. That would have been a good example for [a previous] rule.” Then, Elizabeth provided the student with an example of the rule and explained the difference to them. Elizabeth did not immediately correct the student, or use the words “right” or “wrong.” Instead, she explained to the

student that their example was more fitting of another rule, and then they worked together to come up with a new example of the rule. When it came time for another student, a Black student, to identify an example of the rule they said the word “leff.” Elizabeth told the student that they had had the right idea, but that “when we say a word fast, we sometimes leave a sound off. There's an additional sound there that is the “t” sound.” Elizabeth did not correct the student’s Black Language, and she did not make any statements about “proper” or “improper,” avoiding gearing him toward the “standardized” English dialect. She simply let the student know that when writing the word “left,” there is a “t” at the end. The student demonstrated that they understood the concept, which is what matters for Elizabeth as an educator. These instances show how she works patiently with students to ensure that they are learning the skills that they need to be successful in society. While she is not shy about keeping them accountable in the learning process, she does not try to change who her students are. She affirms them: she does not shame or “correct” them, and she does not tell them that there is one way to do or learn something. Furthermore, her usage of the word “we” signified to the student that she was partnering with them in their language usage, rather than isolating or “othering” them. Her approach, which is as transformational as it is conducive to relationship-building and student learning, was unwavering in every observed interaction with her students.

Furthermore, Elizabeth holds herself to the same standards as she does her students: she is a lifelong learner who is constantly growing and trying to make change. In her position as a reading specialist, Elizabeth regularly attends a class that advances

her knowledge of reading, and she attends an annual reading conference. In her school community, she is fighting to integrate culturally responsive pedagogy in her school and district. She is also involved in her community, partaking in the district's African American Council to remain aware of the ongoings of her community. Being a lifelong learner works in a full-circle fashion for her mission as an educator: learning more enables her to be up-to-date on the newest research and teaching skills, while being involved in her community gives her a more holistic understanding of her community's needs, which in turn allows her to be a better teacher for her students, which motivates her to persist to keep transforming lives.

Sustainability. Motivated to persist in the profession because of her mission and her ability to make change, Elizabeth has found ways to make the profession more sustainable for herself, particularly by cultivating community and bringing in her creativity, two things which bring her joy. These things help Elizabeth to stay well within the profession so that she can continue to pursue her mission. Although Elizabeth admits, “I need to do better on the wellness factor”, because the work “never ends,” she has found ways to make the profession more sustainable in order to remain motivated and joyful.

The Challenges of Wellness in the Profession. When asked how she remains well in the profession, Elizabeth stated, laughing, “I don't! I get no sleep!” More seriously, Elizabeth said, “Yeah, [wellness in this space] is hard. [...] That's one of my energy boosters, doing [social committee] stuff. Gardening is another energy booster. Um, how do I stay well? I try to get a massage every now and then.” She stated,

I used to have a [massage] membership [...] so then I got one where the lady comes to the house. Well, I was with one, but I found out she was racist, so then I stopped. Yeah, and how I found that out is [a colleague] went to her too, and she had an incident with her where the lady said- when they were going to make the Little Mermaid, and she was Black- "Oh no! They can't do that! How are they going to see her under the water?" I'm like, "Okay, I'm from the Caribbean. My friends and I go to the beach. We don't see each other under the water?" I was like "that's ridiculous." And then there's this other one that comes to the house, but right now I'm broke *[laughing]* so I haven't gone. [...] But yeah, so I try to do massages. I like to sit and do nothing sometimes, too.

Elizabeth understands the physical, mental, and emotional tolls that the teaching profession can have on a person. When asked about what advice she would give to a new teacher, she said,

When I encounter student teachers, in my mind I ask "why?" But I try to be realistic with them. I let them know that it is a lot of work that you do not get paid for all that you do. I try to advise them that they should take care of themselves because all the work is always going to be there... it never ends, so pace yourself.

Elizabeth tries to "be realistic" with new teachers so that they understand what they are getting themselves into, and can prepare accordingly. By revealing the difficulties of the teaching profession to other teachers, Elizabeth is promoting notions of sustainability within the space for others, as well. She learned the importance of this lesson firsthand, stating that to stay well "I just do the best that I can. [...] The work will always be there so take care of yourself."

Elizabeth does not romanticize the profession. It is a difficult position, with more work than there is time to complete it, made harder by policies, structures, and adversities that challenge her mission as an educator. Yet, Elizabeth persists because she feels so strongly about her mission and her ability to make a change for students. She also understands that while she cannot give all of herself, there is a lot that she can recognize

and control to make the profession more sustainable for herself as she endeavors to change the lives of her students through the pursuance of her mission.

In/formal Head of the Social Committee. As aforementioned, one of the primary sources of sustainability and joy for Elizabeth, beyond successfully carrying out her mission as an educator, is the school culture that she helps to cultivate through her in/formal position as head of the in/formal social committee. When asked if she is the head of the social committee, she laughed and said “There's no head! There's no head of committee. No, we don't have a social committee. We used to have one a long time ago, but they got into some trouble with money and so it broke up.” Elizabeth became socially involved when “ we were getting laid off a lot. We had [reduction in force] notices, and they would go back like seven years into the system and say, “you're not going to have a job the next year.” Because she was hired in a special assignment during one of those years,

I had time. Our morale was low at our school, and then I started celebrating people's birthdays. But I went overboard with it because I celebrated *everybody's* birthday, and I brought cupcakes or whatever. So then someone said “why don't we just do it once a month?” And so then that's what we did: once a month, and then probably bring a sheet cake or something. Then we said “let's do some potlucks.” And so that's where that all came from, and then I was doing that, too. And then someone said “well, why don't grade levels sign up?” and then that's where that went. [...] And so then that's how that came about. So every year we do that. Yeah. So being an interventionist, or being a [reading specialist]-, it gives you time. Your time, it's a different time than theirs.

Although demure about leading the community culture in her school since there is no *formal* social committee, most people see Elizabeth as a leader in their community. Immediately after explaining how she got involved in leading the community events, she stated “Yeah, but people think I am [the head of the social committee]. I'm like, ‘anybody

can do this, anybody can do that. You don't have to ask me.' Like when Cathy first came," Elizabeth said, laughing, "she talked to me about people wearing pink for Thursdays in October. And I said, 'Oh, that's a great idea! Send out an email.' She sent it out." Laughing, she continued "Somebody said, 'Did Cathy talk to you about the [email]?' I'm like, 'What?! She had to talk to me about it?!'" Elizabeth laughed again, shrugging and smiling as she stated, "but I said, 'Yeah, she did.'" While Elizabeth does not consider herself the head of the informal social committee, others on campus clearly do.

Not only do others on campus see Elizabeth as the head of the informal social committee, but it had been stated around campus that Elizabeth is the "work mom" of the school. Lily, this study's second participant, once stated without being prompted that Elizabeth is the "glue that holds everyone together." When this topic came up in conversation, Elizabeth tried to downplay her impact, stating "I try to help with that. We try to welcome everybody and make people feel like they belong. That's why we're having a hard time with someone who is here that's working against it. And our ex principal, he worked against that too. [The current principal] is real good at keeping us together [though]." Similarly to her mission of empowering students, Elizabeth tries to ensure that her colleagues feel like they belong to the school community. She explained how "every job, they kind of do things. Like when I worked at NIH [...] [like if] someone had a birthday, they'd say 'oh we're getting this one some flowers.' Or, 'bring in a cake,' or 'you can donate,' whatever it is." To explain the significance of fostering a strong community, Elizabeth shared "That's just, that's your work family, you know?" Elizabeth

understands the value of community, and she understands that having a family-like community in the work space is conducive to wellness and sustainability not only for herself, but for her colleagues, also. Being able to cultivate community through the socials, the potlucks, the parties, is a big “energy booster” that helps her to stay well in the profession.

Creativity and Joy. Elizabeth’s current position as a reading specialist has given her more time to be socially involved on campus as she heads many of the campus community events. By default, this position has allowed her more space to bring creativity into her work as she plans the events and decorates around the school. When asked if her creativity has had an impact on her joy and wellness in the teaching profession, Elizabeth said,

Yeah, it does. I guess I go all in, so to speak. I get carried away sometimes- you know, you have to be bigger than the last time. But I'm not doing it for anybody else. It's just for myself. Okay, so if it's an activity that's coming up, and you give me a lot of time, it's going to be too big. Yeah, I'm going to go crazy [with it]! Because the more time you give me, and I start working on it, then I think of, "Oh, let me add that!" And, "Oh! That would be nice!" Yeah, so the longer I have, the more it's going to grow. No, but I like it. And I started that from the minute I started teaching.

In the past few months, some of the projects that Elizabeth created were astounding. In October, she and the other reading specialists created a fairytale backdrop and float-like display for the school’s Trunk or Treat event. Not only did Elizabeth spearhead the display, but when it was time for the event, she dressed in a thoroughly-crafted costume; she wore a beautiful pink gown and a tall, shiny crown, complete with a wand. As the winter holidays approached, Elizabeth decorated the teacher’s lounge, replete with a lifelike butcher paper fireplace, stockings, and snowflakes all around.

Elizabeth has an eye for design, and she pours her heart and soul into her projects.

Creating brings her joy, and being able to share it with her community in a way that brings them together contributes to her wellness in the profession.

“This is What I Want to Do.” Elizabeth’s journey demonstrates that teaching is a difficult profession. Yet, when asked why she has persisted she says

The thing that keeps me in this profession is the challenge of being the one responsible for my students’ learning. I find it incredibly rewarding when I can develop resources that encourage and motivate my students to want to learn and find out more. I try to instill in my students that learning is a lifelong process and that they should always be motivated to learn all that they can. All in all, I am guessing that I am still around teaching because I love what I do. This is [nearly forty] years in and I can’t see myself doing anything else. I just do the best that I can. I am also learning that the work will always be there so take care of yourself.

Elizabeth is motivated by her desire and ability to carry out her mission; she is a mission-driven educator. She believes her students can learn, and she gives everything within her capacity to partner with them in the process. When they succeed, she feels that she is succeeding in her mission, which encourages her persistence.

Furthermore, Elizabeth has never considered leaving the profession. When asked, she resolutely responded, “No. No, because here's why not. [...] I like working with the students. I think I can make a difference. I like when I see them learning.” She continued, describing that after switching majors during her first year of college,

I knew I still wanted to deal with children in some way, so then I went into education. But that was the only thing I had on my mind. Well, I had interior design as a minor, but that's it that was on my mind. I didn't have any other thing that I really wanted to do. Nothing. So that was what I set my mind on and I was headed that way. And that's all I've had in my mind. So, yeah, like people say, "Oh, after you retire, blah, blah, you can do that." I'm like, “I don't have any interest in doing nothing else.” If I retire, I'm going to sub. This is what I know. This is what I do. This is what I want to do. But I like what I do. Like I said, it's instilled in me. I've been doing it for so long. I couldn't see myself doing anything

else. I'm not tired of it or anything yet. I don't like the politics, but I'm still here. And like I said, I like when the kids learn. Like when they come back, "Hey remember when we blah, blah, blah?!"

Basically, Elizabeth loves "When I see kids learning and they're excited about learning. That's the best thing. [And] having a good day where all the kids seem to be on board; they're getting what you're teaching." Elizabeth believes strongly in her mission that all students can learn and is driven by her goal to carry it out. This mission and her ability to help students ultimately be successful have guided her for so long, it is something that she wants to continue to do for the foreseeable future.

The only thing that could deter Elizabeth from continuing in the profession is the way that power is shifting. Elizabeth believes that power continues to move away from the teachers and their ability to make change,

but I don't think there's nothing I can do. I really don't. Just the way things are going, the way the power is shifting, and how teachers really don't have much say in a lot of things. Other people say [things] for us. People who aren't even in the classroom are trying to make decisions on things. Yeah, so I don't know. The thing is, like... Okay, I was just thinking of retirement. My body isn't ready. I'm not tired and all that. Unhealthy and all that. But it's that part that would send me to retire- not wanting to deal with all the things people are trying to say that we're supposed to do when we are in the classroom. When we know that's not how it works. You know? That kind of thing. Yeah, I don't know. And a lot of it, sometimes it's not the district. It's coming from the state or from the federal [government]. Somebody else. And it's usually someone who's not in the classroom. [They focus on] things that have nothing to do with teaching the kids, you know, so to speak.

In spite of the perceived shift in power, where teacher expertise is being bypassed by external policy and opinion, Elizabeth said "besides that [...] I don't think I would trade it for any other profession." In conversation, the saying, "choose your struggle," came up, indicating that hardships are an inevitable reality of the human experience, but

that we get to determine which challenges we choose to engage because they align with our priorities, values, and goals; we get to choose which fights we participate in. With regard to persisting in the profession, Elizabeth simply responded “Yeah. So this is it. This is mine.”

Lily

Lily is the second protagonist of this work. She is a Mexican-American who identifies as Latina. Being Latina is an important part of Lily’s identity as a teacher. This is especially true since she is a kindergarten Spanish-English dual language immersion teacher. Because the Spanish language is a large part of her culture and identity, and one that anchors my identity, as well, we would often converse freely and naturally in both Spanish⁷ and English.

Part 1: Upbringing/Values

Lily was born in a border town in Mexico because her mother had had a “bad experience [in labor with] my brother, who was her first, and with the doctors out here. And so she ended up, every time she would have us, she would go back to [México], and that's where we were born.” Giggling, she stated, “And so twelve days after, I came over [to the Inland Empire]. But I grew up in [the Coachella Valley], the hot, hot desert.”

Family Influence. Telling me about her upbringing, Lily explained her family dynamics, stating that she is the youngest child in her family, and that she “grew up born and raised Catholic. That's a very important part of my life. That's where my spiritual life

⁷ In writing, italics are often used to denote something as foreign, or “other.” To honor the identities of Lily and myself, and to deconstruct hierarchies of language, the Spanish in this chapter is intentionally not italicized.

comes from.” She continued, “I grew up [in the Coachella Valley] ‘til I was eighteen years old, and came out [to the Inland Empire for college], and I stayed out here after that.” She paused, remembering, “Oh! I did go back after I graduated. I worked for maybe about a year [in the Coachella Valley]. I was already engaged with my husband, and so once we got married, then I came back [to the Inland Empire].”

Speaking about her upbringing, Lily shared,

I grew up [speaking Spanish] so that was my first language. English, I learned it more because of my siblings. I just heard it as I was growing up. [...] I know that as I got older, that Spanglish started coming in. So I don't feel I'm fluent in Spanish, [and] I know it's not very academic at times. So it just kind of comes and goes. But yeah [...] [Spanish] was my language.

Although Spanish is her native language and the language she utilized in her nuclear family growing up, Lily does not always feel that her Spanish is academic or perfect. Instead, she described how her Spanglish, a combination of the Spanish and English languages, “started coming in”- a natural consequence of concurrently learning the language of her family and community and the dominant language of American society. The interplay between the Spanish and English languages, Lily’s Mexican and American identities, would have implications for her as an educator later on.

Guided by Spirituality. In addition to her identity as a Mexican-American, Lily’s spirituality is the guiding force in her life. In fact, she laughed as she began to share her stories, saying “all right, ¡que Diosito me llena de historias!”- “May God fill me with stories!”

Explaining the roots of her spirituality, Lily stated “ I feel I grew up like an only child because my [closest] sister is like, six years older than me.” Smiling, she continued,

“So I was with my mom all the time. A donde iba ella -si a la iglesia- me iba con ella. Si sus juntas tenía, o el coro, se iba con ella. Every, every time.” Because Lily’s siblings were so much older than her, she spent all of her time with her mother, a very spiritual woman. Where Lily’s mother went, she went. This meant spending a lot of time in choir practice and church meetings. Lily had a lot of exposure to religion early on, and it became a fundamental part of her identity. As Lily explained the impacts that her spirituality has had on her trajectory, she stated,

I think it's influenced everything in my life. You know, honestly, I mean, just you feel... I get emotional [...]. God has been a big, *big* part of my life. And I think for me, even just as a young girl, I started getting involved more [...]. Me llamava mucho la atención. And so that's when it all started for me. Of course, before that, because my mom. My mom has always been involved in church, even to this day. So for me, it just has a big part of my life. God, you know, He guides me- whatever it is that I'm gonna do in my life. So even just this, becoming a teacher. So I try to put him in the center of everything, or before any of my decisions. And look! I do get emotional! Just thinking about it. Because it's just, it's just... [pauses] interesting. Wow. Yeah, I think it's just different when I'm talking to someone that I haven't talked to before. [...] He has guided me every, every step of the way- everything I do. It's Him in the front, you know? And it's Him guiding me - with my family, with my job, my students, just any decisions I'm going to make. It's always Him.

Lily’s spirituality is a fundamental part of her life. She centers all of her major decisions around prayer and being guided by her faith. In fact, Lily believes that she was directed by her faith to her “vocation” as a teacher since childhood:

I actually did [know I wanted to become a teacher as a child]. [...] So for me, also as a little girl, I remember playing school. And it was more with my stuffed animals. [laughs] I always tell that story. And I still vividly remember where I would just have all my stuffed animals. And my dad es jardinero. Well, was- he's retired now. But he brought me this old desk that he found. 'Cause sometimes when he'd go and he had to go throw [things] al dompe- that's how we would call it- he would find little treasures for me. And I remember him bringing back a desk. [...] And I remember I would sit my stuffed animals against a wall or whatever, the bed, and I would be teaching my stuffed animals. [...] Since then, I

knew I wanted to go into teaching. But once I graduated, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. But then I thought, “you know what? Well [teaching] is something that comes naturally to me.” So it's like, “okay Diosito. If that's where you need me to go, that's where I'm going to go.” So again, you know, just having that and having Him there every step of the way.

Lily had enjoyed the idea of teaching since she was a little girl, often “teaching” her stuffed animals at a desk that her father, a self-employed gardener, brought her from a waste disposal site. Yet, after graduating with a bachelor's degree in “Liberal Studies with [a] bilingual emphasis” she encountered a moment of doubt. She decided to lean into her faith and determined that teaching is what she had indeed been called to do since it was something that she had enjoyed doing since she was a child.

Educational Attitudes. Lily described that her parents did not have a formal education but, like many immigrant families, they believed strongly in the power of education. Therefore, they strongly encouraged Lily and their other children to pursue higher education. Explaining the impact that her parents’ educational attitudes had on her trajectory, Lily shared,

my dad... well, I might go a little off topic. But he was part of the Braceros program at one point. And so I know after all his experiences, when my parents got married, they emigrated [to the US]. My mom would have loved to have gone to school. Pero, as they were growing up, they were like eight in her family so she didn't get a chance to. She only went up to maybe third grade, out in México. My dad probably had twenty-one days in school. But then after it's just work, work, work. You know, so that's what he knew. When they came out here and once they had our family and we started growing up, that's the one thing he always would say, [to get educated]. You know, porque miraba [...] que muchas de las familias que él conocía trabajaban en el field. And they would take their children with them. And he's like, “I don't want that for my kids.”

Lily’s father solidified his belief in the power of education when he noticed the children of his peers worked in the fields alongside their parents. He did not want his children to

have to work doing arduous manual labor, as he had: he wanted “more” for them. “So that's what they said: ‘No. You guys are gonna go to school and you're gonna get an education and just do your best. Go figure out how you're going to do it.’” Lily’s parents did not have the opportunity for a formal education. Yet, they firmly believed that becoming educated would be transformational for their children, affording them more opportunities, so they required them to pursue higher education.

As first-generation college students, Lily and her siblings had to learn how to navigate higher educational institutions on their own. Her brother, the oldest, “he dropped out of school *but* he's been successful in his business. He started up his own little gardening business.” As for her sisters, Lily shared “my oldest sister is the first one who ended up [graduating], [but] with a lot of struggles.” Laughing, she said, “como dicen ‘de panzazo’ terminó la escuela because my mom was after her. But she was the first.” Smiling proudly, Lily stated “So she was like our role model, for me and my other sister. So, ya de allí la seguimos. And we all actually went to [the state university], all three of us.” Lily credits that although her brother did not acquire a degree, he has been successful as an entrepreneur. Her oldest sister was the first in their family to complete a degree, but “by a hair” because school was difficult for her. Her mom was persistent that the oldest finish, and it paid off. By completing her degree, Lily’s older sister was able to share navigational capital with her younger sisters, allowing them to fulfill their parents’ desire that they become educated. Lily credited her sister, stating “she had to learn it all on her own.” She laughed and shuddered at the thought that “if it wouldn't have been for her. It's

like, ‘oh my gosh,’” implying that she and her other sister would not have known how to navigate the process.

Concluding her thoughts on her family’s educational attitudes and expectations, Lily said

So, that's what it was. And I think for me, at a certain point, it was more of- as I was growing up, I was very shy- *bien tímida*. So [...] even though I knew I had to go- at the same time, it was more of "I'm gonna go with the motions, because that's what's expected of me. But I know that it's important. Because I hear it, and I see it.

She explained that she pushed herself through school in spite of the shyness, “once I finished high school, [it was] like, ‘let's go!’ ¡Me puse las pilas! You know?” Laughing, she described how she stepped up and more diligently pursued her educational options. Reflecting on that period of her life, Lily also credited her faith for helping her navigate it, stating “por eso digo- even though there were things of how I was, and how I might have not understood like how school worked and all that, pero yo se que Dios allí estaba. Again, God was there the whole way.”

Part 2: The Dynamics of Teaching

Lily began her teaching career in her home community of the Coachella Valley before getting married and relocating more toward the heart of the Inland Empire, which encompasses the cluster of cities around San Bernardino and Riverside cities, proper. She believes that she was called to teach, and shared what it means for her to be a teacher. Reflecting on those first few years, Lily also shared the valuable information she learned helped her to navigate and persist in the profession.

The First Few Years. Describing her trajectory as a teacher, Lily began

even when I was going through school, I think for me it was more of a, “this is what is expected of me” thing. I knew that I wanted to go into teaching but because of my shyness, I don't feel that I probably took advantage of a lot of the experiences. But at the same time, I know it led me to where I am now. [clears throat] So for me, in regards to schooling, [...] I ended up doing my bachelor's in five years. And then I did my credentialing in two years- I had to do two years. But I started as an intern, so as soon as I finished my bachelor's, I was able to get in. And so during my [internship], I was doing my credentials and I was getting paid, which was nice. I was like, “all right!”

While it was exciting to be paid as an intern, “it was also a little nerve wracking, because, as an intern [...] it was more of like ‘go in and figure it out on your own.’” Retelling this story, Lily paused, and then clarified “so [...] I [actually] started subbing first. I started subbing out in the Coachella Valley. [...] So that was my very *first* [position], and it was a long term subbing position. So that was interesting. I didn't know what I was doing!” Laughing, she continued “there I *really* was on my own, because that was just a very small school. So I was like, ‘Well, I'm gonna do what I gotta.’ And I was the only kinder teacher, so I really didn't see anybody else.”

After her first long-term subbing position, Lily acquired her first official teacher-of-record position as an intern. She explained “I was able to get a job, [...] a first grade teaching position. So that's where I did end up finding a lot of good teachers that helped and would say, ‘Okay, do this. Do that. Go here,’ you know?” She continued, laughing “and the one advice that I remember someone saying [with regard to curriculum] is that ‘You either steal, borrow or beg!’ So I was like, ‘Okay! Got it!’” With the help of a community that offered her mentorship and help navigating the profession, Lily began to

feel more grounded. Reflecting on that initial exposure to a school community, Lily stated “but yeah, that was a good experience.”

“Find[ing] That One Person” and Patience in the First Five Years. Despite the good advice Lily received once she received her first internship position, she would continue to struggle to get oriented and to find her footing in the first few years. Yet, Lily shared that in navigating those first five years of the profession- when many novice teachers statistically leave- leaving was not on her mind. This was due to the fact that she felt, and feels, that teaching is her vocation. Thus, she was able to find a way to persist with the support she got from her community: “I think it was never a question about me staying or not. I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. So the first five years, it was more of me learning how to be a teacher.” Reflecting on her experience, she shared, “Because even though you go through your [teacher education] program, it's nothing compared to when you come in, [and] you're actually in the classroom.” She continued, pausing to think,

I think it was, again, just the people... yeah! It was [...] the teachers, the community, you know? Especially, I remember Miss Sol. [...] She was a big motivator. She would just always motivate me. Because I remember a couple of times I went to her crying because it was just like, "Oh my God, I don't know what I'm doing!" And she was like, "Nope, you just pick yourself up." And she would help me: "okay, let's do this," and "let's do that." She would help me with lesson planning, or just, you know, motivate me to keep going. [...] So I think if it wasn't for her- I don't know. But she was one of the ones that, que en todo la escuela, she was the one person that year, that first year. So that's why I say, "find that one person."

Lily recounted that although she did not have any intentions of leaving the profession, the learning curve for teaching was still difficult to endure. She felt that her teacher education program had inadequately prepared her, and she oftentimes felt

insecure about what she was doing at the beginning of her career. On those tough days, however, she knew that she could lean into her community. In the beginning it was Miss Sol- a seasoned teacher who became an unofficial mentor and friend to her- to help her physically and emotionally overcome the difficulties of teaching. Lily shared that later on, “once I came [to Canyon Elementary School], [it was] having the AM/PM teacher [in kindergarten]. But I always had that other person in the classroom.” Pretending to inhale deeply, Lily explained “So I think that helped: always observing, ‘okay, they did this, did that. That worked, didn't work. Let me try it now.’ And I think for me, that helped with finding my own style.”

Leaning into the community during those first few years of teaching was paramount for Lily. She described how in the beginning “there were different points where I was like” she gestured pushing downward with her hands as she paused and exhaled loudly, before continuing “‘I can’t do this anymore.’ Like, ‘this is too [much]- I just don't want to do this.’ I loved it, but at the same time I didn't.” But, “*Again*, the teachers, the people who were with me, they just encouraged me all the time. But it was not easy,” she said, laughing at the memory.

One of the people in Lily’s support group was, and is, her husband, a fellow teacher. They started their careers at about the same time, and having his support and understanding at home was critical for the inevitable tough days where “I had my moments where they were overwhelming and I would go home crying. And luckily my husband was there, and he understood. So it was just like, ‘Okay, tomorrow is another day.’ Like, ‘alright, let's keep going.’ He encouraged her and helped her to navigate the

tough days, but it was reciprocal. Since he was a fairly new teacher at the time, he also had his days where he struggled. Lily recounted his experiences, saying “He *did* [struggle] and [...] more so. Because [...] he didn’t go through a teaching program, an education program. So for him, it was like, ‘what am I doing?’ And nowadays he says ‘my poor first year kids. Oh my gosh.’” Lily continued about his own persistence in the profession, explaining “it is his vocation as well, being a teacher [...]. But he had his lows so we would have to keep encouraging each other, and *that’s* what helped me more.” Smiling shyly, Lily explained “So, knowing that I would go home [and] he understood me, or he would come home and I would understand him, you know? So we would just talk to each other.” The mutual love, understanding, and encouragement in her personal relationship with her spouse was critical for Lily’s persistence in the profession. It helped her to remain well so that she could give herself grace and patience in those first few years, which Lily explained as “it was more of a ‘let me just learn, and I do what I can, little by little.’ And I remember somebody saying to me that it takes at least five years. So I thought, ‘okay, I still have time,’” she said laughing, ‘to find my own path,’ you know? [...] It just kind of put me at ease. [...] But yeah, no, the first couple years, it was more me learning the ropes and just learning as much as I can from people and observing.”

Due in part to the support Lily received from her official and unofficial family, she was able to extend patience to herself as she “learned the ropes” of teaching. She shared that when she is telling prospective teachers about the teaching profession, she really emphasizes that they be patient with themselves, and that they find their person and their community: “Be patient with yourself as you go. It is said that a teacher will find

their own teaching style within five years after beginning their career. So enjoy the process." Lily continued,

and that's something I have told my [aides]- I call them my girls- [...] but they're going through wanting to become teachers, and that's something that I tell them. That and that it's also important to find that one person that you can talk to. Sometimes it's either to vent or to bounce ideas off. And also, not to be afraid to ask for help from others, especially from administrators.

Ultimately because Lily felt that teaching was her vocation- where she was meant to be- she had to learn how to be well within the profession so that she could persist. To do so, she applied a growth mindset to the first handful of years of teaching, understanding that it would take time to become an effective teacher. In this time, Lily felt challenged and at times overwhelmed. Rather than being surprised by the difficulty or adversity of the profession, however, Lily found ways to navigate the profession in a manner sustainable for her. She prioritized her wellbeing, reminding herself that she had to be kind and patient to herself in the process. She also found "her person," whom she could learn from, and who could help guide her and motivate her physically and emotionally as she found her footing in the career.

Teaching as a Vocation. Lily's desire to become a teacher was born out of a childhood interest and cinched by her faith. As a spiritually devout woman, Lily believes that she was led to be a teacher. For this reason, being a teacher for Lily is more than "just [a] job." Instead, teaching is what Lily considers a "vocation." For Lily, a vocation requires that

you have to have your heart in the right place. So for me, a vocation is- and again, I think I take it spiritually in the sense of whatever direction my life is going to take, I have to take time to just stop, sit in silence, think, pray and discern. So a vocation is like my mission, my purpose, in where I'm going to be able to actually

put my talents and my gifts to the best use possible, you know? So for me, that's why it's, it's a vocation. It's where you're going to use those talents that God has given you, and He shows you.

For Lily, what separates a vocation from a job is that the vocation entails using the talents and gifts that one possesses to serve others because when something is “your vocation, you’re gonna do the best. You’re going to care about people.” In a vocation one is tasked with serving others in a way that promotes their well being, so they must have their “heart in the right place.” As Lily explained the idea more, teaching as a vocation became more apparent. To Lily, teaching is

one of the most important jobs and a beautiful way to give back to the community. It is more than a job. It is a vocation. So again, you have to make sure that your heart is in the right place. We are dealing with children and their future as well as their hearts.

As such, Lily’s mission is rooted in care and relationship. Another time, Lily was describing how a colleague’s child had been battling an illness. The day that the child was finally able to return to school, there was a reception for the child with a cheering crowd. Lily described how “everyone was crying,” as she motioned streams of tears coming down her face. She shared that the school community wore t-shirts in solidarity with the child, stating “¿Ya ves? That’s why I say this is a vocation. Your *whole* heart has to be in it.” Laughing, she said “we certainly don’t do it for the money!”

Mission. Teaching is a difficult profession, which is why teaching as a vocation is rooted in a mission and purpose that requires that one’s heart be involved in the process. This entails anchoring in community and relationship, as vocations are meant to empower the individual as well as the people that they serve. With regard to the children she

serves, Lily's "purpose [is] to set the foundation for my little ones as they learn not only academics, but social skills as well as emotional ones." This means

molding students, and not just academically, but just helping them understand. I mean, I know we have [our school values] and I know that kind of goes into, like, how to be good citizens. But again, just bringing in my spirituality, [those values have] a lot to do with spirituality. And I don't have to talk about God with them, you know? But it's just molding their little minds on how to be good people. How to have a good heart and just knowing that they can do whatever they set their minds to do. And that's a little cliché, but they're so little at this point. But that's, you know, [that's] my mission with kinder.

For Lily, the manifestation of her mission, which anchors teaching as a vocation, is the care, love, and relationship that allows her to set her students up for success. The things also help her to persist on days when teaching feels difficult: "it's so hard sometimes- but it's just looking at each child as a whole person; just a whole little human being. And trying to hone in on the little things that we can give them to help them."

To set each student up for success to the best of her ability, especially in a holistic way, requires Lily to know and have a relationship with each of her students so that she can understand her role in the process. She explained,

I have this one little boy, Nicolas. Oh my Nicolas, he's so smart. But- llora mucho. Es bien sensible. And so I feel like it's not, "Okay, I'm just here to teach you [...]" No. It's the *whole* person. You know, y con [Nicolas], my mission this year is to help him become independent and self regulate. And so he's better this year already. So it's just a matter of that- just looking at the kids individually and helping them to my abilities, where I can, because there's only so much we can do, right? But just to do what I can to help them become the best who they can be, even now. [...] It starts here, it starts now. And not just them- talking to the parents [too], you know? And sometimes it's even giving mini parenting classes [...] so they can help them even from home.

Thus, transforming the lives of her students to empower them and ensure their success requires that Lily know her students deeply and personally.

Teaching in “Diverse” Schools. Since beginning her career, Lily has taught in schools she considers “diverse.” When defining what “diverse” means to her, Lily shared “diverse to me means a school that is multicultural for both students and staff. It has always meant working in a low-socioeconomic community for me.” Lily continued, “the reason why I decided to work in these types of communities is because of my own background, you know?” She continued, “I was low socioeconomic [status] [...] and just being Latina. So for me, it was important to come and work in something similar to what I grew up with.” For Lily, “diverse” schools are those where students and staff are multicultural, representing a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds and languages. However, Lily recognizes that schools that are “multicultural” often intersect with schools that serve students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

For Lily, those experiences in the intersectionality of being Latina, from a low-socioeconomic, single-income household, and an aspiring bilingual all motivated her to enter the profession. She explained

I am also considered an English Learner. As I began my path to becoming a teacher, I was able to realize how I was not “seen” by many of my teachers because I was a quiet student. My grades were not great, but they were not low so it was easy for me to go under the radar. I was able to understand that some teachers- whether it was, ¿cómo se puede decir?, intentional or not- I was a quiet student, I was a good student, so I was always in the background and they really didn't worry about me.

Lily shared that she thought to herself, “No, I need to come and do something different. I need to be better for whoever comes into my classroom.’ So for me, it was important to come to a school like that, with my similar background.” Lily explained that due to her experiences as being an English-learner and quiet student with “passable

grades,” she was relegated to the background and not “seen.” Lily was motivated to become the teacher she never had- one who would see all of her students, encouraging and uplifting them, holistically. Being the teacher who can help encourage her students and positively transform their lives, especially when those students are marginalized by society, is a big reason that she persists in the profession.

Evaluating whether or not Lily had had teachers who looked like her when she was navigating her K-12 education, she said, “actually, no, I didn’t. Because most of my teachers were, um,” she said, pausing, “well, [to be] politically correct, Anglos. Eran, you know, they were Anglo Saxons.” Reflecting on the teachers she had, Lily said “It was actually very rare [to have a Latino teacher]. I could maybe think of one or two for me growing up. Even though I came from a low socioeconomic community [in the Coachella Valley].” Despite not having teachers who looked like her, Lily explained “most of my teachers- no, they weren’t [Latino]. [...] They were good teachers. They never made me feel less than. But at the same time, there were few teachers que si miraban mi, my potential, and motivated it.” While she believes that her “Anglo” teachers were good teachers that never made her “feel less than” others, Lily believes that she had very few teachers who recognized her potential or motivated her to endeavor for more, encouraging her success. In short, most of her teachers were “good” teachers, yet neutral in their affect. Lily described that maybe if her teachers had looked like her, “they would have noticed,” that she was struggling, and they would have helped to inspire and motivate her. For these reasons, and for not being “seen” by her own teachers, Lily was motivated to teach in diverse schools so that she

could help uplift students like her in their educational journeys, and in a holistic way, making sure to “see” all parts of them.

Choosing to Work With “The Little Ones.” Lily has been teaching for nearly three decades, and she has been a kindergarten teacher nearly her entire career. When asked why she decided to work with elementary schoolers, she exhaled playfully, remarking “Ay. That's where they ended up putting me.” She paused dramatically, laughing as she began again, “No, it isn't. That is what they offered me, [...] but [...] I always liked the little ones. I never thought I would be in kindergarten, though.” As she stated this, she paused and smiled, “I always liked the younger ones. I don't have the ‘tough skin,’ I guess you could say, for middle school, high school. [...] And so for me, it's more here. This is where I kind of have that passion.”

In addition to not having the “tough skin” for working with older students, Lily has felt that she can better connect with younger students “porque son mas como- no, porque sean vulnerables, pero- they're more open to learning and they're loving, caring.” Lily believes that younger students are more open: a little more vulnerable, more open to learning, and very loving and caring. She continued,

but I don't think I knew it back then. When I started, it was [more] like, “okay, that's the position that's open. I'll take it.” And I know that, “okay, this is it. That's where God needs me.” But I've grown to love it so much, you know? Porque pues ya [tantos] años nomas en kinder- that's all I've done. Except for the first year, I did the first grade, and then I think I did second for like three months, but then it was back to kinder. Because I was like “if there's another opening, please put me back!” So for me, my passion is kinder because I love how fast they learn. Por eso siempre me ha gustado. Porque pude ver tan rápido like how they're learning everything, and they're just so loving, and they're so forgiving. [...]. I just feel like I make more of a difference here than in any other grades.

Despite always wanting to work with younger students, Lily developed a passion for teaching kindergarten. She loves how quickly and how much they learn in that year. She also loves that the students are loving, caring, and forgiving toward her and each other; these three characteristics are critical for building solid relationships and community, which the idea of vocation entails. It is Lily's ability to make a difference holistically in the academic, social, and emotional lives of her students that help her carry out her mission within her vocation.

In addition to feeling like she can connect with younger students more deeply and effectively than older students, Lily mentioned the overall importance of relationships in her mission and vocation, citing that it is “ the parents too. I think it's- como, conjunto- it's everything. Not just the kids.” Beyond just connecting with the students, Lily's ability to connect with parents and build community has been something that she has deeply appreciated over the years. The relationship with parents and the ability to build greater community has only deepened since Lily has been a Spanish-English dual language immersion teacher. She explained, stating that with “dual immersion. It's different. [...] [Parents are] more respectful. Como que hay más- and maybe it's just because of the program, because they have to commit- pero si son más abiertos y son más, ¿como se dice? They're loving, too.” Lily laughed heartily at her realization, continuing, “I think that's what I love. They let me into their lives. So we do have our parent conferences, and sometimes the parents open up. And it's just nice when we do become like a family.” Becoming like a family is part of what makes teaching a vocation- “it's not just my job.

It's more like, 'No, we're a family.' And I'm gonna do what I can in the time that I'm here with [students] and with [parents] if they need something. So that's what I like.”

Lily has been a dedicated teacher to younger students, primarily kindergartners, throughout the majority of her career. For her, teaching is a vocation- a job that specifically requires her talents and gifts; a job that she was made for. Within her vocation is her mission, which is to uplift her students holistically to help them be successful. She has a holistic approach to their success, which requires that she “sees” and understands her students to help them grow. She wants to be the teacher for her students that she never had.

Pursuing a mission like Lily’s requires that she have a deep relationship with her students. She feels that kindergarten is a special grade to teach because she is able to develop a deep relationship with each of her students, and her students are reciprocally loving, caring, and open to learning and to relationships. Lily has also found that her student’s parents act similarly, respecting her expertise as a teacher and being open to relationships, allowing them to become like family. When put together, these values, rooted in community and reciprocity, is a quintessential part of what separates teaching from a vocation. They are also the values that help Lily to persist and be sustained within the teaching profession.

Part 3: Navigating the Teaching Profession

After spending the first few years of her career in the Coachella Valley and beginning to find her footing as a teacher, Lily got married and relocated. She and her husband were hired to teach at the same school in the Inland Empire Unified School

District. Although she spent a few years working at this school, she would move to Canyon Elementary School, where she has spent the majority of her career.

Navigating Matters of Race and Ethnicity in Diverse Schools. As a person of Color electing to teach in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, Lily believes that matters of race and ethnicity are important to consider as she navigates the profession. Yet, Lily believes that she has not had to “navigate race” since throughout her career she has

worked at schools where 80-90% of the teachers and staff are Latino. I have not had to navigate experiences dealing with race. If anything, I would say my anglo co-workers have been the ones who have expressed feelings of navigating the Latino community. Nevertheless, my experiences have always been positive and fruitful. Co-workers have become friends and family.

Lily does not believe that she has had to “navigate experiences dealing with race” because she has always taught in schools where the primary demographic was Latino. Thus, she has always been a part of the racial/ethnic majority and has felt the salience of her community with her co-workers, who have become like family to her. She described how, “if anything,” the underrepresented racial/ethnic groups- in this case her ‘Anglo’ counterparts and colleagues- have expressed feeling like they have to navigate experiences of race in schools. Lily clarified that this means her Anglo colleagues have had to work to learn and understand the community that they teach in.

About navigating race in the profession, Lily continued, “because of the schools I’ve worked at and the way the community is in regards to me and my work area, I don’t feel it has been an issue, a big issue.” She continued, “Like I know in other places, other schools, I’ve heard of teachers saying that they feel that tension, even just racially. [...]

But here, I think we all get along!” Lily shared how even her colleagues of racial or ethnic backgrounds other than Latino fit into the school, stating “because I’m thinking like, Mrs. Elizabeth, you know? She’s African American and she’s one of our best, keeping us all together.” Lily smiled,

She’s like the glue to our family here, you know? [...] But she’s always getting all the luncheons together and just making sure [...] that we do feel a part of the school. It’s not just again, ‘work, work, work, work,’ but [also] having that fun and that bonding time. So, I’m always excited to come to work. Empezando con ella. I love her. And so I feel that everybody is very respectful towards each other, and just being that family that we are, I haven’t had to really navigate feeling like a negative force because I’m Latina. Or, you know, me towards anybody else. I think it’s usually more personalities rather than, you know, race. So I feel very blessed.”

Pausing to reflect, Lily recounted, “even in [my first school] out here, same thing. It’s never been an issue. So I don’t feel I’ve ever had to. I thought ‘I haven’t had an issue.’”

For Lily, then, being in “diverse” schools has been a “blessing” to her; she does not feel that she has had to “navigate” race because she and her colleagues get along. She does not believe she has had to navigate any interpersonal racial conflict.

Lily’s experiences working in diverse schools have been described as very positive. Furthermore, she believes that the culture of the school and community she teaches in are more conducive to her being an effective teacher. She explained how parents have “a respect towards the teacher. Even though I’ve seen less and less of that [respect], just in general, I feel that it’s more, ‘okay, you’re the teacher and we go with what you say.’” Lily’s experience working in these schools is that their communities, namely the parents, still trust and value teacher expertise, something that Lily believes is dwindling within the teaching profession. She compared her experiences to those of

teachers in schools on the other side of the city, in higher-income neighborhoods and schools, stating

that's where I've heard a lot of things like- our dual immersion Kinder team, we're spread out- [...] they have more of that push back [...] on [the wealthier side of town]. So that's interesting, too. But here, I've never- well once in a while, cosas que pasan a lo normal. But in regards to like that pushback because of race- it's never been that way. So it's been good. I feel blessed.

On the topic of navigating race in the profession, Lily shared “last side note! I know this year was the very first year [...] that I've been called the most ‘rudest, meanest teacher ever.’ And I thought ‘why?!’ Like, ‘wait!’” Laughing, she said, “it was one of my students. [...] They're African American. [...] And the little girl, I was helping her- again, seeing the whole picture, the whole student [...]. [And] she was a little bossy, and she would push kids. So I'm like, ‘No.’” Instead, “I called her attention [to it], and I don't think she liked that. So that was the first time, and [then] they took her out of the school. La sacaron. I was like, ‘Okay, bueno Diosito tu sabes porque.’” Lily said to herself, “okay God, only you know why” the parents decided to withdraw their student. Pausing to chuckle, she continued “I was gonna keep working with her [...]. And you know, she wasn't a behavior problem, [...] but that was the only thing I think I've ever really [had], after twenty years.” Lily feels that she has never had to navigate race because the only incident she has encountered is one where an “African American” student thought that Lily was unkind and did not like being confronted about her behavior in class, resulting in the student electing to go to a different school. For Lily, navigating matters of race amounts to racial conflict, tense interactions, or otherwise negative incidents on the basis of race or ethnicity. Thus, she understands matters of

race and racism to be interpersonal rather than structural or ideological.

Navigating the Higher Ups. Although Lily feels that she has not had to navigate matters of race working in diverse schools, she has navigated many things in her career, including different types of leadership and demanding policies. Although these things can significantly impact a teacher's experience in the profession, Lily has leaned into her faith, community, and expertise to persist in her vocation while carrying out her mission.

Navigating Administrators. Talking about her experiences with administrators, Lily shared that she has had good administrators throughout her career, which has helped with her persistence in the profession. She recounted her experiences with administrators, laughing as she stated "I've had some pretty good administrators, except for the last three years... So I'll just say that: the administrators [...] they were all very, very, very open. They had to do what they had to do, but they were *very* transparent." Those administrators were cooperative and "worked with us instead of just like, 'Okay, this is what I need you to do.' It was more of a team." Lily has had "one administrator that made some really awful decisions," resulting in her and her husband moving to Canyon Elementary School, where for "the last twenty years, administrators have been wonderful."

Although Lily has had primarily good administrators throughout her time at Canyon Elementary, she credits the teachers for her persistence, stating "but more so the teachers. I do feel like they're not just my coworkers, but I feel like they're more like my family." She continued, "It's just more of a family-oriented environment. And it goes to show these last three years with our administrators that we had- awful, awful, awful."

Pausing to explain the former administrator, Lily shared “He was just very hands off. [...]

Very, ‘I’m the boss.’” She explained,

it wasn't him being involved and actually wanting to be a part of the community or a part of us. That's what made it hard. He really didn't know what was going on. He didn't know what we were about. He didn't *want* to know who we were. It was just “okay, let me come in, and this is what we're doing. Let me change everything, and I don't care.” So that made it difficult.

To make matters worse, that particular principal “came and divided,” the community, “taking some of the people that have done so much and taking them away [...] and trying to put the people he wanted [in place] because they were going along with him. So it was just more of a division.”

Lily shared the collective reaction, explaining “but it was the teachers, the staff, that [said], ‘you know what? It doesn't matter. Let's keep going. It's the kids that we're here for. We're not here for admin. Admin comes and goes. We'll try to keep the focus.’” Because the school culture is so tight and so familial, the school community knew how to overcome the difficult administrator by working together, as they have done in the past. Lily explained this concept, stating “so I think it's more the teachers that have helped keep me here, especially [at] Canyon Elementary.”

Lily shared the example of how she and her school community resisted the disruptions of poor administrators by banding together and “keeping the focus” on how to best serve their students. Even so, when her school community has a good administrator, Lily is grateful, as it helps her carry out her personal mission:

this year, I'm glad with our administrators that we have. I'm back at that point again where I just feel they trust us. They trust us enough. And again, I know [the principal] is very data driven, but as long as we do what we have to do and I feel good, I feel like, “okay, we can do this.” And it's nice to feel trusted. So that's a

big thing. No matter what the district says, as long as our admin has our back- they trust us, too- we trust them. And that's what helps me stay. Because a lot of teachers I know have left for whatever reasons. So I've stayed, [...] beginning with, "I know God needs me here." I think at times I have felt like, "what am I doing here?" because of so many things. But at the end of the day I take it to prayer, and I'm like, "okay, God. Otro día más, vámonos." I know that He also surrounds me with people that give me that sense of, like, "okay, we can do this."

It is not that a "good," or supportive, administrator will determine whether Lily remains in her vocation. Instead, a good administrator will support their teachers, trust their expertise, and get involved, contributing to- rather than diminishing- the culture of family and teamwork.

A good administrator will contribute to the community in a valuable way, adding to the family and working with teachers in a more collaborative manner to help them be effective in their missions. Canyon's current principal embodies these qualities. He is involved in the community, engaging with parents during "Coffee with the Principal," and serving the kids [lunch] because they got perfect attendance. [...] So he's out there serving the kids," which to Lily is perceived as, "wonderful. I love it." Furthermore, he makes an effort with the teachers; "the first couple weeks he would come in on Fridays, and I thought he was in to say something to me." Instead, he'd say "Oh, no, just came. Thank you for a great week. High five!' Okay! You know? I didn't know what to do with that at first," Lily recounted, laughing. "But even just that. Something as simple as that: 'thank you for a great week. High five. Have a great week,'" demonstrates that the current principal cares, and that he is interested in serving his community. So although "he's still very data driven, [...] he's involved and he listens and he's there for us, and he's trying to do his best not just for the students, but for us as teachers, his staff. That makes

it so much better,” Lily said, laughing. “Yeah, and that just makes [...] our job less stressful, you know? Because even though we know ‘we have to do this,’ and, ‘okay, he’s telling us that’ [...] we know that he does care.” Lily concluded with “I feel more comfortable knowing that they are present, that if anything happens, I can call them [...]. But it’s just nice to have administrators that you can count on.”

Navigating the District: “I Do What I Need to Do.” Describing her experiences with navigating the district over the years, Lily shared how she has leaned into her own knowledge and experience, or expertise, as a teacher because she has not found the district to be very proactive in setting her up for success. She described how “I noticed it more since I started with DLI, and [...] this is my [ninth year] [...] but we still haven’t had [...] a speech therapist in Spanish. Knowing that it is for DLI [...], they start programs but they don’t plan for them.” Lily feels that the district is quick to create new programs, initiatives, or policies, like “‘Let’s do it!’ But they don’t have anything in place. So I feel like a lot of the time they’re more reactive than proactive.” The district does not say, “‘Okay, if we’re gonna do this then let’s plan it out. Let’s make sure we have everything in place. Let’s look at other districts.’ [...] So for certain things, they don’t listen,” Lily said, pausing, “sometimes. So I think it’s an overall [...] thing that I feel they need to improve. ‘Cause that frustrates us as teachers, you know? And then they’re asking us to do *all* of this, yet they don’t have all the resources in place.” Lily continued, stating that when the district does not listen to their input as teachers, it’s “very frustrating [...]. But that’s why at the end of the day, [...] I close my door and I do what I have to do with my kids. I’ll give them what they want, but I know what I have

to do.” Especially because “once we [normally] get any news [from the district] it’s like ‘oh okay. Well they’ve already decided on something.’ [So] it’s like, ‘whatever. Just an extra thing. Let me delete it,’ she said, laughing. “It’s like ‘well when it comes to me, it comes to me. If I have to do it, I’ll do it. Ahorita no lo quiero leer,’”- “right now, I don’t want to read it,” she says. As her stories describe, Lily understands that the district does not partner *with* teachers, but instead often tells them what to do, which can be overwhelming. Instead of tirelessly adhering to all the requirements of the district, then, Lily centers her agency to determine when and how she needs to attend to matters in order to keep the profession sustainable for herself.

Lily shared that the district does not check in with teachers so that they might understand how to better support them- “no. I feel [...] it goes back to being reactive instead of proactive. Instead of *you* thinking about what *you* think that we need, come and ask! Be *proactive*. Let yourself be seen! You know, look at what we’re going through.” Lily continued, that “once they get up there, it’s just like, oh! They’re nice and comfortable up there. And they forget [what it is like to be a teacher].” Pausing, she said “Yeah, a lot of the time they forget. So I’m thinking ‘just come and ask!’ Send a survey, you know? Let *us* tell *you* what we need.” Lily knows that teachers have a lot on their plates, but believes they would be happy to participate in district efforts to center teacher voices

if [district personnel] come in like the principal, [...] the way his demeanor is. Just the way he genuinely cares [...]. It doesn’t even have to be like an individual, but if they were to come in and do like a group questioning. Or if they were to have people sign up, maybe. I think a lot of people would. I think a lot of teachers would.

When asked if there is anything the district could do to improve the profession, Lily paused for many moments, clicking her tongue and replying “trying to think.” When she was ready, she responded “I think it continues going back to the 'being proactive, not reactive' [...] because it's not so much the profession that needs to change, but it's the people in the district that need to be more proactive, again,” she said, pausing, before continuing,

just, *them* having that human interaction with us. [...] *Once* they do- once they remember what it's like to be in the classroom, I think a lot of these programs and tests and elements that they're like, “okay, you have to, you have to, you have to, you have to!”- it would not so much go out the window, but I think it's not going to be about the test.

As things stand, Lily believes the district is responsible for many of the difficulties associated with the teaching profession. “They're not giving us that...” she said pausing, before correcting herself, “no, I don't want to say freedom. That's not what I'm saying. But you know, they're not letting us teach!,” she said loudly, laughing while slapping her hand against the table. Lily’s passion continued to build as she stated,

because all we're doing is testing, testing, testing and teaching to the test! They want us to do all this, but we don't have time. [...] If they remember “Okay, let's bring this element back,” where we're actually teaching and remembering that [students] are human beings, then *of course* we have to teach. Let us teach!

Reiterating that teachers are the experts who know how to help students be successful, she said “let us do what we have to do, and not worry so much about all these tests! So I think *that* needs to change.”

In spite of what Lily believes needs to change, she conceded about her administrator, “ I love him. So far everything's been so good, but I know it's data driven [...] because they have to give results [The district] is all about results, you know? So it's

not about the children. It's all about the numbers.” She continued her evaluation of the higher-ups, stating,

You know? I honestly feel that anywhere I go- and again that’s the spirituality part coming to me- no matter where I would go, no matter if I go back to the Coachella Valley, if I go anywhere [...], it's always going to have its difficulties: their good things or bad things. People are always going to be looking out for themselves. They're going to have their hidden agendas. But at the end of the day, I know God has me here in this classroom, or whatever classroom I'm in, for the kids. For the parents. And that's why I do what I need to do. So most of the time it's been the admin who tells us what to do, [or] the district tells us what to do. But at the end of the day, I close my door and I know what I need to do and I give my kids what I feel they need. That's what keeps me going.

Acquiring that discernment came with experience, and Lily shared “that's where you kind of have to find that balance within the classroom [...]. Sometimes they'll tell us how to do things, but we do what we know is best for our kids. And we still give them the results. We'll still give them what they want, but...” in her own way. Lily explained, “sometimes [...] policies that come down, they don't know what goes on in the classroom. And that's where either [...] they're not even educators themselves, our policy makers, or when they come down through the district, the district forgets what it is to be in the classroom.” She explained, “So they're like, ‘Okay, you gotta do this, that, da, da, da, da, da,’” she said, pretending to list off items. “I think at the beginning [...] maybe because I was a newbie, it was like, ‘well, okay, this is *just* what I have to do.’” Lily smiled and stated “But once I started understanding it, it was, ‘alright, this is what they asked me [to do], but this is what I know.’” Thus, since the higher-ups are seemingly not concerned with the best interest of their students or teachers, Lily knows to take matters into her own hands, once again centering her agency to resist neoliberal practices and policies that might harm teachers and students. Instead, she closes her door and trusts that she has

acquired the expertise- through relationships, knowledge, and experience- to provide her students with what she “feel[s] they need.”

Navigating Federal Policies and Events. In addition to navigating district higher-ups, Lily has had to navigate federal policies and events that have affected the teaching profession, including No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, both high-stakes, performance-heavy, and pressure-inducing policies. Describing her experiences navigating those federal policies, Lily shared

I think by that time I was already tenured, so [...] I didn't feel the stress of losing my job. I think it was [...] more so for others and our new teachers. But again, at that point, it was the same advice I would give them: just do what you have to do, and you're going to show them results, but you know what you need to do for your kids.

Laughing, she admitted “but I don't remember. I just remember [thinking], ‘okay, what might happen if I'm not performing?’ But I know with my tenure, I don't remember feeling that stress or, like, the fear of losing my job.”

Lily's tenure and her teaching expertise gave her the confidence to avoid being stressed about her ability to teach her students well, which those policies mandated; in turn, she did not feel threatened about losing her job. However, she also stated that the lack of concern ultimately came back to her faith, explaining,

yes. *Everything*, [...] everything has to. Because I thought, ‘You know what? And if I did lose my job?’ [But] I knew God would provide and I would find something else to do. [...] And honestly, yeah, [...] it all comes down to that at the end of the day. God knows where He needs me, and He knows where He's going to keep me. [Beyond her faith] my husband being a teacher and his position within the district- even *that*. Him having that confidence as well, I just knew we'd always be okay, in whatever sense. So that helped. But [he] even [said] ‘nothing's going to happen. That's fine. Things happen. This changes. That changes. People come and go.’ [That made me feel] like, ‘alright, we're good,’

she said as she pretended to relax and exhale. Giggling, she said “that's why I've never been one to pay too much attention to policies, because [...] once my door is closed, I know what I have to do with my students.” By leaning into her expertise, Lily knows that “I'll give [...] the results, [...] but I still have to see [students] as a whole person, not just numbers or results or grades. So I have to know that [the policy] is there, but I can't stress myself over that.”

Ultimately, Lily has navigated performance policies, whether they came from the district or higher-up, in a way that centers her faith and expertise, leading to her wellness and the wellness of her students. Lily will conform to the needs of the district when necessary, and will

provide [her students] with the test, [or] provide them with whatever it is that they [require], that I *have* to do. But I'm not going to overwhelm my students [...]. I'm going to teach what I have to teach. I'm going to do what I have to do, and give them what they want, but that's kind of the attitude I've always had.

For Lily, this means centering her expertise to gauge the needs of her students, and teaching them in that way. In doing so, Lily's belief is that students will learn, and that they will satisfy whatever policy mandates as a consequence of deep and holistic student learning. Lily concluded, lightheartedly, “so, policies come and go, things change, you know? At this point, [...] I'm going to do it the way I need to do it. So yeah, that's how I've navigated the policies.”

Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic. Beyond navigating policies, Lily had to navigate a year and a half of distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first year of distance learning amounted to one semester of school being online- the second semester of the 2020-2021 school year. Because the shift to online learning was

unprecedented, Lily shared that “everybody went ‘okay. How? What are we doing?’ Nobody knew.” As a kindergarten teacher, “I really wasn’t [comfortable] technology wise. And so I know even just all of us, a lot of the kinder, it was more where we would just send the work home and do videos, and it wasn’t like we were online.” Reflecting on that first year, Lily shared

that first year of the pandemic, [...] I felt a little defeated because I never saw my kids. [...] We might meet once to kind of touch base with the parents, but it was a lot of: “go on Google Classroom. Here’s your homework, Here’s this. Look at this video.” [...] I just felt like I did such a disservice to my kids. Even though *now* I’m like, “well, all of us. We didn’t know.”

She exhaled, “nobody knew what we were doing.”

In the second year, Lily described how the kindergarten team pulled together to be more effective teachers in the changing landscape- “that second year, we were like, ‘all right, we need to get on top of this!’” A kindergarten colleague who was a little more comfortable with technology stepped up to lead the kindergarten team, which Lily was very grateful for: “And luckily we had one of our teachers- Mrs. Nancy- oh my gosh, she’s amazing, and she’s just on top of things.” Lily recalled “And so we started creating digital lesson plans. And so I think if it wasn’t for my team, [...] that support, ay. No sé qué hubiera hecho. I would have gone crazy, I think, because I’m not very techy.”

Following Mrs. Nancy’s leadership, “who just said ‘you know what? Let’s do it this way. We gotta do this,’” Lily began developing the confidence to say “all right. I’m here. I’ll learn. Let’s do it.” The kindergarten team “all came together and we utilized each other’s strengths.” “We all said, ‘okay, well, I can do this, I can do that. You do this, you do that.’ Y, pues, juntas. [...] That was the Kinder team. Through cooperation, collaboration,

and reciprocity in the kinder team, Lily felt “encouraged [...] to start saying, ‘okay, I can do this. I can try to do certain things on Google Slides and making PowerPoints, and making things animated,’” she explained, laughing. “It helped me in the sense of I’m not too afraid now, in regards to technology and using technology, which is a good thing.”

Lily continued,

So that was neat to me- for me to find some strengths in that, and by encouragement from my team. [...] But I think the parents were happy! And we would get a lot of, you know, “gracias maestra. It’s engaging and it’s not boring.” We had one parent, [...] he said “sometimes you wouldn’t see me, but I would even be dancing with the kids or getting engaged myself!”

In addition to partnering with one another, Lily described how they knew that to be effective teachers to their students they would need help from the students’ parents:

“So that second year we thought, ‘you know what? Okay. We *need* to teach the parents, being kindergarten.’ [...] Because *they’re* the ones that are gonna be logging them on, [and] doing whatever. So, we thought ‘ni modo,’”- “what can you do?” So for the first few weeks “we said ‘[...] this is going to be parent workshops.’ So it was online and showing them ‘this is where you’re gonna do [this], this is how you get online. This is [how] you mute, how you unmute,’ so the basics.” She continued, “‘How to use Google Classroom, how to turn in assignments,’ and so it was just that.” Lily believes that it paid off to pivot and invite the parents’ help, stating that as teachers they got “*a lot* of positive feedback. Yeah. And [...] parents talk. Because they would say ‘ay, Maestra. Porque la otra maestra de tal que está en esta escuela no les ayuda.’ [...] and so that was kind of neat. We were like,” excitedly,

“Yes!” I thought that was great. So that was like, “all right then.” It was a success for our kids. We did [the] best that we could because we were thinking of the

kids' and then, again, as a team. So again, the team is what helped me navigate it all. And so, yeah, so that's how I navigated [COVID], just the support. The support. Because I wouldn't- I didn't know where to start.

Navigating Community. Not only did the kindergarten team lean into each other for academic support, but their closeness translated into emotional support and community while in quarantine. “We were always texting each other or calling each other. Or we would do [...] Google Meet! So we'd always be talking to each other, [...] we never stopped.” With regard to fighting isolation with her school community, Lily mentioned “with regard to my co-workers, I know one of them had a pretty hard time. So it was always ‘okay. How are you doing? Did you go for your walk today?’” Lily paused, sharing that she sent her struggling colleague a Rosary before jumping back in, “and then ‘okay, pray your Rosary. Or at least have it with you- that kind of helps,’ you know? And so we would always-” Lily paused, realizing that I am familiar with the staff- “oh! Well, Ms. Mana,” she said, laughing, “yeah, she's my ‘one person.’ So it was nice. Even that: just [...] checking up on each other,” and having “that support that just doesn't let you fall.”

As Lily talked about the support she experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, she segued into how close the kindergarten team has been throughout her time at Canyon Elementary School. She explained, “I think everybody knows the Kinder Team. Everybody knows us as that: we're always close knit, so it's nice. I love it.” Expressing her gratitude for her team, and how it is rare to have such a close team, Lily said, “Even a lot more rare now that we have [dual language immersion]. The English-only and the DLI teachers, they're just very separate [on other campuses]. Y pa nosotras,

no. For us, it's like, 'It doesn't matter. Let's work together.'" Even though "we each have our own curriculums, let's theme teach. [...] I translate [for DLI], or whatever we do, but we try to always work together." Lily continued, "we've always stuck together. So even though I have my one person, which is you know, Ms. Mana, it's just always [been] the [whole] kinder team." "I know if I had to go to them, I know they would listen. So it's just nice, you know, to have people. But yeah, for me right now, [...] my constant person would be Ms. Mana." Explaining the evolution of her friendship with Ms. Mana, Lily stated, laughing joyfully, "I think at first it was more [a professional relationship], but it became more of like- now we call each other sisters. [...] So I see her as my sister." By having her "one person," and a whole team, who became family to her, Lily has been able to acquire the support that she needs to navigate the profession and effectively carry out her mission. Speaking about her gratitude for her academic family, Lily shared her thoughts about the absence of community in this vocation, stating "I think a lot of teachers that maybe have gone through that are the ones that say, 'see you. I'm done.' They go somewhere else. Find something else."

Navigating Societal Issues in Teaching. Discussing the COVID-19 pandemic, the topic of crimes against communities of Color came up- including crimes against the Asian-American community and the murder of George Floyd. Our *pláticas* took place around the 2024 presidential election, when rhetoric concerning mass deportations was rampant, and Donald Trump was elected into his second term. Responding to whether what is happening in society influences what, or the way, that Lily teaches, she paused soberly and exhaled, stating, "with the little ones- I mean, I just teach them and try to

keep it happy [...] cause they don't understand. So I think it's more with the parents, you know? And just having that communication with parents.” Lily continued, saying “Just yesterday, actually, we were talking to one of our administrators and she mentioned- [...] even naturalized citizens might be deported or taken. I'm like ‘what!?’ That's the first time I had heard of it.” Hearing that, “I did kind of like, ‘oh my gosh!’ Like, the panic wants to set in. But again, going back to my faith, that's where I say ‘well, Lord. You know what's gonna happen,’” she said, pausing, “I mean, talking about the election, I wasn't for either one of them.”

Continuing to explain, Lily shared,

so, I think it's just me again having that faith. That's how I navigate *that* part. And just trying to keep the positivity for my kiddos, for my parents- their parents. [...] I haven't seen any of my parents look worried or talk to me about anything. But, I'm preparing myself. Because in the sense of once he does come into office [...]. That's when we're like, “okay, we're gonna see what's going to happen.” So, again, I can worry myself, [but] I might be worrying myself over something that may not happen [...]. But I'm prepared for whatever might happen. But um, so yeah, so that's just something I think is more of a personal [thing] rather than with my students, my little ones. So that's where I just have to prepare and just be ready for whatever might happen.

When asked about what preparation might entail, Lily shared that she would have to first position herself spiritually, asking “‘okay Lord, [...] where or what am I gonna need to do?’ I haven't had to to that point or extent. So that's going to be another learning process for me to see, ‘okay, how do I advocate on this spectrum?’” Trying to be optimistic, Lily remarked about the recent election, stating “we endured him for four years [...].

Hopefully within [these] four years, nothing crazy happens to where we can still fight for our rights, or do whatever we got to do, and advocate for people. For ourselves. Pero, ay.”

Concluding the topic, Lily responded to whether she believed that was a difficult question to answer, to which she responded,

you know what? No. I think it was more of, um, a needed question to think about because of the situation that we are in. And I think sometimes I try not to think about things that way, because of my faith, but at the same time it's the reality. And so we- I *have* to, you know? I have to look at reality. And so it's a good question.

While Lily's faith guides and anchors her, she knows that at times she has to preemptively and physically engage with the ongoing of the world in order to advocate for her communities. Although Lily does not feel that she can teach her students about social justice issues because they are so young, she is prepared to have difficult conversations with their parents as she prepares to support and advocate for their families.

Navigating What it Means to Be An Advocate. Defining what it means to be an advocate, Lily shared

keeping true to myself, to my values, and doing the same for others and not letting people confuse them, and [take] advantage of them because of their own agendas, or their own views. [...] I guess I think of it just starting with my own family. I have to advocate for my [children] so that they won't fall into that confusion, or let other people come in and just sweep them away from what is true.

Lily anchors her advocacy in her faith, making sure to love and support people, but in a way that is authentic to her and consistent with her values. When asked if her general definition of advocacy changes with her students, Lily shared, “no, it doesn't. It's the same, you know?” Pausing for a few seconds, Lily hesitated before continuing in an honest manner, “and I guess I'm gonna say it [...] but in regards to even just literature or bringing in curriculum that has to do with, like, same sex parents or family, or the way it

is with families-” Lily began again, “First of all, I feel like it's not my position- I don't have a right to teach that way. I think that's more families- they're the ones that should [teach] whatever it is that they want to teach their kids.” Pausing to reflect, Lily stated “I know my faith does come into it, but um, [that's] just an example. For me, being an advocate for my kinders, where policy might say ‘you gotta bring this into the classroom,’ I can't go against my own values.”

Lily understands that her faith may come into conflict with certain topics or policies in schools, but she considers how she must remain authentic to herself and her beliefs as she navigates the profession. She believes that some topics are not meant to be taught in schools, and that they are better left for the domestic sphere, where families can choose what to teach their children. In the same vein, Lily shared “yeah, it's a hard one too because I'm thinking, you know, sometimes I may have a student with two moms or two dads, but still- it's going to be like more of a general [teaching] thing.” She stated that for her part, “I'm not going to bring in [religion], you know? And so both sides- I have to kind of be careful with that, too. But I think it's just advocating that way.” Thus, in her teaching Lily believes she has to be “careful” with certain topics, making sure to teach more generally, more neutrally, both for the sake of what she is teaching her children, and for the sake of protecting herself within the profession. While she teaches and advocates in a manner consistent with her spiritual values, she also knows not to explicitly bring certain topics, such as religion, into the classroom.

Navigating Sustainability in the Vocation. In navigating her vocation, staying well has been paramount for Lily to carry out her mission. Since teaching is Lily's

vocation, and something that she loves, she never felt that leaving the profession was an option. Instead, she found ways to make it more sustainable for her, ensuring her wellness in the process.

Humility. Lily described the values of her faith that help her to keep her vocation sustainable. Pausing to really think before sharing, she exhaled and began, “mmm. I think because I just heard it on the Dia de Guadalupe-” she said laughing, “we just heard this about Juan Diego and la virgencita- but, just, humility. And I think that’s humility in the sense of how I treat others: how I treat my students, my families, my parents.” Pausing again, she shared, “always knowing that I don’t know it all and there’s so much more that I *can* learn. And that I *need* to learn! [...] I think that would be the umbrella: that humility, you know?” That humility extends into Lily’s relationships with her school family as well, as Lily explained, “with my colleagues, as well. Same thing: [...] the humility and just not assuming things about people, because that gets me into trouble!” Finishing a hearty chuckle, Lily shared, “and just trying to be kind. Just again, love- love like Jesus loves: everybody and anybody who comes in that door, or whoever I meet on campus.” Having humility enables Lily to check herself- to ensure that she is not making assumptions- so that she can continue to be a vehicle for change in her vocation through love and kindness.

Having the humility to evaluate things allows Lily to be loving and kind to herself and her campus community, and it helps to challenge becoming burned out or jaded in the profession by fostering deep relationships within her community. Lily recalled an experience with a former colleague from her first school in IEUSD, stating that he was

“very grumpy all the time with everybody, and just questioning everything [in] staff meetings, [...] pushing back all the time. But now I understand why, knowing [...] about the district and everything they ask for... So he just had it,” like, ““I just don't care anymore.”” But with Lily and her husband, “he was always *so* kind. [...] I feel that because we showed him, we always saw him with love, [...] he might have been the grumpiest teacher on campus, but not with us. [...] He was always so kind. It was reciprocal.”

Having that humility allows Lily to evaluate herself and to present the best version of herself that she can, which is essential for pursuing her mission of serving and empowering children. However, knowing that some days are difficult and that sometimes children can test one's patience, Lily explained “so, again, that's where God comes in.” Pretending to grit her teeth, she continued, “even though I may not *sometimes* feel [loving], I have to remind myself that I have my own flaws,” she said, laughing playfully,

and somebody might be looking at *me* like that. So I'm like “okay, Lord!” See? And that goes back to [...] the well-being. For me, just having that time in silence... I try to do it on a daily basis, but just checking in with God every day. That's like me checking in with myself on how *I'm* fulfilling my purpose everyday. It helps me when I come here with [students].

Checking in with herself to see how she is fulfilling her purpose is important because “I think at the beginning, when I did start- as a newbie,” Lily said, laughing, “I think when any new teacher starts, it's more of like, ‘okay, I'm here to change the world,’ type of attitude. And little by little, I started understanding [that] it's like, ‘oh, wait. I can't. I can't do it all.’” That paradigm shift can feel very defeating for many novice teachers, but instead it caused Lily to evaluate what she *could* do for students, and how to

do it sustainably to ensure that she is carrying out her mission of empowering each one to the best of her ability. This requires humility and intentionality, as well as reflection:

So from then to now, it's more of finding that balance. [...] I have to find balance in my life between my profession, my life, my spirituality, and just everything. So it's just one day at a time, one student at a time, looking at every student individually, and then do[ing] what I can- whatever's in my power. And then whatever's not, that's where I have to learn to let go, and that's when I have to ask for help or ask for suggestions, or doing it as a team. [...] It's heartbreaking when you can only do so much, but if there's not that support from home, then there's really nothing more I can do. [...] It's heartbreaking sometimes. And I just had to learn to [say] "okay, you did what you could." And you just have to move on and continue focusing on the students you do have.

Lily puts forward the best version of herself that she can, and she presents a genuine effort to help every one of her students. When she needs help, she seeks it out from her network and community. However, in order for her vocation to remain sustainable, Lily has also had to be realistic about the limitations of what she *can* do. This has meant, at times, accepting when she is unable to help a student in a more impactful way. She has learned that after giving everything that she can, she has to prioritize her own wellness in order to remain well and effective for the remainder of her students and her mission.

Practices for Remaining Well. Corresponding with the spiritual values Lily considers to be grounding for her in her vocation are the practices that help her to remain well. Sharing her practices with regard to wellness over the years, Lily explained

first and foremost, again, God. [...] I have to have like my prayer time, just to sit in silence and reflect on His word and [...] that's what keeps me kind of grounded. So no matter what's going on around me- or even inside me- you know, it's just always going there. That's what keeps me going. That's what keeps me sane. Knowing that no matter what happens here on Earth, that's not what dictates what's going to happen or how I should feel. So [...] mindfulness just keeps me focused on what matters. [...] It's what keeps me going because, oh my goodness. Many times I think I could have just- again, without judging anybody- but I think it could have been to a point where depression or anxiety.

For Lily, her prayer time is an opportunity to check in with herself to reflect on how she is doing and feeling. Having that opportunity to check in helps to keep her grounded, and it has helped her to navigate experiences that might have otherwise been overwhelming and difficult, leading to mental health struggles. Those difficult moments are exactly when Lily leans more into her faith, “the moments when I know I need Him more.” In addition to having those daily moments of prayer, Lily disclosed “I have a spiritual guide [...]. That starts off my wellness- where I can just talk. And through her questions- not so much her telling me anything, interpreting or analyzing- it's just more me [...] mak[ing] sense of my own life.” Thus, Lily is able to look internally, sometimes with the help of a person who guides her to make sense of her experiences. These meditative practices, grounded in her faith, allow for Lily to remain emotionally and spiritually well so that she can persist in her vocation in a healthy manner.

Beyond the mental, emotional, and spiritual practices that Lily employs, she is able to “find that balance” within her personal life, as well, prioritizing physical practices which help her to remain holistically well. Lily revealed, “I've been going to the gym for about a year now [...] just letting out the stress. That helps. That has helped a lot now.” Laughing, she continued “and just keeping myself a little stronger now that I'm getting older and my knees are crackling! So, that helps too.” Another practice that helps Lily stay physically and emotionally well is

family time [and] making that a priority. My [children]- I know they're older now. They're busy with school and work and girlfriends. [...] We have to say “okay, we have to be intentional about our family time.” And just even if it's sitting here for an hour talking, or doing whatever, that- just checking in on each other,” is important.

Finding Healing in Paradigm Shifts. Recapitulating the practices that help her to remain well in her vocation, Lily said “God first just to center myself spiritually. That takes me to taking care of myself through physical activity, gym, or whatever it is I need to do, and then family time. [All] that helps me take care of everything else.” Discussing the importance of these practices, the expression “you can’t take care of others until you take care of yourself” arose. Lily exclaimed, “It’s true! It really is. [...] And I know as Latinas we’re usually like, ‘yo me quedo sin comer para darle,’”- “I will not eat so that you can,” but a wise man once shared with Lily that “‘*you* must be okay first because then [you’ll] have the energy to take care of your child.’ [...] That’s what he would always say. I thought ‘Okay. I get it.’” Lily described how she had to learn how to prioritize her own well being to have the emotional and physical capacity to take care of her own children well. Although the man’s advice was directed to Lily’s role as a mother, it was representative of how Lily had to learn to prioritize her own well being in order to remain well for others, which directly translated to her role as a teacher and advocate of children.

Challenging the notion that Latinas are oftentimes told to be giving and sacrificial- always putting the needs of the other person before their own- required a paradigm shift. Lily described how “I think that even that, that well being, [...] it is part of letting go of certain things [culturally] that are not true. [...] It’s like, ‘no, you have to evolve.’” Nodding her head, Lily said “You have to evolve and it doesn’t mean you’re letting go of [...] our values, our family, everything else- but we have to see this side where you have to take care of yourself first.” Lily divulged how she had to move past

some of the cultural expectations that were harming her, rather than serving or helping her. This required her- with the help of a psychologist- to evaluate her spirituality and her cultural expectations about what it means to be a woman,

and little by little- again through those spiritual exercises that I had spoken to you about- I was able to realize a lot of things. That, “oh, no. That's not the way He works. That's not the way he wants us to live.” And so little by little as that started changing I started feeling better because [...] I went and I talked to [the psychologist] and she helped me *so much* [with] getting a lot of things [about] certain experiences, or just things about myself, the way I felt. It was very eye-opening. I was able to value myself. So, yeah. So as Latinas we do have to [challenge paradigms], and it's hard. [...] It was good. Very, very... [pauses] liberating, in the sense of there- it's a freedom. Yeah, and I'm going a little bit too much into it! [laughs] Yeah, but it's a freedom, [...] que nos lleva así a Dios más. And so, yeah. There's the wellness!

Lily described how on her road to wellness she had to reevaluate what she believed her faith and cultural expectations required of her. In seeking answers, she was able to move past some of the harmful gendered expectations of her culture while growing closer to God. In turn, she learned how to prioritize her own holistic well being so that she can continue to serve others. These wellness practices allow Lily to navigate difficult situations in her life, undoubtedly including those of the teaching profession, which can be overwhelming and stressful. By prioritizing her well being, Lily is better able to show up and carry out her mission of serving and empowering her students.

Part 4: Teaching Spanish-English Dual Language Immersion

Lily has been a Spanish-English Dual Language Immersion (DLI) teacher for nearly a decade. Being in this assignment has brought Lily so much joy, and has helped to make the teaching profession even more sustainable as she has found healing and empowerment for herself and her community.

“I Needed This Change.” Although Lily has known that teaching is her vocation, she has not been without struggle or doubt over the span of her career. Explaining how she became a DLI teacher, she shared, “my principal, before we started the program, me llamó un día y dijo, ‘Mrs. Lily, so I wanted to ask. We’re starting this program, DLI-’” Lily audibly gasped, repeating her genuine reaction to the phone call nearly a decade ago,

My eyes just lit up. I had heard of it and I was like, “Okay...” and he said “so and I know you have your BCLAD. Would you like to start it?” “Yes!” I didn’t even think about it twice. I was just so ecstatic. I was just like, “oh my goodness! I can’t believe it!” At that point I was kind of feeling a little burned out. It had already been, well, almost half of my career. [...] So by then that was like the moment that I thought “Thank you, Lord, because I *needed* this change.” I didn’t want to go anywhere else. I didn’t- I *don’t*- want to work at the district level [or] be an administrator- I don’t feel that’s my calling.

Lily was struggling with the tension of continuing teaching in the same way or moving away from her vocation, as she was “starting to feel like, ‘oh God, is there anything else? Am I going to be teaching for the rest of my life?’ So, as soon as the principal said that, I thought, ‘yes!’ And that just-” Lily gestured a relaxed pose, exhaling audibly in relief, “switched up everything for me. So at this point, yeah, DLI is keeping me *alive*!”

Lily feels that DLI came at the perfect time, as she was navigating feeling burned out in the profession. It was a welcome change, one that she was extremely excited about, since “when I started, there were no bilingual programs at that time. Nothing.” The extent to which she could take advantage of her BCLAD, was during “my ELD time, where I [would] clarify things.” Once she was able to begin the DLI program, she was able to utilize her BCLAD in a way that gave her mission additional purpose, stating “I felt so empowered that first year, and even now [...] seeing how it’s progressed [...]” Her sense of empowerment comes from both personal and interpersonal matters. She explained how

on the one hand, “even though it's just teaching the same thing, teaching in *my* language. [...] Just that empowerment of being Latina, and it just gave me more sense of pride of who I am.” Personally, she feels empowered about bringing her Latina identity into the school space, being able to unapologetically share a part of herself and her family’s culture and language with her students-

And being able to do that with my students, the parents, the community. Just seeing them, like- ¿cómo se puede decir? El gozo que ellos también muestran, knowing that their kids are going to be bilingual. [...] So it's like ‘yes! And they're gonna be able to help you when they get older!’ So *that*. That just keeps me going.

On the other hand, Lily feels empowered, and empowering to her community, because she is aware that her school predominantly serves Latino students and families. Furthermore, many of the students are classified as English-Learners, coming from Spanish-only speaking homes. Lily describes feeling pride and joy about being able to share in the pride and joy of her students’ families, noting that the students will be bilingual- an absolute asset not only to them as individuals, but also an asset that they can share with their families for their collective empowerment. Thus, being able to bring that culture and language into an otherwise English-dominant setting has been empowering for all. “It's been great, it's been awesome. [After nine years] I don't think that sense of empowerment has gone away. When we walk around we’re like-” she raised her chin, smiling proudly, “‘We’re DLI.’” Laughing, she remarked “I love it. I love it.”

DLI and Lily’s Mission. Being a DLI teacher has been empowering for Lily, inclusive because the DLI assignment is conducive to her mission of holistic teaching- setting a foundation of academic, social, and emotional skills for her “little ones.”

With regard to the academic portion of her mission, Lily feels that she is a more effective DLI teacher than an “English-Only” (EO) teacher. However, it took her a few years to feel effective, since at the beginning she felt like she “was a new teacher again. [...] I had strategies under my belt, [...] it was just teaching in Spanish. It's a little different. But after, maybe the second, third year, that's when I started like, ‘okay, I got the hang of this.’” After years of building experience, Lily is able to “feel more effective [...] because of the language structure.” She shared that teaching in Spanish is “easier than in English because [...] Spanish being syllabic, the kids catch on a little faster. So it's like ‘whatever you hear, or whatever you say, that's what you write. That's what you read.’” Lily feels more effective as a teacher, and her students’ academic abilities reflect the feeling-

my students at this point- I think when I was teaching just all EO, it took them a little longer to start reading or to start feeling more successful. At this point [in the year] I have [...] maybe ten kids, that are a lot more successful than at the same point when I was teaching my EO.

In addition to helping students be more successful academically, Lily considers DLI an opportunity to foster multicultural understanding among her students, helping them foster social and emotional growth in the process. For her Latino students, specifically, Lily knows the developmental tension that people experience when they are “made to feel ashamed of our heritage. Of who we are.” She explained, “I think I went through that, [...] the whole culture growing up here, como dicen ‘no me siento ni de aqui ne de allá,’ at times.” The phrase is common among first- or second-generation immigrants, normally expressed by Mexican-American communities, and indicates that they are not entirely accepted by either culture, instead existing on the periphery of both

Mexican and American cultures. So for her Latino students, Lily feels that DLI is an opportunity for them to resist that tension or shame, instead reframing it as a source of pride since they “can speak the language. They're learning it, and they're going to learn to read and write in both languages. I get goosebumps just to think about it! [...] Y cuando terminen, they'll have that seal [of biliteracy]. And it's just beautiful.” By instilling a pride in her students and teaching them that being bilingual is an asset, Lily hopes that her Latino students will have a cultural pluralism that gives them a strong sense of identity without shame or exclusion.

The nature of DLI at the kindergarten level is that students are being immersed in the Spanish language for the majority of their day. In tandem, the class has a Spanish curriculum in which there is a greater opportunity to present students with culturally responsive pedagogy, bringing in their backgrounds and experiences. In a school where “my kids have always been predominantly Latino, [...] it's easier for me to bring in the culture and for them to connect- reading the stories, bring[ing] in realia, whatever it is. They connect and we can connect that way.” However, because Lily’s mission is to nurture the whole student, ensuring that *all* her students are being “seen,” so she uses DLI as an opportunity to foster the social and emotional growth of her non-Latino students, as well:

[When] I've had my African American students, or my Anglo students, bringing *them* into the culture [as well], you know? For them to be more, what's the word? Empathetic. I kind of try to make it [so] they're learning about the culture, but it's also bringing in *their* cultures. So when I do, especially if I do have African-American students or Anglos, I try to bring in things that they can connect with, as well. So, I try to do that. I know when we have Black [students]- or even if I *don't*! If it is all Latino, for example, [...] I try to bring in stories. I try to bring [things] in for them to understand and make them more [...] multiculturally aware

of other people. Because yeah, once they leave here, they're going to be dealing with other cultures. Whether [it's] once they get older, go to work, whatever it is, go to school.

DLI is an opportunity for greater culturally responsive pedagogy, centering students' cultures and experiences. Since the majority of her students are Latino, and the language of instruction is Spanish, she is more easily able to connect the material to their lives, helping them feel seen. However, because it is important for Lily to ensure that all of her students feel seen and empowered, she tries to bring in materials that her students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds connect with. It is important for Lily that all her students feel individually seen, but also multiculturally aware and empathetic since they are being prepared to enter a diverse society that requires understanding and cooperation.

That her students be multiculturally aware in a diverse society is important to Lily, and DLI is an opportunity for her to more deeply foster that goal. She stated, "I would love it if we had more [diverse students]. [...] At the end of first grade, second grade, when they became a family [...] [and] all felt comfortable speaking Spanish or English, it was like, 'Oh no, éste es mi amigo,'" - "This is my friend." "They didn't see color. And I love that, you know? I love that." Lily believes that DLI is a greater opportunity for connection among her students, and wishes more students of varied backgrounds would enroll in the program. At Canyon, DLI students track together through the grades so long as they remain in the DLI program. As a consequence, students foster deep empathy and understanding, becoming like a family. Stating that one of the most beautiful things about fostering multicultural understanding among her students is the advocacy that they will have for emerging bilinguals, Lily shared,

Y quiero agregar, que lo más bonito es cuando si tenemos, you know, [diverse students], they're speaking the language now. It's just so beautiful because now when they get into the workforce or whatever, go to school, lo que sea- van a defender también. You know, they'll be advocates [...] because they're going to have that sense inside of them- because *they're* going through it- *they've* gone through the struggle of learning a second language. And so, eso es más bello todavía.

Lily believes that DLI is like an equalizer- students learn social and emotional skills like empathy and cultural understanding, connecting deeply with one another. With regard to language and culture acquisition, Lily cherishes that non-Latino students will act as advocates for aspiring bilinguals and people of other cultures, having understood the struggle and experience of learning a second language. In this way, Lily believes DLI is a mechanism for fostering solidarity among diverse students, overcoming racial and ethnic differences in the process.

DLI as an Opportunity for Learning and Healing. Beyond being a mechanism that revitalized Lily, and a greater tool for carrying out her mission, DLI has also been a tool for healing- both for herself, and for her community. For Lily, DLI has been

like a self-healing process for myself [...]. I think it just made me more aware of myself. And that's interesting because I was able to connect with my kiddos and my parents more, just me learning how the Spanish language works because I didn't- I spoke Spanish- but I didn't *learn* in Spanish.

By leaning into the learning process in Spanish, Lily was able to connect with her students and their families more deeply. Furthermore, that process enabled Lily to become more aware of herself as she more deeply engaged the language of her family, culture, and community. She reflected on how as she learned to teach in her language, “it was just *amazing*. I loved it! And so I feel like it has been healing. And just... becoming more aware of myself as a Latina. And understanding the beauty of our language.”

DLI has also been healing for the community that Lily serves. She described how she has a new student who just arrived from Central America, and how “it was just amazing to see his little face. At first he thought [class] was going to be in English, so when he sat in the classroom.” Then, the student noticed that Lily was “talking [in] Spanish and we started doing the calendario and counting [...] [and] he just [transformed]. And he’s smiling and he’s engaging and that was just amazing.” To witness students recognize “like ‘oh my gosh. This is what I speak. I can understand everybody,’ [...] and the kids just feel [shocked], ‘I can speak my language here! Me están enseñando en *mi idioma*.’” Lily described how empowering and healing it is for Spanish-speakers to enter the classroom setting, where their language is being utilized. Rather than feeling alienated or perceived as less than because their language is different from the English that dominates society, students are excited to understand and be able to engage, excitedly exclaiming “they’re teaching me in *my* language!”

Reflecting on her own experiences and how they relate to the transformational power of DLI, Lily shared,

before las pláticas, I didn't really think a lot about [navigating race]. But again, por lo mismo de, the color of my skin- I'm lighter- and just the friends that I had- I never went through a lot of it. [...] it was more seeing my parents, you know? O mi papa. The way he was treated by his employers sometimes, porque era self-employed gardener. I still remember, and I was little, pero fuimos con el- and my sisters had to translate- y no le pagaron. [...] And my dad was so frustrated porque no podía darse entender, with his limited English. So I think, like all of this, it brings all that back...

Briefly choking up, Lily shared, “Oh my God. I’m getting emotional. But it’s just like, da gusto de poder estar en esta posición ahora, and to see that- Yeah.” Gathering herself, she continued “Quienes somos, lo que hablamos- nuestra cultura es tan bella, tan

hermosa- y our kiddos are gonna be able to- se van a poder defender. Y que no tengan esa vergüenza de ser quienes son.”

Lily shared an experience from her childhood in which her father, with his “limited English,” had to rely on his daughters to translate for him after he had completed a job for a client. The client took advantage of her father’s inability to verbally stand up for himself and decided not to pay him, resulting in strong emotion and frustration. Sharing that story, Lily reflected on the healing and transformational power of DLI, expressing her gratitude for being in a position where she can make change. She believes that DLI is a vehicle for the Spanish-speaking communities that she serves to understand that who they are and what they speak- their cultures- are beautiful. She believes that in becoming bilingual and feeling empowered by the process, students are going to be able to defend themselves and their loved ones. Furthermore, they will not be embarrassed about who they are. Thus, Lily has found healing in teaching DLI, and she is proud to be able to share its transformational power with the communities that she serves.

“Now Look at Us.” Teaching is Lily’s vocation, and it is something that she is grateful for. Reflecting upon her gratitude and loving what she does, she stated,

it's interesting, but I think se me viene a la mente mi papá. And again, he was with the Braceros program [...] where they would be sprayed down before they came in every time, and just humiliating things that they had to go through every time they'd come over to work. And so I see from him, to now, to us, to me. It's just- I come to work and it's a safe environment. It's a good environment. I love my colleagues. I love working with my kids. Él pasó por todo eso, and he said, "nope, you guys are getting your education. You guys are gonna be more. Para eso me vine. Para eso venimos. No se van a conformar.

Smiling, Lily continued, “and so it's good. And I think it's just nice to [...] be able to say like ‘mira Apa. Thank you. Thank you because of what you went through. But now look at us,’ you know? So, ha! [I’m] getting the goosebumps!” she said, laughing.

Although the teaching profession is imperfect, Lily persists in her spiritually-aligned vocation. She believes strongly in her purpose and ability to help her students become successful, holistically. She is able to lean into school and nuclear families for support and for joy; she prioritizes her own wellbeing so that she can continue to uplift those she serves; she loves teaching, and has been revitalized in her position as a DLI teacher who found healing and transformation, extending it to the community that she serves. At the intersection of her faith and Latinidad, she is grateful for the teaching profession because she believes she is safe and able to do meaningful work while being immersed in an uplifting community, all things which are possible because of the sacrifices of her family. All of these components help her to navigate and persist in the profession which she loves, and the vocation that allows her to continue her mission of empowering her students through her spiritual calling. Concluding her thoughts and reflections about her persistence in the vocation, Lily stated “I see God there saying, ‘mira. Mira, todo lo que he hecho. And just keep going. Hay mucho adelante que hacer todavía,’”- “Look at everything that I’ve done. Keep going. There’s still so much to do.”

Chapter 5

Considerations for Generalizability

The vehicle for this work, life history research, is meant to center the lives and decision-making of its protagonists (Cole & Knowles, 2001), requiring an in-depth and intimate look into the lives. To get to deeply know my study's protagonists, and to honor their time, stories, and dignities with my own time and presence, the number of protagonists manifested in a "small n" (Cole & Knowles, 2001). In my identity as a researcher attempting to do work that honors and empowers communities of Color, the choice of undergoing life history research is an act of resistance to challenge dominant notions of rigor. I understand and assert that there are stories that need to be told, and voices that need to be centered in order to inform the work that researchers do. This is how we as researchers will ultimately better serve the communities that we work in and with.

As such, my "small n" allowed me to intimately understand my protagonists, and their persistence in a profession not created to serve communities of Color. My protagonists' lives, decision-making, and stories can inform the way that we think about doing research, and they can provide broader insights into community contexts as we consider how factors of the teaching profession, including navigating missions, community, administrators, policies, and societal events, can affect a teacher's ability to persist in, or leave, the profession. To reiterate, this is not because to "understand *one* is to understand *all*," but because understanding how an individual makes decisions has the

potential of moving us toward “understanding the complexities of lives in communities” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11).

Themes

The purpose of this life history research was to closely center the lives of two career teachers of Color, listening to their stories to understand how they have navigated- and ultimately persisted- in the teaching profession for decades. With regard to this study’s first research question, “How do career teachers of Color who teach in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color navigate the profession?,” Elizabeth and Lily’s stories demonstrate the strength and importance of their missions- their “why.” Their missions are at the core of their decision-making and persistence in the profession. Their missions are grounded in resistance as they work to empower the lives of the students they serve, specifically electing to dedicate their careers to serving students like themselves, working class and students of Color. While an important factor in how teachers of Color navigate the profession, their missions are not enough. In order to continue the work of transforming student lives, the protagonists demonstrate the importance of sustainability as they resist mechanisms that might otherwise lead to their attrition or pushout. In short, they work to empower themselves in the profession by finding ways to make it more sustainable for themselves so that they can continue to persist in the profession while pursuing their missions of making a difference in the lives of their students and communities.

With regard to the study’s second research question, “ How did their race consciousness and approach to resistance inform how they persisted in the profession?,”

Elizabeth and Lily's stories demonstrate how their understanding of racialization and racism shapes their missions and the matters of oppression that they attend to. Their race consciousness is mostly visceral and interpersonal, resulting in them attending to resistance in the categories they recognize and can change- i.e. student relationships and teaching. Thus, Elizabeth and Lily resist deficit orientations of racialized and marginalized students in their schools, care deeply about them, believe in their abilities, and teach them well. Their success in attending to the harm and oppression that they recognize as a result of their race consciousness in turn allows them to feel like their missions are being accomplished, which motivates them to persist.

Finally, this study is grounded in resistance theories, and builds off of Solórzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) resistance theory framework of transformational resistance toward social justice. By recognizing that this framework is an opportunity to understand oppositional behaviors, rather than to label people as "transformation" or not, this work aligns itself with the notion of resistance theories to reframe and honor the survivance of communities of Color in societal institutions created to reinforce hegemony (Hannegan-Martinez et al., 2024). This study recognizes and endeavors to honor its participants, hereafter protagonists, who are devoted to their missions of serving and empowering their students and resisting the people, policies, and structures that hinder their ability to do so.

Their experiences with racialization informs and motivates their mission, which drives their persistence, but their behaviors often lacked critique beyond interpersonal matters of oppression and the structural. However, in tandem with the epistemological work of honoring the dignity and personhood of the protagonists, and drawing from

Hannegan-Martinez et al.'s (2024) work which dictates that we not shame, diminish, plot or label the oppositional behavior of the protagonists, this discussion does not serve as a criticism to that finding. Instead, this study seeks to complicate existing conversations about teacher of Color retention by centering the stories and decision making of two teachers of Color to understand how they have navigated the profession, resisting and persisting. This study also recognizes the implications for where to direct our attention in the continued fight for social justice as we endeavor to retain teachers of Color and develop a more critically conscious workforce. As such, the following themes attend to this study's research questions.

Theme 1: Race Consciousness and Its Consequences on Persistence and Resistance- A Response to the Visceral and Interpersonal

The first theme in this study is what I am calling a visceral race consciousness, which directly affects how Elizabeth and Lily navigate the profession. Both Elizabeth and Lily's race consciousness has largely been shaped and informed by their experiences navigating racialization and racism. Their visceral race consciousness largely exists at the interpersonal, rather than structural, level. At the interpersonal level, their race consciousness is visceral according to the experiences that they have encountered in navigating society and its institutions as people of Color.

Their visceral race consciousness has three main consequences for how Elizabeth and Lily have navigated the profession: firstly, as the stories of their respective upbringings suggest, they have both been harmed as a result of their racialized experiences in interpersonal and institutional ways, including in their personal and

academic journeys. As a consequence, both were motivated to work in “diverse” schools (Achinstein et al., 2010), and to be “better” for the children like themselves in these schools. Thus, they created missions rooted in resistance- resistance to empower marginalized students and resistance to pushout- to help them be better for their students. Secondly, their visceral and interpersonal experiences navigating racialization and racism informs *how* they resist in educational spaces, notifying them of where to direct their efforts and advocacy for their students and themselves. Thirdly, by attending to, and resisting, the harm that they recognize in their institutions, they feel that they are being effective and successful in empowering their students; this helps them to persist in the profession.

Their visceral race consciousness, though it manifests largely at the interpersonal level, allows them to be transformationally resistant in educational spaces as they advocate for their students. They feel the enduring legacies of racism and how it affects their students' well being and opportunities, even though they may not always connect it back to structural racism. For example, Elizabeth described that although she has a baseline of equality in her teaching, she will push her Black students to work harder and want to be smarter (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Redding, 2019), since she “know[s] what it's like to have teachers who don't think you can do anything, or to have teachers who don't think you're going to amount to anything.” This behavior is related to her perception of larger systemic and institutional racism, and the notion that it is a problem that exists in “the Black community because usually we have to prove ourselves to people. And it's not right, but [...] we always seem to have to go a step above

everybody else just to get recognition for things that other people aren't even doing.” She recognizes that because of enduring legacies of anti-Blackness, the Black community has to work harder in order to be perceived as “let's say, ‘average’ versus people who aren't even doing that [and] are above us, [...] as far as above average in the eyes of the person in charge.” Because in this context Elizabeth is able to recognize the interpersonal matters of racialization and racism as they relate to the structural, she is able to respond and adjust her approach to relating to her students as she carries out her mission of empowering them. Her stated mission dictates that because she cares about her Black students and knows how society treats them, she does not want anyone to undermine them. As such, she is giving her Black students, and all of her students, the relational and academic foundations to ensure that they can be successful in whatever it is that they pursue.

Lily, for her part, recognizes the intersection of personal and systemic race consciousness as it manifests often in her advocacy and position as a dual-language immersion (DLI) teacher, which has helped her mission be more critical. DLI is an opportunity for healing and transformational resistance in the lives of her students, as Lily explained when sharing that DLI teaches them that “quienes somos, lo que hablamos- [que] nuestra cultura es tan bella, tan hermosa, and our kiddos are gonna be able to- se van a poder defender. Y que no tengan esa vergüenza de ser quienes son.” In her position as a DLI teacher, Lily has been better able to empower her students, and especially her majority population of Latinx students. They challenge existing structures through the affirming of their identities, and by challenging the shame and

embarrassment that exists as a consequence of White-centric, English-dominant policies throughout society and its institutions.

For her Latinx students, there is community empowerment and advocacy as a result of the asset of being bilingual (Yosso, 2005); Lily believes students will be able to stand up for themselves and their communities as they challenge and transform harmful societal perceptions. Furthermore, DLI is transformational because it aligns itself more with social justice-oriented teaching, as non-Latinx students are also being given the opportunity to become multilingual- an asset that will offer them more opportunities within society- and because they are being taught within a setting where Lily is able to bring in more culturally responsive teaching. In doing so, her students are becoming more multiculturally aware and “empathetic,” learning to understand one another for the future. Thus, Lily’s position as a DLI teacher challenges social oppression and strives for social justice as she challenges deficit notions of emergent-bilinguals, challenging the White-centric, English-dominant structures that oppress multilingual speakers and people of Color. Furthermore, she is teaching for democracy within her classroom (Labaree, 2018). Despite her race consciousness, she is able to be transformational in many ways in her position.

Race Conscious, Not Critically Conscious. Elizabeth and Lily are both able to be resistant and transformational as they carry out their missions, attending to the visceral and interpersonal matters that they recognize. Because they attend to that which they can recognize and can respond to, they feel effective about the change and empowerment that they sought to make in the lives of their students, encouraging their persistence. Yet, at

the same time, their racial consciousness is different from a critical consciousness (Jackson & Knight-Manuel, 2018). While their race consciousness allows them to have a critique of social oppression as they aim for social justice, resisting in educational spaces in a way that promotes their missions and persistence, they have at times admitted to struggling to identify and act against- or in the case of Lily, reconcile- other forms of subordination within society. Furthermore, they tend to be responsive rather than proactive in these matters. For example, Elizabeth described the first “major turning point” in her educational career, where she experienced “prejudice” in her small church university because an advisor put her and two other Black freshman peers in an advanced course with upper-classmen, none of whom were Black. All three freshman Black students were “lost” on the subject, resulting in failing or near-failing grades. Although Elizabeth recognized that the three of them were experiencing “prejudice” by their advisor by being put into an upper-division course that they would not succeed in, the critique stopped there. Elizabeth would change her major due largely in part to that incident, but her retelling of the incident did not include discourse of enduring legacies of anti-Blackness, nor was there any mention of the inequities or injustices that lead to the pushout (Carter Andrews et al., 2019) of marginalized populations of students in higher education.

About her criticality, Elizabeth elucidated that she oftentimes struggles to understand why something more subtle or implicit- as the enduring legacies of structural or institutional racism and inequity can be- might be considered racist or harmful. She shared that she would have considered herself a critically conscious educator at one point

until she began to interact with younger generations and “how woke *they* are. And then I was like, oh, ‘I don't know nothing about all of that.’ You know, they just see things. You know, ‘Oh, this is racist,’ or ‘this happened,’ and I'm like ‘oh, is that what that was?’ You know, I don't see it.” Thus, while Elizabeth generally considers herself to be a race conscious teacher whose mission aspires for social justice, she oftentimes struggles to understand social oppression and injustice as it relates to more macro levels, like structures. Her race consciousness allows her to recognize and respond to overt, interpersonal forms of oppression via her mission, but she admits that her understanding of a more critical consciousness is partially eclipsed by her upbringing on the Islands, where everybody was either Black or shared the culture of being “Island.”

Lily's criticality is also based largely on interpersonal understanding relating to the experiences of her and her family, and her spirituality. Her stories demonstrate that she recognizes the issues at the various intersections of race and ethnicity, language ability, immigration status, social class, and gender. For example, she recognizes that she is a “White-passing” Latina, acknowledging that she has not had to personally endure too much negative treatment, or otherwise “navigate race,” on the premise of her appearance. Her own lack of “navigating” harmful racial experiences is juxtaposed with the stories of her father, a first-generation Mexican immigrant and a Bracero, and how he had to endure humiliating experiences where his humanity was reduced. Lily explained how he was sprayed down at work in the fields, and how later on, when he was an entrepreneur, someone took advantage of him and his “limited English,” electing not to pay him for the work that he had done. These experiences were deeply emotional and interpersonal, and

they made clear for her the subordination of certain people in society on the basis of race or ethnicity, class, and language. Yet, missing in the discussion of these experiences was the greater structural context about how the Braceros program was exploitative and contributed to the enduring legacies of racism in the United States, or how the power structures in American society that favor White supremacy and English dominance made the behavior of the person who took advantage of her father and his “limited English” permissible.

Furthermore, while Lily has a partial understanding of various forms of oppression and injustice, and though she attends to them in various, resistant- and often interpersonal- ways, there is a tension that emerges in her teaching because of her spirituality. Recall how Lily described what it means to be an advocate, and how she aligned her definition of advocacy with remaining true to herself and her own values, which are governed by her spirituality. She used the example of sexual orientation as an example that she does not feel she has “the right” to speak about in her teaching. It is a topic which pushes a boundary in her spirituality, and a topic that she believes should remain in the domestic sphere rather than in schools. Thus, Lily attends to what she can change in her pursuit of her mission, often focusing on the interpersonal matters that do not conflict with her spirituality. While Lily recognizes that her spirituality creates tension with certain types of transformation in the classroom, she believes that she cannot “go against [her] own values.” In a reciprocal fashion, Lily does not teach her students about religion, which is a pillar of her being. Beyond teaching on topics that pertain to racial and cultural diversity, Lily feels that she must teach in a mostly neutral way to

remain authentic to herself, her values, and her mission, and because she has to protect herself and her livelihood by avoiding topics which might be considered contentious in schools. By teaching in a way that is authentic to herself, she is able to pursue her mission in a sustainable manner that promotes her persistence.

As these examples demonstrate, as Elizabeth and Lily have navigated the profession they have attended to the matters of oppression and injustice that they can recognize and control- mostly those which manifest in visceral and overt or interpersonal, rather than structural, ways. By attending to the oppression and injustices that they *do* recognize and *can* change or control, mostly those pertaining to student relationships, identity, and care, they demonstrate resistance in certain behaviors as they work toward social justice and empowerment. In turn, their persistence is promoted because they feel effective and satisfied with the change that they are making. Yet, their stories reveal that their race consciousness means they rarely attend to the issues which they struggle to recognize, feel that they cannot change or control, or think that they should avoid- the more structural. So while the presence of both protagonists in schools is important and valuable as they are able to be resistant at the intersection of various types of oppression and injustice, important issues are left unattended to. In short, one cannot attend to that which they do not see: because they struggle to recognize structural oppression and injustice, they do not teach for liberation.

Theme 2: Navigating the Profession- Their Mission(s) and The “Why”

Elizabeth and Lily’s race consciousness is the lens that shapes and informs their resistance toward social justice as they navigate the profession. In this way, much like the

students in Solórzano and Delgado Bernal's (2001) work, Elizabeth and Lily are motivated for social justice due to their personal and family backgrounds, as well as by observing the experiences of marginalized people throughout society. The injustices that they have witnessed and navigated motivated them to "make a difference." With regard to "making a difference," it manifests in two forms: 1) their explicit, stated mission of empowering students, and 2) their implicit mission to persist, manifesting in sustainability. This theme demonstrates how Elizabeth and Lily's missions are concerned with that which they recognize- interpersonal oppression and injustice- and attending to it. Their missions reveal that Elizabeth and Lily are not concerned with changing the profession; they are concerned with reducing harm in the lives of marginalized communities by empowering them in the ways that they recognize and know to do. In doing so, they feel like they are making a positive change in their communities and remain motivated to persist. Below, the missions of Elizabeth and Lily are explained.

With regard to their explicit, stated missions, both Elizabeth and Lily wanted to become teachers to empower students because of their own experiences with racialization and harm in navigating educational spaces en route to their teaching careers; their missions are rooted in resistance. As a consequence of the deficit ideologies that they endured in society and education, they wanted to ensure that they could prevent harm and "be better" for students. Thus, their experiences motivated them both to become teachers. Furthermore, they both did so with the intention to teach in "diverse" schools. For Elizabeth, this means a school where "students come from varied backgrounds, races, and socio-economic statuses and with a varied range of academic abilities." For Lily,

“diverse” means a “school that is multicultural for both students and staff,” and a school “in a low-socioeconomic community.”

Both teachers ventured into teaching to work in “diverse” schools and to serve those students because of their own treatment in educational institutions as “diverse” students. Elizabeth and Lily wanted to “be better” for their students- to positively transform the lives of their students and to help them succeed in whatever it is they “set their minds to” through learning, care, and relationship. Elizabeth experienced deficit ideologies and perceptions about her abilities on the basis of the statuses and labels attributed to her by society as a working class, Black child. She “wanted to teach in schools that were very diverse because as I think back to my earlier years, I remember being judged as to whether I was capable of completing work based on my race and socio-economic status. I wanted to teach to show my students that they were capable of anything that they put their minds to.” To resist the deficit notions and harm attributed to students on the basis of their race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or ability, Elizabeth pursues the mission that “every child can learn.” Her mission is based in equity and care, affirmation and demonstration toward *all* students. Her responsibility is to ensure students learn in order to achieve growth and success. Because Elizabeth knows that “diverse” schools predominantly serve marginalized students, that is where she wanted to dedicate her attention, energy, and efforts in order to empower them and allow them the opportunity to succeed in society. Her mission is rooted in internal transformational resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) because she had a social justice agenda of “giving back” to communities like the one she grew up in.

Elizabeth's mission has driven her for over three decades as she has navigated the profession. Her stories demonstrate how she has resisted and made decisions according to how well they allow her to be an effective teacher, measured by how well she feels that she is able to carry out her mission of teaching and empowering her students- her stated "why." Elizabeth's attitudes and perceptions about her experiences in schools reflect whether her mission as an educator has been promoted or hindered by the policies and structures in place (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Recall how when the policies and structures in place have hindered Elizabeth's mission, she has resisted, finding ways to overcome them to remain an effective teacher who continues to empower her students. Ultimately, her mission is a vehicle for resistance *and* for persistence in the profession. She loves "the challenge of being the one responsible for my students' learning," and "working with the students. I think I can make a difference. I like when I see them learning." Although Elizabeth acknowledges that the profession is far from perfect, she persists because she feels so strongly about her mission and her ability to make a change in the lives of her students.

In a similar fashion, Lily shared her experiences being relegated to the background in schools, rarely being holistically "seen" or encouraged by her teachers. Although Lily believes she had good teachers, they were neutral in their affect. She described how her mostly "Anglo" teachers "never made me feel less than. But at the same time, there were few teachers que si miravan mi, my potential, and motivated it." She believes that her teachers would have noticed her, encouraging and motivating her, if they had been teachers who "looked like" her (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Cherng

& Halpin, 2016). Teachers from a similar racial or ethnic background might have understood her better or been more caring toward her, helping her to develop and achieve greater things. Thus, Lily thought to herself, “‘No, I need to come and do something different. I need to be better for whoever comes into my classroom.’ So for me, it was important to come to a school like that, with my similar background.” Lily’s mission, then, is to ensure that she can “see” the “whole child,” helping her “little ones” establish a solid foundation in academic, social, and emotional skills. Like Elizabeth’s mission, Lily’s mission requires a strong academic foundation, authentic care and relationship with her students so that “they can do whatever they set their minds to” in society.

Lily does not want any of her students relegated to the background on the basis of personality or behavior, language ability, socioeconomic status, or race or ethnicity. Therefore, she works in “diverse” schools so that she can be a teacher for her students like herself, those more likely to fade into the background or be forgotten on the basis of how they are treated by society. She wants to challenge oppression by helping her students establish a solid foundation, empowering them to become the best version of themselves that they can be (Labaree, 2018). Furthermore, as a Spanish-English dual language immersion (DLI) teacher, Lily applies her mission in an assignment that is resistant to White-centric, English-dominant norms. Thus, Lily’s mission is rooted in resistance and transformation (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Importantly, Lily’s mission is tied to her strong spiritual identity. She believes that teaching is her “vocation,” her spiritually-aligned calling. To be successful in her mission means caring and transforming the lives of her students while carrying out her spiritual purpose. Thus,

time and again, Lily shared that what “keeps her going” in her vocation is her ability to carry out, and be effective in, her mission.

The Implicit Mission- Persistence. Working in tandem with Elizabeth and Lily’s explicit, stated missions is their implicit missions of persistence. They care deeply about mitigating the harm that they recognize is being done to communities of Color. As such, they have implied missions of remaining in the profession for as long as possible to positively impact the lives of as many students as possible. Thus, this implicit mission is rooted in resistance for social justice, but in an indirect way. Their resistance for persistence manifests in sustainability to ensure that they remain well and in the profession to be able to continue empowering their students and communities.

For Elizabeth, her mission for persistence is evidenced by her statement that teaching is “what I set my mind on and I was headed that way. And that’s all I’ve had in my mind. So, yeah, like people say, ‘Oh, after you retire, blah, blah, you can do that.’ I’m like, ‘I don’t have any interest in doing nothing else.’ If I retire, I’m going to sub. This is what I know. This is what I do. This is what I want to do.” For Lily, her mission of persistence is at the intersection of her teacher and spiritual identities. Since she feels that teaching is her vocation, this is where she feels she is called to be in order to empower as many students as possible. Her long term persistence is implied by a statement shared as she reflected on our pláticas. Lily shared what she believed God was telling her in response to how she has persisted in the profession, stating “look at everything that I’ve done. Keep going. There’s still so much to do.”

Recapitulation and Consequences of Their Missions. Elizabeth and Lily were motivated by their own experiences as students of Color to resist and transform education. They did so by becoming teachers, specifically electing to teach in “diverse” schools that predominantly serve marginalized students on the basis of their socioeconomic status, linguistic or academic abilities, and/or racial and ethnic backgrounds. Their own treatment as “diverse” students marginalized within educational spaces and their desires to “be better” for students like themselves would inform their missions, rooting them in resistance and the desire for transformation.

Their missions direct their decision-making in the profession; so long as they feel effective and authentic in carrying out their missions, they feel that they are doing well in the profession and remain motivated to persist. At the same time, their implicit mission dictates that they persist, because it is only by remaining in the profession that they can continue to make change in the lives of students. The missions of each of these teachers is their *raison d’etre* within the profession- their very strong “why.” That each of them has been successful in carrying out their defined missions of empowering students is notable and significant, particularly in schools that predominantly serve marginalized communities of students and families. However, having a strong mission- even if it is one of persistence- is not enough. Elizabeth and Lily have navigated the profession by making it sustainable for themselves.

Theme 3: Facilitating Their Missions- Sustainability and The “How”

The third theme to emerge from Elizabeth and Lily’s stories is the importance of sustainability, or the “how,” that facilitates their abilities to carry out their missions. The

impetus for sustainability in the lives of the protagonists is resistance to being pushed out of the profession. Thus, as they have pursued their missions- the “why” that drives them and directs them toward how to be effective teachers- they have both learned how to make the profession sustainable for themselves. Their sustainability includes things like constant self- and student advocacy for Elizabeth, challenging administrators, the district, and neoliberal policies to make sure that she could be, and continues to be, an effective teacher to her students. She is intentional and thorough, from creating more time for herself in the classroom to be successful as a teacher to her interactions with students, rooted in care (Valenzuela, 1999). It also means leveraging her teaching position at school, moving into a special assignment position that affords her more time to actively engage and cultivate a school family community, allowing her to bring her creativity and joy- her version of wellness, and an “energy booster”- into the process. Elizabeth’s sustainability manifests primarily in her ability to advocate for herself and others, manifesting in her resistance toward things that might challenge her mission(s).

Lily, on the other hand, feels that teaching is her vocation- her spiritual calling of a profession where she is best able to apply her God-given talents and gifts. Therefore, sustainability manifests differently and more saliently in Lily’s stories. For example, she knew from the beginning that she had to be patient with herself, so she took the first five years of teaching to “learn the ropes” of the profession, understanding that it would be difficult and take some time to find her footing. She elected to have a positive growth mindset that enabled her to remain patient with herself as she learned. Since then, she has surrounded herself with a genuine and reciprocal family community for support and

encouragement (López et al., 2019; Simon & Johnson, 2015) as she has persisted. This includes her physical family- her husband, who is also an educator- and her school family, consisting of mentors, her “one person,” her kindergarten team, and occasionally the school principals if they elect to align themselves with the culture of the family community.

Additionally, to ensure that the profession is sustainable for Lily, she has had to learn balance between her position as a teacher and other facets of her life, mainly her spiritual life- her priority- and her personal life. In her vocation, sustainability and balance have meant leaning into her expertise as a teacher to advocate for her students and protect them from neoliberal policies, for example. She has also been able to find renewed vigor and healing in her position as a Spanish-English dual language immersion (DLI) teacher. In her spiritual and personal lives, balance means checking in with herself- through prayer and meditation, a spiritual guide, etc.- to ensure that she is well and can continue to be intentional in her mission as an educator serving her students. All of these things help her to persist in the profession so that she can continue to carry out her mission(s).

Although Elizabeth and Lily have navigated sustainability differently, they each do so to ensure that they can remain well enough to continue to pursue their missions in an impactful way. In their decision making they have managed to resist and reject both burnout and pushout, allowing them to persist in the profession that they love where they feel that they are able to make positive change in the lives of their students and communities. If their missions are the proverbial “why,” with regard to navigating the

profession, then their sustainability as they have navigated the profession- is the conversation which needs to occur in tandem: the “how.”

Recapitulation: Defining Concepts and Connecting to Theory

It is useful to delineate the concepts and theoretical contributions that emerged from this dissertation before diving more deeply into them in the “Discussion” section. In this dissertation, a few concepts emerged that I define here with respect to teacher persistence and resistance in schools. First, the concept of a “visceral race consciousness” implies that teachers of Color may recognize and attend to issues of racism and injustice in a visceral way, defined by strong feelings and convictions that emerge as a result of their own experiences with racialization and its intersection with other forms of oppression and injustice, rather than by a clear understanding or articulation of the oppression or injustice.

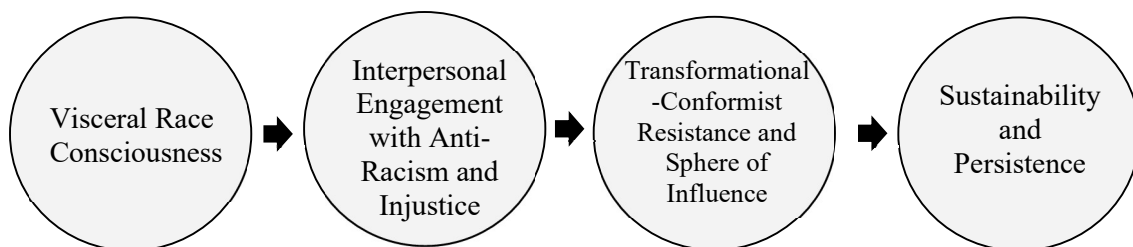
Second, the concept of “transformational-conformist resistance and the sphere of influence” indicates how teacher resistance in the profession materializes within the realm of what teachers feel they can control or positively influence- their “sphere of influence”- manifesting at the intersection of transformational resistance and conformist resistance. This concept demonstrates how teachers of Color may transform their own experiences or the experiences of their students and communities while simultaneously “buying into” or conforming to the rhetoric and expectations of the institutions that they navigate, thereby leaving the structures of oppression largely intact.

Third, the concept of “persistence” is a form of resistance defined by teachers of Color centering their agency and choosing to remain in the profession in spite of various

forms of difficulty or opposition. Persistence as resistance entails an important element of sustainability that is grounded in a desire for social justice based on a teacher's desire to continue the work of empowering marginalized students and their communities through teaching. With regard to making the profession more sustainable, the concept of "micro-institutional resistance" emerges. Micro-institutional resistance is an extension of resilient resistance (Yosso, 2000) that asserts that teachers help transform their sites into a space where even though the structures of oppression continue to exist *beyond* it, they are seemingly mitigated *within* it, helping them to persist.

These concepts are useful for understanding and informing the resistance of teachers of Color as they navigate the profession. Below, I apply these concepts in the context of the protagonists of this dissertation, Elizabeth and Lily. Figure 1, titled "Teacher Persistence as Transformational-Conformist Resistance" demonstrates the connection between the concepts that emerged and this dissertation's two research questions with regard to resistance and persistence.

Figure 1: Teacher Persistence as Transformational-Conformist Resistance



Elizabeth and Lily's race consciousness informs how they resist and persist in the profession. For both Elizabeth and Lily, their race consciousness manifests as "visceral race consciousness." Because their visceral race consciousness is largely informed by

personal experiences, their resistance to racism and other forms of injustice manifests most commonly at the interpersonal level. Consequently, as their stories revealed, both Elizabeth and Lily demonstrated transformational resistance with regard to things like student relationships and advocacy: they affirmed and uplifted their students, they viewed them through asset-orientations, they advocated for them in a variety of ways, etc. Yet, because their response to racism and injustice largely occurred in interpersonal ways, there was often an invisibility of structural injustice. Because they do not recognize structural injustices as clearly, their resistance related to pedagogy and curriculum manifests in structural conformity. For example, they teach the standardized curriculum and incorporate acritical versions of culturally responsive pedagogy in their practice. They are motivated by social justice to provide opportunities for marginalized students in education and understand the importance of teaching them well, but they lack a critique of greater social oppression and do not connect it back to their pedagogy.

At the same time, they have learned to make the profession sustainable for themselves in order to continue their work of empowering marginalized students. In this way, their sustainability manifests as an indirect form of resistance for social justice because they recognize the impact that they are making in the lives of their students and in their communities, and are motivated to continue in the profession. They resist things like pushout by leaning into their community, resulting in resistance in the form of micro-institutional transformation, and by leaning into their own agency and expertise to make the profession more sustainable for themselves. While the help of administrators or the district would be welcome, they do not rely or wait for the “higher ups” to support them.

Instead, they make agential decisions within their sphere of influence in order to persist in the profession where they are able to make a difference in the ways that they recognize in the fight for social justice.

Taken together, their visceral race consciousness guides various forms of resistance which in turn aid and motivate their persistence in the profession. Their decision-making demonstrates the ways that they have resisted and survived in the profession in order to carry out their social justice orientations of empowering and providing better opportunities for marginalized students in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color.

Elizabeth and Lily's stories and experiences have great value and can inform us as researchers, leaders, and policy makers about how teachers like them make decisions as they navigate the profession. The next section outlines what we can learn from teachers like Elizabeth and Lily by connecting their stories to extant literature. The final section outlines the implications of what was learned, contributing to how we might empower valuable teachers like Elizabeth and Lily as they persist in the profession.

Discussion

This discussion section considers the themes and concepts that emerged from Elizabeth and Lily's stories, and connects them to extant literature and theories. It begins by discussing the importance of a mission rooted in resistance for social justice for teachers of Color. However, recognizing that a mission rooted in resistance is not in and of itself enough for teachers of Color to persist, the discussion then focuses on the ways that teachers of Color make the profession sustainable for themselves to aid in their

missions. In understanding their sustainability, concepts such as micro-institutional transformation, autonomy and expertise, and leveraging teacher assignments are discussed. Finally, recognizing that Elizabeth and Lily's race consciousness is responsible for how they resist in and persist in the profession, this section ends with a discussion of areas of growth for teachers of Color. The final subsection of the discussion chapters calls attention to what appears to be a "Goldilocks Zone" of teacher persistence, recognizing that while we should help teachers of Color grow their race and critical consciousnesses for greater opportunities for transformational resistance, it must be done in an authentic and sustainable manner to promote the ongoing persistence of teachers of Color in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color.

The Importance of a Mission Rooted in "Being Better" for Marginalized Students

In their stories about navigating the profession in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, Elizabeth and Lily both demonstrated their missions have been responsible for their long-term persistence in the profession. Their missions, or their "why," for being in the profession are rooted in internal transformational resistance and the desire to "be better" teachers for their students than the teachers that they had, endeavoring to transform their students' educational experiences (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011).

This major theme in their persistence is consistent with extant literature describing how a teacher's "urban" or humanistic commitment can be an important factor in the retention of teachers of Color (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Olsen & Anderson, 2007; Whipp & Geronime, 2017). Elizabeth and

Lily's missions can be explained in conversation with extant literature as humanistic commitments, or "their commitments to serve students from nondominant racial and cultural communities by enhancing opportunities to achieve academic success" (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011, p. 86), and "urban commitments," or a commitment to teach in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color while being "sustained as urban educators by their faith that they could play a role in supporting their students in finding better futures," (Freedman & Appleman, 2009, p. 334).

These "commitments" have proven to be effective in retaining teachers in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, and slightly more effective at retaining teachers of Color than their White counterparts. This latter point is due largely in part because teachers of Color are more likely to return to their "initial schools," (Achinstein et al., 2010) or schools like their initial schools, likely indicating that they have been informed by their own experiences as students of Color to, like Elizabeth and Lily, "be better" for their own students- children like the children they once were. Therefore, the increased retention of teachers of Color in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, like Elizabeth and Lily, is likely due, as the protagonists' stories reveal, to their understanding and experiences of the oppression that can occur when people of Color are not "seen" or validated, or otherwise assumed to be inferior on the basis of their racialization. Their persistence is instead rooted in a mission of resistance for social justice as they work to make their students' lives better.

For example, recall how Elizabeth described her approach to teaching her Black students, challenging the perception of her White peers, stating that she does

not [...] sugarcoat things just for [Black students], because you do have that on the other end, too: teachers who are from a different culture who think that, “uh, they can't really do it.” So then they'll “dummy it down” [...] when that child is *very* smart and *can* do it. No. Or you have the same teacher who might say, “they can't do anything,” and so they don't even push them to do anything.

Elizabeth described the ongoing behavior of non-Black teachers who hold deficit ideologies about their Black students, and the power that they have to affect and transform, or hinder, student lives through learning. Her stories demonstrate how she challenges the problematic and racist belief that Black children cannot learn, at the same time calling out the cycle of teacher expectation and subsequent behavior: if a teacher believes their child can learn, they will put in more effort, explanation, and patience toward students, which in fact has consequences on their academic outcomes (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Chang, 2011). Elizabeth's asset-orientations and high expectations of her students (Gershenson et al., 2016) are transformational resistance as she holds a critique of social oppression and is motivated by social justice to empower her Black students.

Extant literature has demonstrated the power and impact of commitments on the retention of teachers, but Elizabeth and Lily's stories elucidate the importance and impact of a strong and meaningful mission, a “why,” rooted in their values, identities, and goals. Teachers of Color who recognize that their own oppression is a systemic and ongoing issue want to “be better” teachers for their students, those in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color, so that their students may transcend their oppression. Furthermore, their stories demonstrate the importance of feeling effective and therefore satisfied (Chang, 2009) in carrying out their missions. This balance has

important implications for a teacher's long-term persistence. In the case of Elizabeth and Lily, feeling like they are honoring their missions- their personalized version of humanistic and "urban" commitments- they have been motivated to persist. At the same time, Elizabeth and Lily demonstrate that a teacher's mission in and of itself is not enough for persisting in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color.

Sustainability and Navigating the "How"

In the case of each of the protagonists, there were themes of self-induced sustainability and wellness as they made decisions to help them remain well and balanced within the profession as they pursued their missions. By focusing on, and changing, that which they can control to make the profession more sustainable, they have been able to remain well within the profession to continue to do the work that they love: materializing their missions of empowering students through authentic care (Valenzuela, 1999), asset-based orientations of their students' identities, abilities, and expectations (Gershenson et al., 2016; Redding, 2019), and positive academic outcomes (Downer et al., 2016; Redding, 2019).

There were two main ways that Elizabeth and Lily made the profession more sustainable: 1) they transformed their school site themselves, or elected to teach in a seemingly-transformed school site, as a way of facilitating their missions and persistence; 2) they leaned into more independent practices and agency that help them to make the profession more sustainable for themselves. To reiterate, although Elizabeth and Lily's explicit missions and subsequent behaviors toward their students and communities are

nested in resistance for social justice, their behaviors for sustainability are not explicitly tied to matters of social justice. Instead, it is by remaining in the profession that Elizabeth and Lily can continue to do the work of empowering their students and communities, which *is* related to their mission of social justice.

Micro-Institutional Transformation for Community. In their stories about navigating the profession, each of the protagonists described having an awareness to change the things that they can control within the profession to make it more sustainable for them, and to make them more effective in their missions of serving and empowering marginalized communities. Their agency helps transform their school site, making it more conducive to the carrying out of their missions, which is being called “micro-institutional transformation.”

The notion of micro-institutional transformation is an extension of resilient resistance. Yosso (2000) outlines the notion of resilient resistance, a form of resistance in conversation with Solórzano and Delgado Bernal’s (2001) resistance theory framework. Resilient resistance exists at the intersection of conformist and transformational resistances, much like the majority of this study’s protagonists’ decisions do. Resilient resistance asserts that strategies students use “leave the structures of domination intact, yet help the students”- or in this case, the teachers- “survive and/or succeed,” (Yosso, 2000, p. 181). In her discussion of student behavior, Yosso (2000) found that “students’ anger pushes them to *conform to the system* and to *reform the system* by reforming themselves” (emphasis added, p. 180). In a similar vein, I contend that as part of their resistance in these spaces, the teachers are both affected by the structures in place and

simultaneously challenge them. They “buy into” the profession, but have many critiques and complaints about it, particularly when their ability to effectively carry out their missions of serving and empowering students is challenged. Thus, they lean into their own agency to transform their school site, or to teach in a seemingly transformed school site, to make the profession more sustainable for themselves through community. In the process, they transform their school into a space that is conducive to their sustainability and wellbeing, helping them to persist.

For example, Elizabeth has leveraged her teaching assignments over the years, most recently landing in a reading specialist position that is more conducive to community transformation. Since her time as a reading specialist is “different,” she has been able to become the in/formal head of the in/formal social committee, where she leads to create and foster a family community in her school and among her colleagues, mostly teachers of Color. She described the importance of cultivating a “work family” and making sure everyone “feel[s] like they belong,” recognizing that the feeling of belonging (Kokka, 2016; Simon & Johnson, 2015) is important for the wellness, sustainability, and persistence of herself and her colleagues. By transforming her school site in a way that makes her mission more sustainable and achievable, Elizabeth is not transforming greater educational structures or institutions (Yosso, 2000)- she is not fighting the proverbial war. However, by intentionally fighting for the sustainability and wellbeing of herself *and* her teaching community in pursuit of her mission- she is fighting, and winning, battles within it, aiding her persistence in the process.

While Elizabeth demonstrated how one teacher can help foster micro-institutional transformation in their school site, Lily has interacted with micro-institutional transformation from a different perspective. Lily is a Latina teacher who has elected to teach in schools where “80-90% of the teachers and staff are Latino.” As a consequence of teaching in “diverse” schools, Lily stated that she has not had to “navigate race,” stating that “my experiences have always been positive and fruitful. Co-workers have become friends and family.” This rhetoric, though it may appear race neutral, is worth closer inspection. Things like racial battle fatigue and pushout can happen for teachers of Color who experience racial stereotyping, who have their authority and expertise constantly challenged or undermined, or who are otherwise disrespected or diminished (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020) in the profession on the basis of their race and microaggressions like stereotypes. By electing to teach in schools that predominantly consist of teachers of Color, and especially Latino teachers, Lily feels safe, honored, and respected. She does not feel like she has to navigate a hostile racial climate or toxic work conditions (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Kohli, 2018), unlike her colleagues across the city in the “wealthy” elementary school. In the case of that elementary school, “wealthy” is a proxy for White, and her DLI colleagues experience more pushback and racial tension within that community. Lily’s experience working in schools that 1) consist predominantly of teachers and staff of Color, and 2) predominantly serve working class students of Color and their families has resulted in increased motivation for persistence as she feels safe, honored, respected, and effective. To reiterate, although the structures of domination are largely left intact (Yosso, 2000) beyond her school site, they are seemingly mitigated

within it, and her school site is a place that she considers to be conducive to her mission of empowering students and communities of Color, which is critical to her persistence in the school and profession.

Agential Practices for Sustainability. Literature has demonstrated that teachers heavily weigh whether or not they can be effective with their students in their decision to persist (Zee & Koomen, 2016), often more than other factors in professional culture (e.g. teaching assignments and administration) (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Knowing that a teacher's perception of their ability to be effective is important, it is also important to evaluate the mechanisms in place that help teachers to feel effective; in the case of the protagonists, they largely relied on themselves and their colleagues to make the profession more sustainable in pursuit of their missions. Although there were ample examples throughout Elizabeth and Lily's stories to demonstrate how they "take matters into their own hands" for sustainability, a few will be outlined below in order to connect their stories to extant literature and factors that commonly connect to teacher attrition or persistence.

Autonomy and Expertise. A teacher's autonomy is important for their satisfaction and persistence in the profession, but may be more so for "seasoned teachers" (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Kokka, 2016, p. 176). Seasoned teachers are more likely to feel that they have a grasp of how to teach and be effective with their students, recognizing and attending to their various needs; they have developed expertise. Elizabeth and Lily's stories demonstrate how their autonomy and expertise are mechanisms for sustainability in the profession.

Both Elizabeth and Lily had critiques of apathetic, neoliberal policies that hinder their abilities to be the teachers they want to be, but Elizabeth has been particularly instrumental in creating micro-institutional transformation by leaning into her own agency and resistance to harmful structures. For example, Elizabeth had a major critique of California schools being more concerned with “business over learning.” Her California school maxes out the number of students in a classroom, has a curriculum that there is not enough time to teach, puts a lot of pressure on both teachers and students to perform, and leaves no time for fostering relationships or care- critical components of being able to be an effective teacher as she pursues her mission. In other words, Elizabeth’s school, like most schools in the United States, aligns itself with racist neoliberal principles, policies, and rhetoric in education (Giroux, 2003) which are conducive to competition, withdrawing “value from the social good,” and effectively “transforming education into a product that can be bought and sold like anything else,” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p.254).

While Elizabeth experienced “business over learning” in her California school and not in her East Coast school, Elizabeth has recognized and responded to the harm of neoliberal agendas in her California school. Thus, Elizabeth has advocated for herself and her students along the way, leaning into her autonomy and expertise to create opportunities in her school site that are conducive to carrying out her mission of serving and empowering her students. For example, recall how she challenged her administrator, advocating for herself and her colleagues to be given the tools that would help them be successful in their roles as teachers, such as more planning time. She refused to keep feeling “like a hamster on a wheel” by teaching from “bell to bell” without planning time,

recognizing the added labor that fell on her and her colleagues. Instead, she demanded that the administrator listen to the concerns of her and her colleagues, and that they be given more time for planning, which is how teachers are “gonna do better” with their kids. The result was a more sustainable workload that enabled them to better prepare and support their students’ learning.

In a similar fashion, Lily described how she leans into her own autonomy and expertise to navigate the excessive “top-down” neoliberal policies that exist in teaching. Recall how Lily described how administrators or the district will tell teachers what to do, “but at the end of the day, I close my door and I know what I need to do and I give my kids what I feel they need.” Lily’s expertise has led her to be an effective teacher that can deliver the results that the district desires while prioritizing and honoring her students and their wellbeing, as well as her own time and sustainability. Lily described this balance, stating that the administrators or district will “tell us how to do things, but we do what we know is best for our kids. And we still give them the results.” She explained how she will provide the administrators “with whatever it is that they [require], that I *have* to do. But I’m not going to overwhelm my students [...]. I’m going to teach what I have to teach. I’m going to do what I have to do” to be an effective teacher. Lily admits that this discernment of policy demands came with time. When she was a self-proclaimed “newbie” she was more attuned to their demands and felt pressured to have to do certain things. As her expertise and understanding grew, however, she learned that ““alright, this is what they asked me [to do], but this is what I know.””

In each of these examples, Elizabeth and Lily also demonstrated their view of and relationship with their administrators. Because of their perceived autonomy and expertise, both Elizabeth and Lily perceive their administrators as someone who can help or hinder their mission (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003) rather than as a factor that determines their attrition or retention (Simon & Johnson, 2015). As such, administrators either become someone to partner with, or an obstacle to overcome, in their quest for sustainability in the profession.

Leveraging Their Teaching Positions (and Doing it With Joy). Elizabeth and Lily's stories demonstrate that in their desire for persistence, they have been able to leverage their teaching assignments to bring joy and healing into their work, making the profession feel more sustainable. Elizabeth shared how she has been able to incorporate her love of creativity and design into teaching. She described how throughout her career she has created projects, such life-size dinosaurs and paper maché solar systems, to help advance her mission of student learning. She would tell me, smiling, "I knew what it would do, you know? How the kids would learn more." Furthermore, since she has been outside of the classroom and in her reading specialist position, she has had "different" time than would be afforded in a regular classroom assignment. This time has given her more opportunity to become more involved in leading creative events across campus in her in/formal position as head of the in/formal social committee. Bringing her creativity into the school events is what Elizabeth considers an "energy booster," even though the projects can be time-consuming. Yet, these projects help her to incorporate joy and wellness into the profession, which makes it more sustainable. Describing her joy in her

creative projects, Elizabeth stated, “I get carried away sometimes- you know, you have to be bigger than the last time. But I'm not doing it for anybody else. It's just for myself.”

Similarly, Lily’s position as a dual-language immersion teacher has been a mechanism for sustainability in the profession, especially as it aligns with her identity as bilingual Latina. According to Lily, teaching DLI has been “like a self-healing process” (Kaveh & Estrella-Bridges, 2024). She has been able to learn more about herself and her culture, and been better able to connect with her students and their families, leading to deep and mutual feelings of belongingness (Kokka, 2016). In so doing, Lily has been able to reclaim the experiences of linguistic violence (Kaveh & Estrella-Bridges, 2024) that occurred throughout her life, helping her feel sustained while simultaneously motivating her to continue in her transformational role as a DLI teacher. She feels empowered as a Latina teaching students in her and, for many of them, their language. Feeling like she is able to make a difference in their lives and identities has been very sustaining for Lily.

“Race Conscious” Does Not Mean “Critically Conscious”

As demonstrated by this study’s protagonists, teachers of Color may have a partial conceptualization, and therefore application, of race consciousness as they pursue their missions. For the protagonists of this study, this partial application means that their race consciousness is limited to a *mostly* interpersonal matter of understanding racialization and racism, and a mostly interpersonal resistance in response as it relates to student relationships and teaching. They are critical and resistant to many of the people, events, and policies that challenge their abilities to attend to those categories in their missions of empowering marginalized communities. While this results in them being resistant and

transformational in interpersonal matters of social justice and oppression, they are largely unaware and inattentive to matters of structural or systemic injustice and oppression.

The finding of race consciousness as visceral manifesting as mostly interpersonal for my protagonists complicates the conversations about teachers of Color in the fight for social justice. On the one hand, the protagonists' understanding demonstrates insider knowledge of what it means to navigate society- and be racialized by society- as people of Color. As Kohli (2009) states, "Through personal encounters, teachers of Color are often already aware of the trauma that racism can cause students," (p. 236). Their experiences with navigating racialization and racism gave them the "insider" knowledge to pursue teaching in "diverse" schools and allowed them to become assets (Kohli, 2009) by recognizing how to resist the oppression of their students, those who are primarily working class students of Color. For example, recall the story of how Elizabeth worked with her Black student and did not correct him when he suggested the word "leff" as an example to the rule that they were practicing. Elizabeth honored the student's contribution, did not "correct" or shame them, and instead simply explained that the word has a "t" at the end. Not only would correcting the student have been detrimental to their learning, but it would have instilled deficit notions in the student about what is considered "correct" or "incorrect," (Lee, 2017) signaling to the student that their manner of speaking was not "right." Interactions with students like this highlight the reason that Elizabeth and Lily entered the teaching profession- to "see," authentically care, (Valenzuela, 1999) and honor their students in a way that they were not. They are transformational in their relationships with their students: Elizabeth and Lily are both

dedicated to ensuring the success of their students; they recognize the assets of their students; and they reaffirm their identities because they recognize the strength and transformational power of doing so in a society that constantly devalues or harms them.

On the other hand, their current race consciousness largely overlooks structural or institutional oppression which results in "missed opportunities" for developing a more sociopolitical consciousness (Jackson & Knight-Manuel, 2018) with their students. For example, though they are both effective teachers, their teaching is a mechanism of conformist resistance as they teach to empower their students. They teach well, enabling students to develop the tools and skills that they will utilize as they navigate society and its institutions. However, the curriculum that they tend to teach is the "standard curriculum," aligned with the teaching of the "culture of power" (Delpit, 2006)- teaching their students foundational academic skills to help them "succeed" within a White-centric, English-dominant hegemonic society. Because they both experienced deficit judgments about their abilities on the basis of their racial, ethnic, and/or linguistic abilities, they both endeavor to ensure that their students learn well. They both work tirelessly to ensure their students have the skills, abilities, and knowledge to succeed within society, and they are effective in doing so. Yet at the same time, their curriculum does not attend to more critical conversations with their students. For example, had Elizabeth been more aware of recognizing and tying her teaching to structural forms of oppression, and if appropriate, she might have invited the student into conversation about "right" and "wrong" language, and whose voices get to determine whether something is acceptable or not (Lee, 2017). Similarly, Lily's assignment as a DLI teacher naturally

lends itself to some amount of transformation and resisting notions of English dominance in schools, but she does not have critical dialogue (Freire, 1970) with her students.

Instead, Elizabeth and Lily's own understanding of oppression currently operates within the interpersonal and attends to the issues that they recognize via their own oppression. While they are able to be transformational in many ways, particularly with regard to student relationships, they are conformist in their teaching. Elizabeth currently thinks her curriculum is too "fixed" to discuss social issues, and Lily believes her "little ones" are too young to be having these conversations. This study recognizes the various assets of the protagonists as loving, caring, and effective teachers- however, this study also recognizes that when aiming for social justice, critical components must be present (Hannegan-Martinez et al., 2024; Kolluri, 2025).

We need to help teachers of Color continue to foster their critical consciousness. However, we must also evaluate a possible challenge that emerges from the literature and the stories of my protagonists: they attend to the injustice that they recognize, and that helps them to feel effective in their missions, motivating their persistence. Thus, fostering their critical consciousness must be done in an authentic and sustainable manner.

The "Goldilocks Zone" of Teacher Persistence. Although more research on this topic needs to be done, an important point of discussion is the emergent notion of the "Goldilocks Zone" within teacher persistence. The protagonists' resistance and decision making in the profession allows them to feel effective, successful, and satisfied in carrying out their missions, resulting in ongoing motivation and persistence (Kokka, 2016). They feel like they are making a difference in the lives of marginalized students.

Their acts of resistance allow them to have some control and impact over the interpersonal: they empower students by developing their abilities and knowledge, and by empowering their identities; they each leverage their own teaching positions for wellness and transformation; Elizabeth helps to foster a family culture in her school, which helps her feel anchored in her community and allows her to bring creativity and joy into the profession; finally, a strong school community allows Lily to feel at home, supported, and well in a difficult position, helping with her persistence. Thus, their decisions and behaviors manifest in a resistant, but sustainable, manner for them. Part of their decision-making and sustainability dictates that they not worry too much about what they cannot control, which often manifests as the more structural issues.

Perhaps it is this balance, feeling effective in making change where they can, but not concerning themselves too much with what they *believe* they cannot for sustainability's sake, that is important to their persistence. Research on teacher burnout does suggest that when stress is too high, or teachers are otherwise dissatisfied and unmotivated, they may leave the teaching profession (Chang, 2009; Ouellette et al., 2018). If the protagonists' race consciousness allows them to feel effective in transforming the lives of their students and their communities by successfully carrying out their missions, then they feel satisfied with the change that they are making which continues to motivate their persistence.

Perhaps Elizabeth and Lily's partial understanding of systemic oppression and injustice, signifying a lack of criticality, is what helps them to remain in the profession. A study on teacher agency and resistance found that some teachers elected to leave the

teaching profession because they did not want to be responsible for perpetuating the harm caused by unchanging educational structures onto students of Color (Carter, unpublished manuscript). In the case of those teachers, they recognized the racist structures that harm communities of Color in education but did not want to be complicit in their reproduction, electing instead to leave the profession. In the case of those educators, they had an awareness of structural oppression and injustice, but felt that they did not have the tools, skills, or ability to do anything to prevent the harm. They felt ineffective against the harm and resisted being complicit in it by electing to leave the profession. The opposite may also be true, where the persistence of social justice-oriented teachers is threatened in the profession because they have critical orientations in their pedagogy, but feel ineffective or conflicted because of neoliberal pressures to perform (Harvey-Torres et al., 2022); in the case of that article, the inconsistency between the teacher's praxis and the expectations of their schools or districts became too much to bear, and attrition was narrowly avoided by the teacher pursuing a "shift" in their teaching position (Olsen and Anderson, 2007).

Another study demonstrated that early career teachers with "urban commitments" who are more critical and "posed a threat to the status quo" (Freedman & Appleman, 2009, p. 333) were not welcomed back by their districts at the end of the academic school year. In the fight for social justice, many of the people and institutions who either consciously or unconsciously reinforce the status quo might perceive the criticality of a teacher as a threat. As such, they act as gatekeepers who prevent teachers from coming in and being change agents. Other research demonstrates how teachers with a commitment

to “urban education” have left their teaching assignments, but decided to pursue other positions, “shifting” into district positions or research positions- those which enable them to alter the more structural issues- to “better support urban teachers and students ‘at a macro level,’” (Olsen and Anderson, 2007, p. 17). For example, some teachers leave the profession to pursue PhD level work that enables them to “disrupt the normalized deficit discourses centered on students and families of Color,” but do so from a position outside of teaching since that kind of transformation is required from the “top-down” (Kirmaci, 2023, p. 2112). These studies demonstrate how more critical teachers may decide to leave teaching but enter a position where they feel better equipped for transforming education, remaining in the fight peripherally from a position where they can dismantle harmful structures.

As this area of research continues to evolve, it is important to recognize that teachers like Elizabeth and Lily, teachers of Color who identify with their students and strive for social justice in the ways that they recognize, are important allies in the fight for social justice. In a teacher workforce that is, and has remained, predominantly White (Schaeffer, 2024; Sleeter, 2014), in a time where things like diversity, equity, inclusion are considered “radical” and forms of “discrimination” (The United States Government, 2025), in a time when our nation’s leaders make overtly hateful and racist policy decisions- like pushing rhetoric to equate diversity to incompetence (Green, 2025)-, in a time where justice, democracy and education are under attack (Cuevas, 2022; Giroux, 2019), and in a time where the dignity and safety of people of Color and other marginalized groups are more saliently being threatened (Flowers & Raychaudhuri, 2025;

Matos, 2025), it is critical that we retain educators of Color like Elizabeth and Lily. At the same time, it is important to continue to cultivate their critical consciousness. However, it cannot come at the expense of their persistence and presence in education.

Implications: Helping and Partnering with Teachers of Color for Persistence

The Importance of a “Why”

The stories of Elizabeth and Lily help to reframe extant literature on humanistic or “urban” commitments. These commitments or “missions,” as called within Elizabeth and Lily’s stories, meet both criteria required for internal transformational resistance: teachers of Color may be internally motivated to enter teaching due to the deficit orientations and treatment of them by teachers with regard to their class, racial and ethnic identities, abilities, and other types of subordination. Thus, in another institution plagued by systemic racism, teachers of Color establish missions that are driven by a critique of social oppression and have a social justice agenda. They want to “give back” (Kokka, 2016; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) through education and service, to prevent further harm to the students and communities who might otherwise experience similar deficit orientations, harm, and marginalization as they did.

Recognizing the humanistic and “urban” commitments of teachers of Color as resistance, manifesting in wanting to empower and give back to empower marginalized students and their communities, is likely the thread that connects why many educators of Color return to schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color (Achinstein, 2010). Teachers of Color like Elizabeth and Lily have non-deficit conceptions of students like themselves (Quartz & TEP Research Group, 2003), so they

care and teach intentionally, leading to important outcomes like higher educational achievement and well-being (Redding, 2019), cultural sensitivity (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019), and decreased likelihood of exclusionary discipline practices (Shirrell et al., 2021) for students of Color. Feeling effective in empowering their students and making a difference is what drives their persistence (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003, p. 583).

Elizabeth and Lily's stories demonstrate the importance of having a strong mission, and it is a common practice for pre-service teachers to have to develop one. As aforementioned, extant literature has already recognized the potential of a "why"- a mission or purpose that teachers can return to to help motivate them when things get difficult or monotonous in the profession. Just asking "why" in a profession situated within a broken and harmful system is not enough, however; at its best, a teacher's "why" is a reminder of why they do what they do, and can help motivate them. At its worst, a teacher's "why" can put the onus on the teacher to endure a difficult profession through inducing shame, or by making them believe that they are responsible for the failures of the institution.

This latter point is exacerbated by research that- ironically- in trying to counter deficit ideologies about working class and students of Color, shifts the deficit-lens to teachers in "urban" schools, in fact blaming them for failing to recognize the assets of students (Kolluri & Tichavakunda, 2022). To reiterate, this largely amounts to blaming teachers of Color for the failure of a broken system since the majority of the teachers in "urban schools" are teachers of Color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Carver-Thomas, 2018). Therefore, by shifting deficit lenses onto teachers in "urban"

schools, we are shifting deficit ideologies onto teachers of Color in these schools. They are made the scapegoats.

Therefore, a mission rooted in resistance is not enough. Elizabeth and Lily demonstrated the importance of sustainability in a profession that endeavors to push teachers of Color out. They demonstrated how they were able to lean into their assets- for example, familial and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005), micro-institutional transformation, and their own expertise- and resist being pushed out of the profession by making it sustainable for themselves. Yet, because they were able to pursue their missions and successfully persist does not mean that they *should* have to navigate the profession on their own. What this reveals is that teachers, and especially teachers who work in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color- where due to systemic inequality and enduring mechanisms of racism resources tend to be scarcer and conditions for teaching made harder (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Garcia & Weiss, 2019)- need help in their fight to be sustained. Furthermore, we need to stop blaming them for failures of the system and other shortcomings, instead recognizing their strengths and partnering with them in their “how.”

Moving Beyond a “Why”- The Importance of Partnering in a “How”

As aforementioned, it is not enough to ask teachers to remember their “why” without supporting them in their “how.” The “how” is important to the way that teachers persist in the profession, and Elizabeth and Lily’s stories demonstrate how they made the profession sustainable for themselves without much help from administrators or other representatives of the institution. Consistent with this study’s intentions, the questions we

should be asking ourselves are “how are teachers of Color navigating the profession? How can we partner with them as administrators, district personnel, researchers, and policy makers to ensure that we are helping to sustain, nurture, and honor them in their persistence?,” especially in places like the Inland Empire which continue to grow more diverse.

Firstly, schools should consider the strengths of their teachers of Color, and their individual missions. How can administrators, largely responsible for the school culture, mission, and vision (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995) better align their school culture to align with and support the values and missions of their teachers of Color to empower them? It begins by getting to know their teachers- talk to them, visit them, survey them, and genuinely consider their input, feedback, and expertise in decision-making (Martin & Bendetti, 2025). In engaging teachers in dialogue, relationship, and community, administrators will be better equipped to facilitate more sustainable school cultures and communities that support their teachers of Color and promote their persistence.

Secondly, districts should consider how they are supporting their long-term teachers of Color in the process. Things like mentorship, induction, and teacher residency or “grow-your-own” programs have shown that they help with early-career teacher retention in schools that predominantly serve working class students of Color (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Guha et al., 2016; Silva & Gleason, 2015). For the persistence of career teachers in these schools, districts should similarly center their teachers’ input and expertise. Efforts like surveys and interviews might clarify teachers’ needs and how to better target policy in efforts to sustain them.

Furthermore, in schools with high administrator turnover, districts should create more opportunities for teachers of Color to be involved in the selection process.

Involving teachers' voices in important decisions will help make them feel valued and might deter feelings of frustration and reduced expertise, such as those that Elizabeth expressed when stating "teachers really don't have much say in a lot of things. Other people say [things] for us. People who aren't even in the classroom are trying to make decisions on things." Or, as Lily said when calling out the lack of support she feels from the district, "Instead of *you* thinking about what *you* think that we need, come and ask! Be *proactive*. Let yourself be seen!"

Thirdly, researchers and policy makers should pursue research to specifically focus on teachers of Color and their well-being and decision-making as they navigate and persist in the profession. A plethora of literature centers youth of Color experiences navigating, surviving, and resisting in society's institutions through theories such as authentic caring and resistance frameworks (Delia & Krasny, 2018; Hannegan-Martinez et al., 2024; Ott, 2024; Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001; Tuck and Yang, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005). There is a comparatively smaller body of literature that engages resistance frameworks that either centers teachers in the process of facilitating transformational resistance for their students (López et al., 2024; Pham, 2022), or explicitly centers the experiences of teachers of Color navigating resistance with regard to the profession (Carter, unpublished manuscript; Kirmaci, 2023). Without research that centers the experiences of teachers of Color, it becomes difficult to understand how to care and support our teachers in their fight for social justice. They can

no longer be both the martyr and the pariah. Rather, we must rethink how we sustain teachers of Color. We must assist them in transforming educational spaces, not just expect them to.

Helping to Promote a Deeper Race and Critical Consciousness Among Teachers of Color

This final section attends to how we might help career teachers of Color cultivate a deeper critical consciousness for continuing to transform educational spaces. Elizabeth and Lily demonstrate how teachers of Color with varying levels of race consciousness can be resistant and transformational for social justice. However, it is also important to complicate a few points within this understanding: in the case of this study, it appears that the race consciousness of the protagonists may aid their resistance and persistence as they focus on, and transform, that which they can recognize and can control. Unfortunately, this also means that areas of their teaching and pedagogy remain largely acritical. This suggests that individuals should partner with teachers of Color to help foster the growth of their critical consciousness. However, we need to ensure that fostering a critical consciousness does not come at the expense of losing good teachers of Color; the cultivation must happen in an authentic and sustainable way to ensure that teachers can remain in the “Goldilocks Zone” of feeling effective and making positive change.

Teachers of Color are not critically conscious simply by virtue of their racial or ethnic backgrounds and experiences (Brown, 2014; Kohli, 2009). To assume so and hire teachers of Color with the intention of “fixing” systemic racial problems is to perpetuate the idea of “professional racism,” or “the guise of dealing with teaching ethnically

different students by underscoring the need for more teachers of Color,” (Gay, 2018, p. 279) assuming that ToCs know how to best teach in a liberating and culturally responsive manner because they have experiences with racialization and racism. Instead, we should help teachers develop their critical consciousness. A critical consciousness is not a fixed state or a destination, but something that is continually evolving (Freire, 1970; Kohli et al., 2019; Milner, 2003). However, a lot of labor goes into helping teachers develop a critical consciousness, (Kohli et al., 2019) especially in teacher education programs, so some scholars suggest that “teacher education programs and schools must recruit and support those already engaged in developing their critical consciousness,” (p. 24). This is an important consideration, but a few things must be considered:

- 1) Many teachers of Color endeavor to enter the profession due to their experiences and harm as a result of the racialization that they experience navigating society’s institutions, including educational ones. They want to make a difference. How do teacher education programs define what it means to be “developing a critical consciousness?” Is it enough for teachers to recognize their experiences with racialization and injustice and want to “be better” for their communities?
- 2) What about teachers who are years, or decades, beyond the intervention of a teacher education program? How do we help them to foster and grow their critical consciousness?
- 3) Recognizing that teachers of Color are not monoliths, and that they have various identities that influence who they are and how they make decisions as they navigate the profession, how can we give credence to and honor the other identities that teachers of Color embody in their teaching? For example, Lily demonstrates a tension- she is first and foremost a Christian, and is weary about discussing concepts that push the boundaries of her beliefs or are too “radical;” the latter point is evidenced by the correction of her speech throughout our pláticas. Yet, she dedicates herself to empowering her students and communities of Color. Does this mean developing a qualified sociopolitical consciousness (Dallavis, 2011) to ensure that her growth is authentic and sustainable?

Many of these questions are beyond the scope of this study. Instead, I offer some recommendations to help career teachers foster and grow their critical consciousness, some of which may overlap with the general recommendations for sustaining teachers of Color listed in the previous section. To reiterate, these practices for growth must be authentic and sustainable to ensure that teachers of Color feel seen, validated, and centered in the conversations for change.

Firstly, schools and districts should hire caring *and* critically conscious administrators of Color to help foster the sustainability and critical consciousness of teachers of Color. Just as students profit from caring and critical teachers (Kolluri, 2025) who help foster their growth and understanding, teachers would, too. Caring and critical administrators can align their school missions (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995) with a desire for transformation, while partnering with teachers in decision-making (Martin & Bendetti, 2025) to ensure that the change and growth is done in a way that includes and honors them. Furthermore, a caring and critical administrator will be better equipped to empower their teachers of Color, facilitating things like critical mentorship (Kohli et al., 2019), affinity groups (Dech, 2022) and critical dialogue spaces (Kohli, 2012).

Secondly, schools and districts should partner with local organizations or universities in the Inland Empire that offer tangible courses, workshops, or other professional development opportunities to help foster and grow the critical consciousness of their teachers. Centering books like Valenzuela's (2016) *Growing Critically Conscious Teachers: A Social Justice Curriculum for Educators of Latino/a Youth* might be helpful tools for developing awareness, dialogue, and praxis (Freire, 1970). In so doing,

elementary school teachers like Elizabeth and Lily can learn how to teach about social justice-oriented topics in their schools and at a level appropriate for their students.

Thirdly, and with regard to research, we must seek to understand the relationship between justice-oriented teaching and its relationship with teacher persistence beyond the first few years of teaching. We know that having critically conscious, justice-oriented teachers is important. We know that retaining teachers, and especially teachers of Color, in diverse and growing areas like the Inland Empire is important. We must continue to understand both in relation to one another.

Conclusion

Through their stories, Elizabeth and Lily demonstrated how they have persisted in the teaching profession for decades. As teachers of Color whose experiences with racialization motivated them to become “better” teachers in schools who predominantly serve working class students of Color and their communities, their missions are rooted in resistance for social justice and resistance for persistence, manifesting in sustainability. They are effective in their missions, making decisions and eliciting behaviors with their students that manifest primarily in conformist and transformationally resistant ways. They feel that they are effective in their stated mission- making a change and empowering their students- which motivates them to persist.

At the same time, though they are able to resist in the profession as they seek social justice, their ability to make change is informed by their varying race consciousnesses. In that way, how they make sense of injustice informs their resistance, but is largely limited to visceral or interpersonal interpretations. Thus, both teachers

would profit from growing their race and critical consciousnesses for their own continued healing and liberation, and in order to continue transforming educational institutions.

However, it is important that their growth occurs in an authentic and sustainable manner so that we can retain the teachers of Color in the profession who are fighting to empower their students. They are important and valuable educators, and it is important that we help them to grow and be sustained.

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