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Actualizing Black Male Youth Healing and Empowerment:  
A Qualitative Case Study of a Black Educational Fugitive Space

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

in

Education

by

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Committee in charge:

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2024

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University of California San Diego

2024

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## VITA

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Actualizing Black Male Youth Healing and Empowerment:  
A Qualitative Case Study of a Black Educational Fugitive Space

by

James Crawford

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California San Diego, 2024

Professor Chris Halter, Co-Chair

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Given the persistence of systemic anti-Blackness, access to quality education for Black youth requires additional resources and opportunities beyond the traditional classroom and school environment. Community-based educational spaces offer a liberatory alternative to anti-Black academic environments. The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing political polarization exacerbate the inherent racialized inequities in schools. As a result, additional research and theorization of Black male adolescent experiences in community programs are necessary to develop pedagogical strategies that attend to the endemicity of racial trauma and Black suffering in American education and society.



This qualitative case study examines The Blue Heart Foundation, a local community-based organization, to explore the processes of individual and collective healing and empowerment among Black male youth. Data collection included an extensive artifact analysis, participant-observations over a two-year period, and semi-structured interviews with 21 participants, comprising 11 Blue Heart alumni, three mentors, two program staff, four instructors, and one guest speaker.

The findings indicate that Blue Heart's programming incorporates high-leverage system characteristics such as paradigms, structures, elements, and feedback loops, which cultivate environments conducive to Black male youth development. Key findings highlight the importance of fulfilling relationships, community engagement, and cultural affirmation in the healing and empowerment processes of Black male youth.

A central contribution of this research is the development of the FRESH HEART framework, which serves as a model for culturally sustaining programs that are relationship-based and developmental in focus. This study affirms the importance of community engagement in shaping bespoke models deeply rooted in local realities and contexts. By working closely with communities, organizations and educators can co-create frameworks tailored to their unique needs. These transformative frameworks are key to actualizing both personal and collective thriving by providing actionable strategies that advance racial progress and contribute to the broader struggle for Black liberation.

## Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

...this endless *struggle* to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity, human authority, yet contains, for all its horror, something very *beautiful*.

I do not mean to be sentimental about *suffering* - enough is certainly as good as a feast - but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. That man who is forced each day to snatch manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth - and indeed, no church - can teach.

He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable. This is because, in order to save his life, he is forced to look beneath appearances, to take nothing for granted, to hear the meaning behind the words. If one is continually surviving the worst that life can bring, one eventually ceases to be controlled by a fear of what life can bring; whatever it brings must be borne.

(Baldwin, 1963, emphasis added)

Current education discourse and policy initiatives highlight the ongoing struggle for equity and racial justice in the United States (CA Prop 16, 2020; Kohli et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Watson & Collins, 2023). These discussions and policies often label Black male youth as inherently “at-risk” and point to racialized achievement gaps and the concomitant disparities in socioeconomic opportunities and outcomes between Black and white<sup>1</sup> students (ESSA, 2015; Howard, 2008; NCLB, 2002). In contrast, critical theorists and education scholars emphasize the social reproductive function of schooling in maintaining systemic barriers to quality education (Keisch & Scott, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Love, 2019) and posit the need for program models and interventions beyond the traditional schooling paradigm (Johnson, 2012, Lofton & Davis, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> Like Dumas (2016), I do not capitalize “white” because the term denotes “nothing but a social construct, and does not describe a group with a sense of common experiences or kinship outside of acts of colonization and terror” (p. 13). Whereas the term “Black” denotes a shared experience of the simultaneity of racial oppression and the constant struggle for liberation.

Community-based educational spaces and programs play a pivotal role in driving this essential transformation in education to better serve Black youth (Epstein et al., 2018; Sanders, 2001, 2003). These programs extend the legacy of community development and organizing efforts among Black Americans, dating back to enslavement and gaining significant momentum in the 1960s, when many groups prioritized improving safety, housing, and economic development in marginalized communities (Warren, 2005). The persistence of marginalization into the 1970s and 1980s—through resegregation, concentrated poverty, and mass incarceration fueled by neoliberal socioeconomic policies (Keisch & Scott, 2015)—intensified racial inequities and heightened the demand for community-based programs supporting Black students and families (Woodland, 2008).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 renewed the focus on and funding for academic enrichment programs delivered by community organizations and school-community partnerships. A variety of partnership and program models have been implemented, emphasizing the roles of school staff and counselors in fostering community collaborations to strengthen student agency, family involvement, and the engagement of community stakeholders (Baldrige et al., 2017; Bryan, 2005; Nelson et al., 2020; Valli et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2014).

Quantitative research indicates that community-based programs and school-community partnerships support student academic success by improving attendance (Sheldon, 2007), test scores (Sheldon, 2003), and behavior (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). Sheldon (2007) conducted a study to explore the impact of school-family-community partnerships on student attendance. The findings indicated that implementing a school-wide approach to family and community involvement can lead to an increase in student attendance, which may contribute to better

performance on standardized achievement tests, lower dropout rates, and reduced likelihood of substance abuse.

Another quantitative study examined the impact of school-family-community partnerships on student achievement in math and reading in urban elementary schools (Sheldon, 2003). The study revealed that students in schools with strong partnerships had significantly higher test scores than those in schools with weak or no partnerships (Sheldon, 2003).

Additionally, the research emphasized that these partnerships could mitigate some of the adverse effects of socio-economic challenges faced by students. The results of this study underscore the positive impact of community-based programs and school-community partnerships on student academic achievement, highlighting the critical role of collaborative efforts in enhancing educational outcomes.

Sheldon and Epstein's (2002) quantitative study focused on the impact of school-based partnership programs on student behavior. The study found that students in schools with strong partnership programs had better attendance, fewer disciplinary incidents, and fewer behavioral problems than those in schools with weak or no partnership programs (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). The study's findings indicate that schools that prioritize partnerships with families and the community are better positioned to create a positive school culture that can lead to improved student behavior. These quantitative data suggest that community-based education enrichment resources fortify student's experiences and lead to positive outcomes. However, more qualitative research is necessary to center the experiences of Black male youth in community-based education spaces to understand how they are supported in resisting anti-Blackness while developing healing and empowerment.

## Statement of the Problem

Black suffering in traditional schooling environments is historically entrenched and reproduced through educational structures, such as policies and practices, that emanate from anti-Blackness and white supremacy (e.g., racialized tracking and discipline, opportunity hoarding) (Dumas, 2018; Keisch & Scott, 2015; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Leonardo, 2002).

According to Ginwright (2016), Black suffering is reflected in the racial trauma that Black youth experience as “the psycho-spiritual injury resulting from oppression” (p. 28). From the perspective of Afropessimism and Black Critical Theory (BlackCrit), anti-Blackness fuels Black suffering as the inexorable consequence of the irreconcilable antagonism between the white (as human) and the Black/Other (as non-human), which structures American schools and society (Dumas & ross, 2016). BlackCrit’s emphasis on the centrality and specificity of anti-Blackness offers particular insights into why and how traditional schooling is rooted in, and further reifies, white supremacist ideologies that structure anti-Black violence and Black suffering as the inevitable and necessary outcome (Dumas, 2016; Dumas & ross, 2016; Mills, 1997).

Furthermore, underscoring the intractability of Black suffering aligns with Bell’s (1991, 1992) racial realism thesis, which articulates the inherent fallacies and inefficacy of seeking equality and racial justice through white-centric institutions such as the courts and schools. Schools are a part of an elaborate, ever-evolving “legacy of federal, state, and district policies and practices designed to deprive Black communities and children of educational resources” (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 418). The predominance of white teachers and significantly lower teacher expectations of Black students contribute to unwelcoming, often hostile, classroom and school environments (McKown & Weinstein, 2008; Picower, 2009). This is compounded by both implicit and overt forms of teacher and peer discrimination (Leath et. al., 2019) and racial

macro-aggressions (Compton-Lilly, 2020) where Black boys are treated as the perennial problem (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Howard, 2008, 2013).

Pervasive deficit ideologies (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Lofton & Davis, 2015) are also reflected in the highly disproportionate disciplining and exclusion of Black male students (Coles & Powell, 2020; Gregory et al., 2010; Payne & Welch, 2015) and tracking into less rigorous courses (McCardle, 2020; Tyson, 2011) that are absent of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Charleston et al., 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014). In addition, Black suffering in schools is elided and reinforced by education discourse that frames systemic inequities as an achievement gap (Gregory et. al., 2010), rather than focusing on the opportunity gap (Milner, 2012) and the education debt (Ladson Billings, 2006) that are the direct result of white-centric, neoliberal policies and practices (Anyon, 2005; Stoval, 2013).

Schools alone cannot solve the problems that they were designed to reproduce (Anyon, 1997, 2005; Dumas, 2016, 2018; Stovall, 2013; Wun, 2014). School reform policies and initiatives are inadequate in isolation from the simultaneous support for family and community engagement (Travis & Leech, 2013; Warren, 2005). Furthermore, the advancement of racial progress for Black Americans is demonstrated not only through academic opportunity and achievement, but in the process of reimagining what constitutes racial progress altogether (Ray et al., 2017; Warren, 2015). To this point, Dumas (2018) posed two pertinent questions:

Is Black achievement, regardless of the means or effects, an inherent indicator of racial progress? In education, is our primary aim to improve the test scores and graduation rates of Black children, or are there other aims, larger cultural-political aims of Black education that should take precedence? (p. 38)

The purpose of Black education should not be limited to improving test scores and graduation rates. Instead, it must attend to larger cultural-political aims. Historically, Black education has been shaped by dominant white culture and politics, leading to a narrow focus on

academic success metrics (Ladson-Billings, 2007). To achieve larger aims, such as promoting social justice and equity, fostering critical thinking, and nurturing a sense of pride and identity, curricular and pedagogical approaches must center on Black experiences and perspectives (Love, 2019).

It is also crucial to recognize the interconnected nature of Black education, involving schools, families, and communities (Johnson, 2012). Thus, educational efforts must address systemic and structural barriers, including racism, poverty, and inadequate school funding, that negatively impact the educational experiences of Black youth (Dumas, 2016). Broadening the goals of Black education is necessary to promote social justice, foster healing and empowerment, and advance racial progress towards Black liberation.

#### Purpose of the Study

Black male youth in urban contexts face significant challenges that hinder their academic and social success (Noguera, 2014). Research has consistently shown that Black boys are more likely to be relegated to under-resourced urban schools, where they endure adverse conditions (Howard, 2008). They are also more likely to be the least supported academically and socially, which can lead to the "pipeline crisis" where Black male youth are too often pushed from classrooms and college-going pathways into the prison industrial complex (Noguera, 2014). Black boys are disproportionately suspended and expelled from urban schools as a result of teachers' fears, biases, and stereotypes of Black males (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). The biases that Black boys face are not limited to disciplinary actions, but also extend to their play experiences (Bryan, 2020). Recent studies have shown that early childhood educators disproportionately identify misbehavior in Black boys' play, reaffirming their biases, fears, and stereotypes (Bryan, 2020). These one-dimensional, biased, and stereotypical views are deeply ingrained in American

schools and society. Consequently, pervasive anti-Black narratives perpetuate and reinforce the race-based trauma that Black male youth experience and internalize (Ginwright, 2016; Givens et al., 2016).

To support healing and empowerment and counteract the potential internalization of anti-Blackness and ubiquity of Black suffering, there is a need for safe and supportive spaces where Black male youth in urban areas can explore and affirm their identities. Community based spaces can provide models for manhood by reimagining Black male identities in education, fostering positive identity development, and reducing the negative stereotypes associated with Black male youth (Givens et al., 2016). The purpose of this study is to enhance the empirical understanding of Black male youth experiences and perspectives in the context of a community-based program that confronts systemic forms of anti-Blackness while promoting Black youth healing and empowerment.

Furthermore, this study seeks to expand the conceptualization of *Black educational fugitive space* (ross, 2021) in the contemporary context of the afterlife of school segregation. The afterlife of school segregation is a critical concept that highlights the inherent subjugation of Black students in U.S. schools (ross, 2021). This phenomenon is similar to Hartman's (2007) afterlife of slavery, which challenges linear progress narratives by recognizing that the entanglements of slavery and freedom complicate myopic notions of progress that are perpetuated through dominant education discourse and policy. These narratives, policies, and practices are predicated on the false assumption of an absolute distinction between oppression and liberty, as if racial progress is a natural consequence of good intentions and superficial reform efforts (Dumas, 2018; Ray et al., 2007; ross, 2021). The afterlife of school segregation centers on the ways in which Black students remain systematically dehumanized and positioned



as uneducable, despite the end of legal segregation of schooling. This concept emphasizes the dissonance between de jure and de facto freedom and the difficulty that Black students face in exercising their equal rights to access quality education.

The grand narrative of integration, which emphasizes the end of formal segregation, fails to acknowledge the ongoing subjugation of Black students (ross, 2021). Black students have continually been racialized, dehumanized, and hypersexualized in schools before, during, and long after desegregation (Dumas, 2016). Black educational fugitive space is a critical intervention and theorization to address the afterlife of school segregation (ross, 2021). Despite the endemicity of anti-Blackness in traditional school environments, Black educational fugitive space provides Black students and educators opportunities to enact educational fugitivity through the social production of Black space in the margin (hooks, 1989, 1990; ross, 2019).

### Significance of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic helped catalyze an increased awareness surrounding the prevalence of systemic anti-Blackness and racial disparities in education. Consequently, schools and districts began taking a more critical approach to their curricula, grading policies, and disciplinary practices with the aim of promoting equity (Taketa, 2020). Despite these efforts, a disquieting trend emerged as 42 states have introduced bills since 2021 that are purposely designed to disparage and stigmatize social justice-oriented curriculum and pedagogy, resulting in widespread restrictions that limit discussions of racism and sexism in public schools (Berman et al., 2021). The proliferation of these bills threatens decades of progress that has been made in promoting equity and addressing systemic anti-Blackness in education. Such measures obscure the reality of systemic racism and undermine efforts to provide a more inclusive and rigorous education for students of all races. From a racial realist (Bell, 1991) and BlackCrit (Dumas &

ross, 2016) perspective, this trend reflects historical dynamics of white supremacy and anti-Blackness in which racial progress leads to incremental gains that simultaneously intensify the intransigence of the oppressive status quo (Ray et al., 2017). Thus, it is essential to employ a liberatory pedagogical approach that recognizes and challenges systemic oppression and supports a more holistic paradigm for positive youth development, particularly for Black male youth.

It is vitally important to advance our understanding and implementation of community programs that focus on supporting Black male youth's well-being in urban contexts (Howard, 2008). Education scholars and researchers suggest that schools should work closely with community-based organizations and other stakeholders to create programs that address the unique needs of Black male youth (Howard 2014). This collaboration can help to create opportunities for Black male youth to build positive relationships, develop skills, and engage in meaningful activities that promote healing and empowerment (Ginwright, 2010b).

The challenges that Black male youth face in urban contexts are complex and multifaceted. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and communities to create safe and supportive spaces that dismantle biases and stereotypes and promote positive identity development (Givens et al., 2016). By doing so, we can help Black male youth to heal and empower themselves, and ultimately, promote greater equity and justice in our society. Hence, this study aims to directly address the conditions that normalize Black suffering and help reimagine racial justice in education by extending the theorization of Black youth healing (Ginwright, 2016) and empowerment (Travis & Leech, 2013) through a community-based Black educational fugitive space (ross, 2021).

## **Research Site**

The Blue Heart Foundation, a non-profit youth development organization, serves the socioemotional and academic needs of Black male youth aged 13-18 across San Diego County. Established in 2013 by Tracy Morris and his wife April Ray Morris, the foundation addresses the critical need for male role models and consistent support within the community. Inspired by Tracy's own experiences growing up in challenging conditions in Southeast San Diego, Blue Heart was designed to provide the guidance and resources he needed during his youth. The organization emphasizes character development, academic excellence, and emotional intelligence through mentorship and culturally sustaining spaces for Black male youth.

The selection of Blue Heart as the research site was initially driven by practical considerations, particularly its local relevance within the San Diego community. Blue Heart's accessibility and proximity made it a convenient choice for in-depth study. Additionally, it was chosen because it stands out as the only community-based organization in San Diego specifically created by and for local Black people, with a focused mission to serve Black male youth. This unique positioning makes Blue Heart a vital institution within the community and deeply aligns with the objectives of this research. Engaging with adult staff, mentors, and current participants and Blue Heart alumni provides comprehensive insights into the organization's methodologies and sustained impact on participants' lives.

## **Research Questions**

The ubiquity of Black suffering in traditional school environments necessitates academic interventions in the form of community-based educational spaces and programs. To this end, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. During program activities, what observable behaviors or interactions suggest that participants are experiencing healing and empowerment?
2. How do Blue Heart staff describe their experiences in supporting Black male youth?
3. From the perspective of Blue Heart alumni, which elements of the programming were most influential in their healing and empowerment journey?
4. Which specific Blue Heart components or activities reflect a Black educational fugitive space?

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

Given the centrality and specificity of anti-Blackness in U.S. schools and society (Dumas & ross, 2016), this study is guided by three frameworks that offer unique approaches to actualize the healing and empowerment of Black youth: a) Radical Healing (CARMA) (Ginwright, 2016), b) Empowerment Based Youth Development (EMPYD) (Travis & Leech, 2013), c) Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS) (ross, 2021). The CARMA framework prioritizes the emotional well-being, cultural identity, and collective healing of Black youth in urban education. The EMPYD framework is designed to be a culturally sustaining approach to Black youth development, taking into account the unique experiences and challenges they face, and promoting empowerment through building competencies and community engagement. BEFS offers a “departure and a refuge from the gratuitous violence of the afterlife of school segregation” and provides opportunities for resistance and political dreaming (ross, 2019, 2021). By emphasizing the importance of cultural awareness, emotional support, and community engagement, these frameworks contribute to a comprehensive approach to advance healing, empowerment, and positive outcomes for Black youth in urban communities.

### **Radical Healing Framework: C.A.R.M.A.** Ginwright's (2016) Radical Healing

Framework offers an innovative approach to addressing the challenges facing Black youth in urban education. According to Ginwright (2016), traditional approaches to education that solely focus on academic achievement are inadequate in meeting the needs of Black youth. Instead, he proposes a holistic approach that prioritizes individual and collective healing as essential for liberatory education. Ginwright (2016) draws on the experiences of urban educators and activists who have implemented this approach to create spaces that promote healing and hope for Black youth. Educators and activists who prioritize relationships and emotional support co-create environments in which students feel seen, valued, and empowered to succeed.

Ginwright (2016) emphasizes the importance of recognizing the systemic oppression and marginalization that Black youth experience and how these factors contribute to their experiences of trauma and stress. Addressing these issues requires educators and activists to create spaces that prioritize the emotional well-being of Black youth and provide them with the tools they need to thrive. Additionally, Ginwright (2016) underscores the importance of community-based approaches, in which students are connected to the broader community and engaged in efforts to create social change. The approach prioritizes the community's needs and empowers students to make positive contributions, which not only benefits individual students but also creates positive ripple effects throughout their communities.

The CARMA framework is a comprehensive approach that prioritizes addressing the emotional, social, and cultural needs of Black youth in urban education, in addition to their academic achievement. The framework emphasizes five key components: *culture*, *agency*, *relationships*, *meaning*, and *achievement*. *Culture* embraces the significance of a healthy ethnic identity and acts as an anchor to connect young people to a historically grounded and

contemporarily relevant racial and ethnic identity. This component also celebrates and sustains the vibrancy and ingenuity of urban youth culture. Black youth *agency* entails the capacity to effect change in personal and external challenges, empowering them to transform obstacles into opportunities. *Relationships* nurture a profound sense of belonging that enables Black youth to see themselves as part of a rich and complex lineage of both adversity and triumph. The *meaning* component involves Black youth exploring their purpose and promoting justice by recognizing the intricate links between personal and political realms through understanding how individual struggles have significant political implications. Finally, *achievement* reveals Black youth potential and progress towards goals, inspires them to reject oppressive forces, and pursue individual and collective advancement.

The CARMA framework offers a powerful new approach to urban education that prioritizes the emotional well-being, cultural identity, and collective growth of Black youth. In addressing the complex challenges faced by Black youth in the education system, the CARMA framework also offers a roadmap for transforming traditional education models to better meet the needs of all students. The framework creates a comprehensive approach that has the potential to promote resilience, healing, and positive outcomes for Black youth in urban communities through cultural awareness, emotional support, community engagement, and student empowerment.

**Empowerment Based Youth Development.** Travis and Leech's (2013) empowerment based youth development (EMPYD) framework for positive youth development is tailored specifically to the needs of African American youth. The EMPYD framework is based on the principles of empowerment, and emphasizes the importance of *connection, caring, character, confidence, competence, sense of community, and active and engaged citizenship*. The first

component of the framework is *connection*, which emphasizes the importance of building positive relationships with family, peers, and community members. *Caring* is reflected in Black youth developing empathy and concern for others. The third component is *character*, which emphasizes the importance of Black youth embodying their moral and ethical values. *Confidence* and *competence* are integral components of Black youth empowerment, with confidence emphasizing self-belief and self-worth, while competence involves acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in various areas of life. *Sense of community* is experienced as a sense of belonging and connection to one's community. The final component is *active and engaged citizenship*, which involves Black youth taking an active role in their community and working to create positive change.

The EMPYD framework highlights the crucial role of empowering individuals by providing them with tools and resources to achieve their goals and take control of their lives. The framework is designed to be culturally responsive and takes into account the unique experiences and challenges faced by African American youth. Travis and Leech (2013) argue that by using this framework, educators and community leaders can help to create a more supportive and empowering environment for African American youth and can help them to develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed.

**Black educational fugitive spaces.** Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS) refer to the purposefully constructed Black space in education that exists in the margin, outside of the larger school structure, and is created in response to rampant anti-Blackness in the larger world and in U.S. public schools (ross, 2019, 2021). BEFS is “a departure and a refuge from the gratuitous violence of the afterlife of school segregation, and spawns possibilities for rebirth and

resistance” (ross, 2021, p. 48). The term "fugitive" suggests that BEFS is a makeshift land for a people whose humanity is consistently made impossible in the mainstream.

In the context of afterlife of school segregation, where anti-Blackness precludes Black humanity, “the notion of school ‘reform’ for Black children becomes a patronizing insult added to centuries of anti-Black injury” (ross, 2021, p. 51). BEFS offers a way to resist and reimagine Blackness by constructing homeplaces that offer a space for resistance. Homeplaces, as defined by hooks (1990), are safe spaces where Black people can affirm each other and heal the wounds inflicted by racist domination. They are a space for resistance, where opposition is not enough, and where Black folks can reimagine Blackness and develop healthy Black subjectivities.

BEFS can also be understood as a form of BlackCrit, which allows for the development of liberatory fantasies and the imagining of a broader fugitive vision, while also supporting the parents, teachers, community activists, administrators, and most importantly, the students themselves, who work tirelessly every day to create "livable moments" in schools. BlackCrit encourages the creation of BEFS and the social production of Black space in the margin. BEFS offer a way to resist the pervasive anti-Blackness in the education system and create a space where Black students can affirm each other, develop healthy subjectivities, and reimagine Blackness. Homeplaces, as a form of BEFS, provide a space for resistance and a way to nurture the spirit and confront the issue of humanization that is impossible outside of these spaces. Therefore, the creation of BEFS is crucial for the liberation and empowerment of Black youth, and it is important to continue to explore and further conceptualize these important and necessary liberatory education spaces.

**FRESH HEART Framework.** The FRESH HEART framework, which stands for Fulfilling Relationships Enhance Social Harmony; Healing and Empowerment Actualize



Resilience and Thriving, emerged as a novel conceptual model through the iterative phases of data collection and analysis in this study. This framework weaves together empirical findings with the study's guiding theoretical frameworks, aligning with and extending the foundational theories of Radical Healing (CARMA), Empowerment-Based Youth Development (EMPYD), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS). FRESH HEART offers a cohesive, systems-oriented approach to understanding and enhancing the dynamics within community-based educational spaces, specifically those designed to support the holistic development of Black youth.

At the core of FRESH HEART is the focus on cultivating fulfilling relationships within the community, recognizing that these relationships are critical to identity development, socioemotional well-being, and the collective agency of Black youth. The framework underscores the importance of culturally affirming and trauma-informed relationships, which serve as a foundation for both individual well-being and social harmony. These relationships provide a supportive network that helps counteract the isolation and marginalization often resulting from systemic anti-Black racism.

The HEART aspect of the framework emphasizes the intertwined processes of healing and empowerment. Healing is recognized as a foundational need for emotional health by addressing past and present traumas that Black youth endure. Empowerment, on the other hand, involves equipping youth with the skills, education, and resources necessary to positively influence their destinies. FRESH HEART advocates for an assets-based approach that encourages Black youth to leverage their strengths, cultural backgrounds, and community ties as active agents in their development. This process of actualization not only supports their personal aspirations but also contributes to their collective resilience and thriving. By viewing support for

these youth through a holistic, systems-oriented lens, the model promotes interventions that are comprehensive, integrated, and aligned with the broader goal of advancing racial progress, which ultimately manifests in individual and collective thriving. FRESH HEART contributes to the academic discourse on youth development and provides a tangible model for practitioners and community leaders aiming to create transformative change in the lives of Black youth.

### **Definition of Key Terms & Concepts**

**Liberatory Education.** Liberatory education for Black youth is a transformative approach discussed by myriad education scholars, aiming not only to combat systemic oppression and mitigate Black suffering but also to empower and create new possibilities for Black youth (Dumas, 2016, 2018; Dumas & Nelson, 2016; hooks, 1989, 2015; Love, 2019). In her essay, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness", hooks (1989) argues that education should focus on providing Black youth with tools to challenge oppressive systems, rather than assimilating them into those systems. This includes providing them with spaces for critical thinking and open dialogue, which allow for a more liberatory approach to education. This idea is further developed in hooks' (1990) book "Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics", where she argues that a liberatory education is one that is transformative, empowering, and rooted in love.

Similarly, Dumas (2016, 2018) and Love (2019) advocate for a liberatory approach to education. Love's (2019) conception of liberatory education is centered on abolitionist principles. This includes reimagining traditional educational paradigms that normalize and reproduce anti-Black violence by co-creating learning environments where Black youth thrive. Dumas's (2016, 2018) liberatory perspective on education identifies systemic oppression and marginalization of Black youth as core features inherent in American education, rather than as

anomalous symptoms. Consequently, Dumas (2016, 2018) argues for a framework that prioritizes centering the experiences and perspectives of Black boys in educational research and creating spaces for their voices to be heard. Overall, these scholars highlight the importance of a liberatory approach to education for Black youth to transform the status quo that is rooted in Black suffering towards a humanizing paradigm that is rooted in love. Hence, this approach requires rejecting traditional forms of education that perpetuate systemic oppression and marginalization, and instead nurturing spaces that are culturally sustaining, uplifting critical consciousness-raising and community engagement.

**Critical Consciousness.** Based on the culturally responsive adaptations to the traditional PYD framework (Travis & Leech, 2013), the empowerment process for Black youth is predicated on fostering critical consciousness that enables them to leverage internal and external resources to promote their resilience and resistance to endemic forms of anti-Blackness. Critical consciousness “mediates the competency of resilience by empowering youth to critically examine the roots of the adversity they face, rather than internalizing such adversity and attributing it to oneself” (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016, p.115). According to Goodkind and colleagues (2020), critical consciousness consists of three elements: critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. Critical reflection pertains to analyses of systemic social inequities and intersecting forms of oppression. Political efficacy refers to students’ perceived ability to effect positive change through policy and practice, and critical action includes individual and collective activism to bring about that change (p. 319-320).

Travis and Leech (2013) highlighted critical consciousness as fundamental to their adapted youth development framework. Travis and Leech (2013) supplemented the PYD framework with two additional components for Black adolescents: sense of community, and

active and engaged citizenship. These components were added as way to develop a “culturally specific empowerment-based positive youth development” (EMPYD) framework, which features an empowerment process that fosters students’ sense of belonging with community and engages civic efforts to shift personal and collective conditions of marginalization towards well-being and social justice (p. 102). Thus, the empowerment process requires the development of adolescents’ critical consciousness to understand social justice issues and apply strategies to actualize their agency and cultivate vital competencies with the mutual support of their peers, families, and communities (Travis & Leech, 2013).

**Resilience.** Resilience is a term that refers to protective factors that mitigate exposure to adverse factors such as adversity, trauma, or stress (Goodkind et al., 2020; Williams & Portman, 2014). Protective factors include internal characteristics (such as high self-esteem and self-efficacy) and external assets (such as familial support and adult mentoring), that allow for positive adaptations to adversity (Williams & Portman, 2014; Woodland, 2014). The concept of resilience was developed based on empirical research over the past 30 years to document why and how resilience is demonstrated by some people and not others. This research led to the creation of interventions designed to enhance resilience by promoting protective factors among “at risk” groups (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016; Goodkind et al., 2020). Traditional resilience frameworks, such as Duckworth’s (2016) conception of grit, primarily focus on the individual while underestimating systemic contexts and the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression. As Love (2019) noted, “Measuring dark<sup>2</sup> students’ grit while removing no institutional barriers is education’s version of *The Hunger Games*. It is adults overseeing which dark children can beat the odds, odds put in place and maintained by an oppressive system” (p.

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<sup>2</sup> Love (2019) borrows the term “dark” -from Du Bois’s use of it in “Criteria of Negro Art” -to invoke the lived realities of BIPOC intersectionality and epistemology.

73). Consequently, individual resilience is often encouraged for youth to overcome their “at-risk” status, which deemphasizes the systemic conditions that are the source of oppression and disparate life outcomes while admonishing individuals and groups who do not reflect the narrowly defined characteristics associated with “grit” (Goodkind et al., 2020).

Alternatively, assets-based and agent-based models shift the deficit paradigm of traditional resilience frameworks, “which imply that something is wrong with the individual,” and instead focus on the context-based resilience process of Black youth (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016, p. 114). Rather than relying on traditional conceptions of resilience that encourage students to merely adapt to systemic oppression, Black students’ individual and collective resilience must be rooted in critical consciousness and predicated on beliefs, values, and community resources that advance empowering strategies (Goodkind, et al., 2020; Clonan-Roy et al., 2016). Such fundamental beliefs and values that promote academic engagement and success among Black students include academic self-efficacy, self-accountability, and multicultural competence (Carter, 2008).

Relatedly, the concept of collective resilience is based on a positive collective identity that leverages critical consciousness to resist and change oppressive systems, rather than acquiesce to them (Goodkind et al., 2020). Resilience and resistance are distinct youth development competencies that mutually promote one another (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016). The development of critical consciousness contributes to attitudes, beliefs, and practices that support Black student resilience, which strengthens confidence and efficacy towards resistance.

**Resistance.** The term resistance, or oppositional resistance, has often been used to explain various aspects of Black youth behavior and outcomes related to educational achievement gaps (Ginwright, 2006). Oppositional resistance has been conceptualized as a set of

shared attitudes, beliefs, and values that reject the norms of whiteness and the mainstream achievement ideology, thereby contributing to behaviors that hinder academic achievement (Ogbu 1990; Fordham 1996). However, resistance is essential for Black students to overcome systemic barriers to well-being and success (Ginwright, 2006). Clonan-Roy and colleagues (2016) posit that, like resilience, resistance for Black youth is predicated on the development of critical consciousness to counter the deficit ideologies that perpetuate notions of innate Black deficiency and depravity.

According to Carter's (2008) concept of Critical Race Achievement Ideology (CRAI), Black student resistance is demonstrated through "adaptive strategies for overcoming racism in the school context that allow them to maintain high academic achievement and a strong racial/ethnic self-concept" (p. 492). These resistance strategies, including personal and collective forms of advocating to address school-related racial injustices (Akom et al., 2016; Hope et al., 2013), emanate from and sustain Black students' critical awareness of pervasive forms of anti-Blackness in schools such as racial profiling (Chapman, 2013), adultification (Brown, 2017; Morris, 2019), and punitive discipline (Gregory et al., 2010). CRAI affirms critical awareness and the rejection of deficit ideologies as fundamental to Black youth resistance strategies to racial marginalization and their resultant academic achievement.

## **Conclusion**

Black suffering in U.S. schools is pervasive and systemic (Dumas, 2018; Dumas & ross, 2016), evident in academic tracking (McCardle, 2020), micro and macro-aggressions (Compton-Lilly, 2020), disproportionate discipline (Coles & Powell, 2020), and under-resourced education environments (Stovall, 2013). However, community-based educational spaces (CBES) such as afterschool programs and community-based youth organizations have been shown to support

minoritized youth's educational experiences, political identity development, and organizing and activist lives (Baldrige et al., 2017). In this capacity, CBES can foster what hooks (1989) described as “a space of radical openness”— a space in the margins that builds a “community of resistance” (p.19) to oppression and provides “the possibility of [a] radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds” (p. 20). Despite systemic anti-Blackness in education structures, policies, and discourses (Dumas, 2016), Black educational spaces in the margins continue to sustain the actualization of Black youth radical healing (Ginwright, 2016) and empowerment (Travis & Leech, 2013).

According to ross (2021), “It is within these margins, that *Black educational fugitive space* [emphasis added] engages in struggling, in reimagining, and in becoming; it engages Black educational futurities, and considers blackness beyond the past and present—it nurtures the political act of Black dreaming” (p. 53). Black educational fugitive spaces (BEFS) are essential for contending with the specificity and centrality of Black suffering in traditional education spaces by supporting co-constructed realms of possibility. Thus, it is vital to expand the understanding and theorization of Black male adolescent experiences of healing and empowerment through community-based education programs that function as a Black educational fugitive space. Black male adolescent experiences are centered in this qualitative case study of The Blue Heart Foundation, a local community-based organization, that provides programming designed to mitigate the impacts of systemic anti-Blackness while fostering individual and collective healing and empowerment.

## Chapter 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.

(Garvey, as cited in Blaisdell, 2005, p. 25)

Traditional school environments often perpetuate racial profiling (Chavous et al., 2008), discrimination (Morris, 2019), and micro- and macro-aggressions (Compton-Lilly, 2020) that negatively impact the experiences and academic outcomes of Black youth (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Howard, 2008, 2013). This section of the paper will explore community-based programs that demonstrate culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum that is grounded in the lived experiences of Black students (Nelson et al., 2020), supports positive gendered racial identity and critical reflection (Kayser et al., 2018), and provides Africentric curriculum to promote academic engagement and achievement (Harvey & Hill, 2004). The theoretical frameworks of the study guided the review of literature and provided key terms for analysis across the studies, including: healing, critical consciousness, resilience, resistance, empowerment, and civic engagement.

The themes were developed to highlight the strengths-based aspects of community-based programs that center and uplift Black students, families, and communities' cultural values (Harvey & Hill, 2004), epistemologies (Lofton & Davis, 2015), myriad forms of capital (Ginwright, 2007; Warren, 2005), and collective reflection and action towards social justice (Goodkind et al., 2020). Hence, the review of the literature is organized into the three main pedagogical and curricular categories or themes that emerged across the studies: (a) gendered affinity groups; (b) STEM-oriented community programs; and (c) critical literacy and youth voice.



## Gendered Affinity Groups

Harvey and Hill (2004) analyzed the effects of an Africentric youth and family rites of passage program on Black adolescent boys. Data on 57 Black male adolescents between ages 11.5 and 14.5 were collected over a three-year period: 17 from the first cohort, 13 from the second cohort, and 27 from the third cohort. The Rites of Passage program provided an afterschool component, family enhancement and empowerment activities, and individual and family counseling. Data from interviews and focus groups indicated that the Africentric, family-oriented approach increased students' self-esteem and self-efficacy. Additionally, the program enhanced students' academic motivation and engagement by using culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum to promote their appreciation of reading, biology, math, and science.

Nelson et al. (2020) provided a case study of a support group conducted with Black adolescent males identified as having significant academic challenges. The group was co-facilitated by a white female school counselor and a Black male community leader. The primary goal of this school-community group was to facilitate a strength-based support group for Black male adolescents to have "authentic conversations" about institutional inequities regarding race and gender (p. 123). A key component of the program model included students sharing their personal, academic, and career life plans. Group members described how their individual beliefs and plans shifted throughout their group experience, which supported the data analysis revealing enhanced resilience, academic engagement, and motivation grounded in the students' values, lived experiences, and racial identities.

Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Watson (2014) conducted a phenomenological study that explored the experiences of Black and Latino male students within the Umoja Network for Young Men (UMOJA), an all-male mentoring program in an alternative high school. Their

research emphasizes the importance of an "ethos of care" and the concept of reciprocal love in fostering positive mentoring relationships. The study highlights how these relationships not only support academic success but also contribute to the social and emotional well-being of the participants. Centering the voices of the mentees allowed the authors to reveal how the mentoring experience allows these young men to navigate their identities and build a supportive community that challenges the negative stereotypes often associated with Black and Latino males. This study illustrates the significance of culturally responsive mentoring practices that prioritize care and connection, ultimately enhancing the educational experiences of these students.

Brooms (2017) examined the phenomenon of "otherfathering" in the educational experiences of Black males in a single-sex urban high school. This qualitative study highlights the critical role that adult Black males play in the lives of young Black male students, serving as mentors and father figures who provide guidance, support, and a sense of belonging. Brooms argues that these relationships are essential for fostering resilience and academic success among Black male students, particularly in environments where they may face systemic challenges and marginalization. The study reveals how the presence of these male role models not only impacts the students' educational outcomes but also helps them develop a positive racial identity and a sense of agency. By focusing on the narratives of the students and their mentors, Brooms contributes to the understanding of how gendered affinity groups can create supportive networks that empower Black males in their educational journeys.

The research underscores the profound impact of gendered affinity groups on the educational and socio-emotional outcomes of Black male youth. Through various culturally responsive and community-centered programs, these groups provide critical support systems that

address both academic and personal development. Harvey and Hill (2004) highlighted how an Africentric approach boosts self-esteem and academic engagement through culturally relevant pedagogy. Nelson et al. (2020) illustrated the transformative power of authentic conversations about race and gender facilitated by a diverse mentorship team, enhancing resilience and motivation. Similarly, Jackson, Sealey-Ruiz, and Watson (2014) emphasized the ethos of care and reciprocal love in mentoring relationships, fostering both academic success and emotional well-being. Broome (2017) further emphasized the crucial role of Black male mentors in fostering resilience, positive racial identity, and a sense of agency among Black male students. Collectively, these studies reveal that gendered affinity groups not only counteract systemic challenges but also cultivate empowering environments that promote holistic growth and thriving for Black male youth. The synthesis of these findings underscores the necessity of culturally responsive, community-based educational spaces that prioritize care, connection, and the affirmation of Black identities.

### **STEM-Oriented Community Programs**

The academic disciplines associated with science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) are at the forefront of many education policies and practices designed to mitigate the lack of resources and opportunities afforded to Black students (Garvin-Hudson & Jackson, 2018). Afterschool and summer STEM programs have been developed to support Black student success and to increase the potential for Black students to thrive in STEM courses and career trajectories. This section identifies community programs that foster positive science identity (Johnson, 2016), increase interest and engagement (Garvin-Hudson & Jackson, 2018), and enhance comprehension in STEM (King & Pringle, 2019). Additionally, these programs offer opportunities for Black students to lead hands-on activities and projects that address real-world

issues in their community (Parker et al., 2017; Tan & Barton, 2018), while providing supportive counterspaces to strengthen social networks (King & Pringle, 2019).

Garvin-Hudson and Jackson (2018) explored the impact of culturally relevant teaching and learning during a TRIO Upward Bound Summer Program for high school students in grades 9-12. Data collection included program artifacts and documents, student science journals, and two focus group interviews (one at the beginning, the other at the end of the summer program). The focus group interviews were designed to elicit the perspectives of students and to identify how a culturally relevant approach to science education impacted their summer science learning. The data indicated that, by providing students the opportunity to do science in meaningful and relevant ways, the science instruction and curriculum helped students to foster a more positive interest in science and STEM careers. Students were able to recognize their own strengths by seeing themselves represented in the curriculum and they were more “affirmed in and transformed by their learning” (p. 717).

Parker and colleagues (2017) evaluated the STEM Achievement in Baltimore Elementary Schools (SABES) program, which is a community partnership initiative that includes both in-school and afterschool STEM education for predominantly Black students in grades 3-5. Community-based organizations helped facilitate local STEM events that brought together teachers, students, families, other community members, and university-based partners to learn collaboratively about STEM topics and engage in student-driven, hands-on activities and projects to address real-world issues in their community (p. 42). Individual interviews were conducted with 12 participants, nine girls who identified as African American, one girl identified as Asian, and two boys identified as African American. The data highlighted an increase in student self-efficacy and academic engagement, particularly in STEM subjects such as engineering.

Ridgeway and Yerrick (2018) employed critical race theory and positioning theory to examine a case study of an afterschool science program for students in grades 7 and 8. The 13 participants (seven girls, six boys) were from a school district where a community bond referendum provided joint funding for STEM in-school, afterschool, and summer academic enrichment. The program focused on science activities, student research, tutoring, and career planning. The afterschool component was designed to affirm students' interest and engagement in STEM through science projects connected to their lived experiences while also leveraging community resources and the students' connections with each other and the community. The participants were involved in a community park effort to study and transform parts of their community through "ecological monitoring and strategic responsiveness" (p. 65). Findings from field notes and student interview data affirmed the centrality and salience of race among participants and their supportive mentors in fostering cultural pride and collective action to improve conditions in their community.

Tan and Barton (2018) investigated how STEM projects supported Black students from two low-income urban communities engaged in sustained STEM-rich making to initiate positive change in their communities. Data was collected from two-year long ethnographic data across two community-based programs serving upper elementary and middle school Black students. Data collection included "field notes, biweekly conversation groups with youth about their making experiences, artifact interviews, informal conversations with club staff and parents, and the youths' work" (p. 52). The researchers highlighted two cases. The first case focused on one Black girl's STEM engagement and performance across one school year. The second case explored how, through a hands-on STEM project, two students developed a critical understanding of access to STEM online resources. The data indicated how the community

ethnography was an empowering pedagogical approach to support the youth in STEM-making to address intersecting social justice issues.

Johnson (2016) conducted a case study to fill the gap in research on assessments of bridge programs for Black high school students pursuing STEM degrees. Data collection included demographic data, journals, a focus-group interview and program evaluation reports. This study highlights the potential of STEM summer bridge programs to promote college persistence of Black high school students by using culturally relevant pedagogy to foster students' positive science identity. Findings revealed that the program assisted students' development of a science identity through the intentional use of culturally relevant activities that affirm the students' racial identity. Additionally, the context of a summer bridge program afforded a better understanding of how Black students navigate the early social and academic aspects of transitioning to college.

The synthesis of research on STEM-oriented community programs highlights the multifaceted benefits these initiatives provide for Black students, particularly in fostering positive science identities, increasing engagement and interest in STEM, and enhancing comprehension in these critical fields. Garvin-Hudson and Jackson (2018) demonstrated how culturally relevant teaching in the TRIO Upward Bound Summer Program cultivated a deeper interest in STEM careers by allowing students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, thereby affirming their strengths and transforming their learning experiences. Parker et al. (2017) found that the STEM Achievement in Baltimore Elementary Schools (SABES) program significantly boosted students' self-efficacy and academic engagement through community partnerships that facilitated collaborative, hands-on STEM activities. Ridgeway and Yerrick (2018) emphasized the importance of connecting STEM learning to students' lived experiences

and community resources, thereby fostering cultural pride and collective action. Tan and Barton (2018) highlighted the role of sustained, STEM-rich making projects in empowering Black students to address social justice issues in their communities. Lastly, Johnson (2016) underscored the effectiveness of STEM summer bridge programs in promoting college persistence by using culturally relevant pedagogy to help Black students develop a strong science identity. These studies collectively underscore the critical role of culturally responsive, community-based STEM programs in supporting the academic and personal growth of Black students, providing them with the skills, confidence, and motivation to pursue STEM careers and contribute positively to their communities.

### **Critical Literacy & Youth Voice**

From the time of American chattel slavery to the era of Jim Crow, and from the movement for Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter, the empowering potential of literacy has been central to the pursuit of quality education and racial justice for Black families and communities (Edwards et al., 2010; Lathan, 2015; McArthur, 2016; Muhammad, 2012). Aligned with the historical legacy of Black freedom struggles, *critical literacy* is a pedagogical approach that actualizes the literate capacities and justice-oriented praxis of Black students by situating them as both learners and creators that engage in critical analyses and creative collaborations through various textual modalities. According to Morrell (2008),

Critical literacy instruction needs to fundamentally be concerned with the consumption, production, and distribution of texts; counter-texts that not only name the workings of power, but critical texts that serve as the manifestation of an alternate reality or a not-yet-realized present that only enters into the imagination through the interaction with new and authentically liberating words that are created by writers as cultural workers. (p. 115)

Critical literacy is an empowering approach to critique systemic injustices while envisioning and expressing a humanizing alternative through collaborative projects. Similarly, youth voice

promotes the “participation of young people in reshaping their worlds” through praxis-oriented research projects (Yonezawa & Jones, 2009). In this section of the paper, youth voice is coupled with critical literacy because many of the programs discussed use literacy to center the lived experiences and social justice praxis of Black students. Consequently, the following will be an examination of school-community partnership programs that utilize various approaches to critical literacy and youth voice to “help students analyze and resist the reproduction of current societal power structures” (Turner et al., 2013, p. 344). These programs improve Black students’ ability to decode texts and develop counternarratives to hegemonic whiteness and deficit ideologies (Acosta & Duggins, 2018; Turner et al., 2013), foster collective racial and cultural identity (Ginwright, 2007), increase civic engagement (Lawton, 2019), and sustain Black students’ cultural knowledge to develop their political consciousness through literacy projects (Brooks & Smith, 2013).

Brooks and Smith (2013) explored the instructional practices around literacy that characterized the work of a community-based arts program designed for urban adolescents. Two primary sources of data were collected: field notes on approximately 35 hours of instruction across the arts classes, including African drumming and dance, hip-hop dance, music, poetry/spoken word, and video editing; and interviews with the six students and program staff, including the founder of Arts Asylum, the director of youth programming, and all but one of the experienced staff members. Four distinct instructional episodic structures were observed: explicit instruction, collaborative or individual construction that provided time for students to engage in creative literacy and artistic activity, serial performance, and scaffolded practice that is informed by a belief that students are capable of success and can develop deep engagement in literate activity. Findings indicated students embraced cultural knowledge, developed historical and



political understandings of social justice issues, and collaborated on mixed-media literacy projects.

Acosta and Duggins (2018) examined the impact of a pilot community-based literacy tutoring program for Black readers in grades 3-5. A mixed methods analysis was conducted to develop a more comprehensive assessment of the student experiences and outcomes.

Quantitative findings indicated significant improvements in decoding, and qualitative data revealed counternarratives that were cultivated with the support of community volunteers. This study emphasizes the influence and importance of leveraging relationships with Black communities in promoting Black student success by affirming their intellectual and cultural proficiencies and cultivating identities that reinforce their academic self-concept and future potential.

Lawton (2019) used the intersecting ideologies and practices of community engagement, social practice art, and community-based art education to conduct a case study exploring the impact of a university-school-community collaboration focusing on civic responsibility and social justice. There were six college student mentors and four consistent Black middle school participants who co-created “neighborhood-themed alphabet books to promote literacy and social justice” (p. 213). The program culminated in a reading performance celebration with youth and adults from the community. Results from this study revealed how engaged pedagogy and community-based art education can support Black students to creatively and collaboratively respond to community and social issues while building solidarity and networks of support.

Lee (2019) conducted a three-year qualitative case study to examine how an African community-based organization fostered the literacy development of African immigrant high school girls who were identified as English Language Learners (ELLs) and Students with

Interrupted Formal Education (SIFE). Data was collected through document analyses, ethnographic observations, interviews with staff, and a focus group interview with eight participants who were consistent in the program and represented a range of literacy skills. The findings indicated that the literacy program fostered critical literacy by leveraging multilingualism to enhance academic self-efficacy and engagement, “to bridge cultural knowledge within local and global communities,” and “to build relationships as a way to foster critical inquiry for girls and their community” (p. 11).

Green (2013) explored the acquisition of literacy skills through a media production program rooted in Black culture. This ethnographic study demonstrated an empowering impact for the students in utilizing creative expression to produce critical, community-oriented radio show content. Students participated in a series of culturally relevant activities to inform their radio program. Such activities included political education workshops, ongoing meetings in a youth development organization, and summer camps designed to “cultivate youth leadership and community organizing knowledge and skills” (p. 319). Through radio production, the students were also making visible the many contributions of Black communities, which enhanced student awareness, strengthened their solidarity, and increased community involvement. Results indicated that students valued the use of personal life experiences, applied multimedia production for consciousness raising, and developed an appreciation of their cultural history to foster solidarity and collective action.

Akom and colleagues (2008) outline and elucidate the concept of Youthtopias as a theoretical framework consisting of key principles and practices drawn from Critical Race Theory (CRT), youth participatory action research (YPAR), and critical media literacy (CML). Youthtopias are defined as, “traditional and non-traditional educational spaces...where young

people depend on one another's skills, perspectives, and experiential knowledge, to generate original, multi-textual, youth-driven cultural products that embody a critique of oppression, a desire for social justice, and ultimately lay the foundation for community empowerment and social change" (p. 110). The researchers demonstrate the elements of Youthtopias based on analyses of data from their community-oriented youth projects, such as the Youth as Public Intellectuals (YPI) program. The YPI youth participants demonstrated increased agency and developing critical consciousness, and enhanced civic engagement.

Turner (2012) conducted an ethnographic study during a year-long multimodal media production (MMP) extended-day program serving 30 middle school students. Data collection included pre- and post-surveys, fieldnotes, video/audio recordings of classroom interaction, course materials, and student projects. The researcher gathered data on the 30 middle school students and focused the data analysis on a case study of one Black female student who used the production of multimodal Hip Hop texts to creatively express her developing critical awareness of societal issues. The findings suggest that the program provided a dialectical space for the Black female participant to make meaning through multimodal texts and engage in community-based research to develop new literacies, particularly critical media literacy.

Based on the data from the 30 middle school students in the previous study, Turner et al. (2013) published an article to elucidate the YPAR components of the after school CML course called Critical MultiModal Hip Hop Production (CMHHP). The CMHHP was found to be a pedagogical method that allowed the Students of Color to use and legitimize African American Language as a cultural and historical extension of Afro-Diasporic literacy practices to articulate their lived experiences of marginalization and oppression. Also, CMHHP empowered students to develop counternarratives to the status quo, and envision a new, more socially just world. In

addition to creating hip hop music and music videos that expressed the students' evolving awareness, participants of the CMHHP program "interrogate[d] their world" through a co-created, co-analyzed community survey as part of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) (p. 347).

Hope and colleagues (2014) examined how eight Black high school students (six boys and two girls) participating in an after-school YPAR program understood issues of racial discrimination and inequality in their schools. Students engaged in a weekly discussion series on various forms of media and analyzed how the imagery and messages influenced their own perspectives, and then came up with the question: "How does youth culture act as a mechanism to stimulate critical consciousness?" (p. 90) Findings from interview data indicated students were encouraged through the YPAR curriculum to recognize personal experiences of racial discrimination, lack of institutional support, and inequities between school districts as a reflection of systemic injustices. Additionally, the youth displayed a developing critical awareness and desire to advance social justice.

Anyon et al. (2018) explored the impact of an afterschool community-based academic enrichment program designed to engage a racially diverse sample of middle school students, with high proportions self-identified as Black or African refugees. The authors piloted a YPAR program to assess whether the participants increased their perceptions of: "(a) opportunities for voice and choice in the program, such as planning and leading activities or making rules, and (b) supportive relationships with program staff who listen, show respect, and care about their ideas" (p. 11). Researchers surveyed YPAR participants (n=33) and a comparison group (n=32) to chart the change they experienced on two program curricular dimensions during nine months of programming. Results indicated that the students who participated in the 26-week YPAR

curriculum “experienced positive and statistically significant changes in perceived youth voice and adult support, in contrast to a lack of change in the comparison group” (p. 16).

Over the course of three years, Akom et al. (2016) explored a YPAR 2.0 model that coupled digital technologies with ground-truthing. Ground-truthing is “an approach in which community members work with researchers to collect and verify ‘public’ data” (p. 1277). The researchers trained three cohorts of 30 students each and conducted extensive interviews with 30 youth: 19 Black, 10 Latinx, 1 Iranian American. This YPAR project helped spark a “food revolution” in East Oakland that led to an increase in self-esteem, environmental stewardship, academic engagement, and positioned urban youth to become community leaders and community builders who are connected and committed to the health and well-being of their neighborhoods. Findings indicate YPAR 2.0 helps youth to address social inequalities by using local knowledge in strategic ways to deepen civic engagement, leverage community assets, democratize data, inform policy, and expand educational opportunity.

Ginwright (2007) elucidated the concept of critical social capital through community-based organizations in Black communities that provide Black youth with intergenerational ties that cultivate expectations and opportunities for Black youth to engage in community change activities. Data for this study were collected from three years of participant observation and interviews of 15 Black youth who were members of Leadership Excellence, a small community-based organization in Oakland, California. In Ginwright’s (2007) study, there were three important aspects identified through the work of a community-based organization with Black youth that contributed to building their critical social capital. According to Ginwright (2007), critical social capital counters deficit perspectives of Black youth by reframing them as engaged political agents in their community, and it helps Black youth to understand their personal

concerns within a social justice context while promoting positive collective racial and cultural identity.

Ginwright and Cammarota (2007) examined the relationship between two youth-serving organizations and youth agency in urban communities. Agency was defined as “young people’s ability to analyze and respond to problems impeding their social and economic advancement” (p. 694). Participant observations and interviews of 15 Black youth were conducted during summer activities, including the summer camp and weekly political education sessions. The program provided the participants with opportunities to engage in youth organizing, spoken word, volunteering, and participation in civic activities to raise consciousness and develop potential remedies to issues in their school and community. Results from this study underscore the empowering potential of community-based programs and spaces to engage urban youth social justice-oriented praxis.

### **Discussion**

The findings from this review of literature highlight the experiences of Black students across various strengths-based school-community programs that advance empowerment and disrupt systemic anti-Blackness. Based on a synthesis of the theoretical frameworks that incorporate the modified PYD models and the Critical Race Achievement Ideology (CRAI) framework, the following analysis explores the ways in which strengths-based school-community collaborations actualize Black student critical consciousness, resilience, resistance (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016), sense of community, and engaged citizenship (Travis & Leech, 2013). To streamline this analysis, I merged CRAI’s six interrelated beliefs and attitudes with the modified PYD components of critical consciousness, resilience, and resistance.

The critical consciousness component coincides with the CRAI's emphasis on Black students' awareness of the myriad forms of systemic anti-Blackness and how it obstructs personal and collective access to necessary resources and opportunities. The conception of resilience, as outlined by the modified PYD, aligns with four of the beliefs and attitudes identified by the CRAI model that counter hegemonic whiteness and foster pro-Black identities and aspirations:

1. Students believe in themselves and feel that individual effort and self-accountability lead to school success.
2. Students view achievement as a human character trait that can define membership in their racial group.
3. Students possess a pragmatic attitude about the utility of schooling for their future as members of a subdominant racial group.
4. Students value multicultural competence as a skill for success. (Carter, 2008, pp. 491-2)

Lastly, the conception of resistance as defined by the modified PYD models compliments the CRAI component that focuses on Black students' development of "adaptive strategies for overcoming racism in the school context that allow them to maintain high academic achievement and a strong racial/ethnic self-concept" (Carter, 2008, p. 492). Ultimately, the aforementioned components are essential for Black students to actualize their personal and collective success in spite of systemic anti-Blackness.

### **Critical Consciousness**

Critical consciousness is a core competency for Black students to develop as they engage the intersections of racism in their schools and broader society (Carter, 2008; Clonan-Roy et al.,

2016; Goodkind et al., 2020). In their study of two culturally relevant community-based STEM makerspace programs, Tan and Barton (2008) explored upper elementary and middle school students' sustained engagement in STEM and identified a positive impact on their developing critical consciousness. For example, two of the participants conducted a survey with community members who indicated concerns about safe commutes for the youth, which sparked the students' idea to invent a solar-powered light-up backpack. After struggling to get the technology to work, the students recognized other youth may have similar barriers to access the necessary information for STEM-making. The students conducted interviews with peers, program staff, and community members before deciding to change their project to a do-it-yourself video series:

After interviewing, they decided to expand their rationale to address new related scales of injustice: the stereotyping of people like them in STEM. They noted the lack of STEM resources for people in their community to do STEM because of local economies and practices. As Thomas said, "In [city] there are not many afterschool STEM programs, and definitely not many kid-friendly makerspaces. Where will kids learn these skills? In our videos, of course!" (p. 57).

This example demonstrates how encouraging Black students to pursue STEM fields and careers also requires an understanding of the hegemonic policies and practices that maintain socioeconomic inequities.

## **Counterspaces**

*Counterspaces* are also essential for the development of Black students' critical consciousness. Counterspaces are physical settings as well as ideological and conceptual approaches designed to support culturally relevant learning environments that sustain Black student identities and competencies (King & Pringle, 2019). Counterspaces provide essential ideological, social, and material resources to support academic engagement and social justice praxis (Akom et al., 2008; Wade-James et al., 2019; King & Pringle, 2019; Turner, 2012). As previously discussed, some researchers have identified these types of empowering learning environments as "Youthtopias"



(Akom et al., 2008). In their study, Akom and colleagues (2008) delineated how the Youth as Public Intellectuals (YPI) program exemplified the Youthtopia framework. YPI was designed to work in four phases to develop and sustain critical consciousness through a two-year YPAR and youth media justice program. These four phases are aligned with Goodkind and colleagues' (2020) definition of critical consciousness that centers the development of critical reflection among youth, while also emphasizing political efficacy and critical action.

The first phase of YPI's program involved exploring structures of oppression with students in critical inquiry groups (CIGs), which help to train youth to critically examine how systems of power influence their lives and communities through issues such as juvenile justice, disparities in healthcare, environmental racism, educational inequities, poverty, and additional intersectional concerns. Coinciding with Goodkind and colleagues' (2020) notion of political efficacy, phase two of the YPI program utilized role-playing, workshops, videos, and other activities that helped to support students in challenging anti-Black ideologies and practices.

In the third and fourth phases of the YPI program, critical action was cultivated through the use of media-based projects that were informed by research and pedagogical tools such as participatory surveys, participant observation, photo-voice, and focus groups. Additionally, the studies in this review utilized web research, identity maps, individual interviews, archival research, oral histories, and policy analyses to support students' developing critical consciousness (Akom, et al., 2016; Anyon et al., 2018; Ginwright et al., 2005; Ginwright, 2007; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Turner et al., 2013).

Brooks and Smith's (2013) study offers another example of counterspaces, through an analysis of a literacy-infused arts program that culminated in an interdisciplinary production performed for local community members and students. As one student from the program

recognized, the youth were provided a counterspace to raise consciousness among themselves and their community at large,

We felt as if we actually touched a couple of people because people were coming to us like, “Did y’all actually write that?” “Did this really happen?” We were like, this really happened [the Rwanda genocide]. Like, we knew but we didn’t know, we didn’t know that other people didn’t know. Like, adults came to us after the show like, “Was that true, did it really happen?” and it really did happen. So we felt good at the end of the day.

The culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum of the arts program contributed to students’ political knowledge and provided space to connect with peers and community.

In Turner’s (2012) study of a multimodal media production (MMP) course, an extended day program served as a counterspace promoting students’ critical thinking and consciousness raising through research and creative media projects. The MMP course demonstrated the components of a Youthtopia by foregrounding the experiential knowledge of the students as they engaged in intersectional critiques of dominant ideologies and discourse. Community-based education spaces that center Black students’ lived experiences through intersectional critical analyses and display the elements of counterspaces contribute to the actualization of Black student critical consciousness and commitment to social justice, thereby strengthening resilience and resistance to anti-Black ideologies and practices.

### **Resilience (Individual & Collective)**

Community-based programs in this review of literature utilized culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum (Garvin-Hudson & Jackson, 2018) to enhance Black students’ resilience by supporting their self-esteem (Harvey & Hill, 2004), positive racial and gender identity (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Goodkind et al., 2020), and critical race achievement

ideology (CRAI) (Akom et al., 2016; Brooks & Smith, 2013; Hope et al., 2013; King & Pringle, 2019). Additionally, school-community programs support resilience strategies that increase the potential for academic success by fostering positive academic identities, values, and peer networks among Black students, (Goodkind et al., 2020; King & Pringle, 2019). The beliefs and values that contribute to Black student resilience were demonstrated in Garvin-Hudson and Jackson's (2018) study, which explored the impact of a culturally relevant science program on students' interests in science education and STEM careers. There were two important themes that emerged from the data indicating a significant impact on student resilience: guest speakers of Color and knowledge for future aspirations. The STEM curriculum included a guest speaker series called Lab Out Loud, which strengthened students' self-efficacy and racial identities by providing opportunities to interact with Black professionals in STEM-related fields from their community:

One student shared, 'The Lab Out Loud presentations helped me to see that people of Color can excel in science just as much as White and Asian people...They showed me I could do it too'. Similarly, another student commented, 'Having African Americans share their careers with me, made me feel like we can do any career we choose to do as African American people...I can do anything I want to'. (Garvin-Hudson & Jackson, 2018, p. 722)

Regarding knowledge for future aspirations, many students highlighted the importance of their science learning experiences, recognizing that what they learned in the summer science course would "help prepare them for the future" and would provide a "head start" in future science courses (Garvin-Hudson & Jackson, 2018, p. 722). In addition, students indicated that the summer science course prepared them for coursework at the college level. One student stated,

“I’m sure that when I get to college I’ll have to do a dissection. Without Ms. Brittany’s class, I never would have known how to do one” (Garvin-Hudson & Jackson, 2018, p. 722). In alignment with other studies on Black youth resilience (Carter, 2008), both the guest speakers and the knowledge for future aspirations supported students’ self-efficacy and provided a culturally relevant basis to recognize their ability to thrive academically as being part of a larger project of racial and social justice.

Carter (2008) also identifies Black students’ value of multicultural competence as integral to their academic resilience. Students demonstrate multicultural competence when they “understand the utility of acquiring various social and cultural codes for navigating the school context and then know when to situationally apply specific sets of codes” (Carter, 2008, p. 487). These sets of multicultural codes were supported in Brooks and Smith’s (2013) study of a community-based arts program, where students were taught both canonical academic knowledge and cultural knowledge. For example, in the music class, students learned about operas and developed their own operatic exchanges about their experiences in school. Cultural knowledge, as demonstrated in the dance class, positioned African culture and history as foundational to the students’ academic engagement and connection with their heritage and community. One student stated,

[Arts Asylum] is not just a place to dance or write but a place to learn stuff that you didn’t learn in school. When we do the dance, we just don’t do it, we learn the history behind the dance....So we just don’t learn the dance, we learned about why we dancing and what drums we using, what the song’s about, what it means, and what does the dance mean to our ancestors....So, like, just learning about not only dance, because we got so many dances today that kids just do just to do; they don’t know the research or the history about it. But when we learn our history, it makes us, like, feel comfortable with the dance and want to dance it more, because we know not only that we dancing but what we dancing for and what we representing when we do that dance. (Brooks & Smith, 2013, p. 55-6)

This response highlights how multicultural competence can be developed by sustaining the African roots of Black students' culture to enhance their racial identity development while also increasing proficiency in canonical knowledge.

Similar to the findings from Brooks and Smith's (2013) study, students from Harvey and Hill's (2004) rites of passage program developed self-efficacy and resilience through Africentric pedagogy and curriculum. The after-school component, including an empowering youth retreat, "promoted collaborative activities and enhanced bonding among the participating youths by increasing trust and respect for one another" (p. 68). The culturally relevant curriculum helped strengthen the students' collective racial identity through positive peer networks, which ultimately mitigated against potential negative influences related to illicit drug use and "high-risk sexual activity" (p. 67).

Additionally, through the co-construction of stories that affirm student perspectives and challenge deficit ideologies during the STEM camp, the students were able to critically examine shared experiences of marginalization as a way to build solidarity and recognize their individual success as being part of a collective struggle for social justice. Black students' self-efficacy and sense of collective racial pride garnered through community-based programs are also vital for sustaining resistance to anti-Blackness (Goodkind et al., 2020).

## **Resistance**

According to Carter (2008), Black student resistance is demonstrated through "adaptive strategies for overcoming racism in the school context that allow them to maintain high academic achievement and a strong racial/ethnic self-concept" (p. 492). These resistance strategies, including self-advocating and collectively voicing concerns regarding school-related racial injustices (Akom et al., 2016; Hope et al., 2013), emanate from and affirm Black students'

critical awareness of pervasive forms of anti-Blackness in schools such as racial profiling (Chapman, 2013), adultification (Brown, 2017), and punitive discipline (Gregory et al., 2010). For instance, in a study of a YPAR program for Black high school students, data from semi-structured individual interviews revealed experiences of racial stereotyping, discrimination from teachers and staff, lack of institutional support for a positive racial climate, and lack of racial diversity in curricular offerings (Hope et al., 2014).

The YPAR curriculum supported the students' developing critical consciousness, which was demonstrated through their social justice-oriented critiques of racialized experiences, such as racial profiling by teachers and peers in their school. Additionally, the students were able to "interrogate how schools can be improved to provide more education around race, racism, and oppression and how they must conduct themselves to navigate the system and negotiate discriminatory practices in schools" (Hope et al., 2014, p. 105). This YPAR program provided the students with an affinity space designed to allow for safe and open discussion of race and racism, "perspective-taking and evaluation skills to interrogate these experiences," and the critical concepts to identify and articulate the inadequacies of their school curriculum in addressing their personal racialized experiences within a social justice context (p. 103).

### **Sense of Community**

Black students' sense of community involves feeling a socioemotional connection and belonging to a group that is structured to support their needs, competencies, and identity development (Travis & Leech, 2013). School community programs from this review of literature promoted a sense of community by cultivating positive collective gendered racial identities among Black boys (Nelson et al., 2020), providing dialectical spaces for students to create counter-narratives to anti-Black ideologies (Turner et al., 2013), and developing communities of

practice (Brooks & Smith, 2013) and counterhegemonic figured communities (Acosta & Duggins, 2018) that support student engagement, academic proficiency, and positive collective racial identity.

Turner and colleagues' (2013) study of a critical multimodal hip hop production (CMHHP) program offers another example of a pedagogical and curricular strategy that supported students' sense of community through critical dialogues about social justice issues. In the culmination of the program, students collectively identified what they felt were the key elements of their community and they co-created a community research project to address concerns of safety. The instructor provided a "dialectical space for students to synthesize their understanding of the data using CMHHP and their African American Language skills to empower the students in the creation of counter-narratives that challenge the status quo and envision the socially just world they desire and believe is possible" (p. 349). The dialectical space of the extended-day program sustained students' interest and skills in African American Language and literacy practices to bolster their sense of connection and community within a social justice context.

*Communities of practice* and *counterhegemonic figured communities* are additional pedagogical approaches that amplify the positive impact of community for Black students (Acosta & Duggins, 2018; Brooks & Smith, 2013; Pinkard et al., 2017). Communities of practice offer collective learning opportunities for groups of students to explore their interests and to develop mastery of academic skills and knowledge (Pinkard et al., 2017). In Brooks and Smith's (2013) study, the arts instructors created a supportive learning environment by tailoring their pedagogy to attend to the range of student proficiencies. One student from the dance class noted,

“I was the worst dancer you could ever see, ever.” After lots of practice and with the help of his instructor and peers, he became the central figure in a masquerade performance:

When I first got to perform with it, and I start to dance with it, I got more...it’s like a new side of me that just came out of me onstage under that mask. Something that came out of me just came out and just lashed out, something that I didn’t know that I had in me.

(Brooks & Smith, 2013, p. 57)

Relatedly, counter hegemonic figured communities (CFC’s) are learning spaces designed to sustain Black students’ connection to their heritage, increase their access to mentors and resources, and extend opportunities for socioemotional and academic development beyond the traditional school environment (Acosta & Duggins, 2018). In their study of a community-based literacy program, Acosta and Duggins (2018) employed a framework aligned with counterhegemonic figured communities and culturally relevant pedagogy. This approach to literacy development helped to establish and reinforce positive peer and adult networks within the community. Taken together, the studies in this section suggest that school-community collaborations can empower Black students with a profound sense of community by uplifting their collective racial and gendered identities and providing counterspaces to enhance academic skills and mastery (Acosta & Duggins, 2018; Lee, 2020; Nelson et al., 2020; Turner et al., 2013).

### **Active & Engaged Citizenship**

According to Travis and Leech (2013) empowerment-based youth development framework, Black youth empowerment develops through experiences and relationships that link their sense of community to active and engaged citizenship. Active and engaged citizenship is a multidimensional construct that includes a sense of civic connection, civic duty, civic skills, and civic participation (Travis & Leech, 2013). The empowerment process involves leveraging Black



youth's critical consciousness and positive collective identity to forge a sense of civic connection and civic duty as they develop the civic skills to advance social justice in their communities. In the studies included in this review of literature, researchers and practitioners utilized youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) to boost the civic connection and participation of Black youth through student-driven research projects designed to address social justice issues (Akom et al., 2016; Anyon et al., 2018; Ginwright et al., 2005; Ginwright, 2007; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Turner et al., 2013).

For example, in an afterschool YPAR program, middle school students developed projects focused on issues that were pertinent to their lived experiences (Anyon et al., 2018). Topics included discrimination toward the LGBTQ community, the need for urban gardens, and police brutality. The group that focused on police brutality analyzed media coverage of police violence along with their personal experiences related to racial profiling with the police in their community. Subsequently, the students engaged in collective advocacy through a youth dialogue at the neighborhood police station, “followed by a presentation to board members of the city housing authority about the group’s concerns and recommendations for changing dynamics between youth and police” (p. 14).

Civic skills and participation were key aspects of a YPAR program that used “location-based technology, new media, and digital organizing to engage youth in ‘people powered place-making’ and urban health promotion” (Akom et. al, 2016, p. 1288). This YPAR program was designed to shift the paradigm of traditional top-down research methodology by centering the local knowledge of students and their communities to develop and implement technological innovations to address issues that they deem most pressing. The high school student participants chose to focus their YPAR project on issues of food access and food security in their

neighborhood. Workshops on critical theories and concepts provided the students a social justice context to critically analyze their chosen topic. With a mobile mapping platform and critical understanding cultivated through the workshops, the students were able to identify trends in the availability of quality food options and connect the data through problem-posing activities to issues such as structural and environmental racism.

--The Youth as Public Intellectuals (YPI) program in the San Francisco Bay Area provided Black youth with opportunities to develop and express their sense of civic duty through social justice praxis (Akom et. al, 2008). During the time of the study, the Jena Six case brought national attention to the racial tensions Black youth endure in schools. In one of the YPI sessions, the youth were asked how they could encourage more Black and Latinx youth to participate in organizing activities, and after developing multiple outreach strategies, the youth planned an event called, “Town hall on Community Activism: A Dialogue between the Hip Hop generation and the Civil Rights generation on Activism and Social Justice” (Akom et. al, 2008, p, 120). In addition to engaging the town hall audience of over 250 people to convey the urgency of political organizing and civic participation, the YPI youth broadcasted their message on a local radio station to address racism locally and to build a base of support for the Jena Six. The YPI town hall event also demonstrates the importance of critical social capital (Ginwright, 2007).

These three components of critical social capital were embedded in the Young Black Leaders (YBL) program, an Oakland community-based organization (Ginwright, 2007). First, Black youth were framed as civic problem solvers by centering their concerns with systemic marginalization and encouraging self-advocacy, rather than focusing on adapting to the norms of whiteness in order to be legitimated by the civic officials to whom the youth addressed concerns

about their community (e.g., related to policing and lack of socioeconomic opportunities) (Ginwright, 2007). Second, the program boosted cultural pride and strengthened collective racial identity through political education activities that allowed for systemic analyses of racism. Lastly, the youth “reframed personal issues (e.g., being 16 and pregnant) as political issues (e.g., being denied the right to graduate from school)” (Ginwright, 2007, p. 416). Taken together, the three aspects of critical social capital contribute to Black students’ sense of community, as well as their active and engaged citizenship to resist anti-Blackness. By leveraging the civic capacities of Black students towards social justice, active and engaged citizenship reflects the empowering potential of actualizing Black student resilience, resistance, and critical consciousness.

## **Conclusion**

The strengths-based community programs and school-community partnerships in this review of literature demonstrated three key components of effective educational practice designed to actualize Black student healing and empowerment: (a) culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy; (b) the use of counterspaces; and (c) a Black radical praxis. As previously discussed, culturally relevant pedagogy centers Black students’ cultural identities and competencies while enhancing sociopolitical consciousness and academic success (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). Counterspaces provide dialectical learning environments for students to co-construct counternarratives to gendered racial stereotypes (King & Pringle, 2019) and anti-Black ideologies (Turner et al., 2013), while also developing communities of practice (Brooks & Smith, 2013) and counterhegemonic figured communities (Acosta & Duggins, 2018) that support student engagement, academic proficiency (Lee, 2019), and positive collective racial identity (Harvey & Hill, 2004). An essential aspect of counterspaces is that they are designed to foster a

Black radical praxis in which Black youth develop a critical understanding of the systemic conditions that require transformation towards social justice (Ginwright, 2007).

Culturally relevant pedagogy is rooted in the promulgation of pro-Black counternarratives that affirm and sustain the inherent capacities of Black students. A pertinent example is reflected in the culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum of Acosta and Duggins's (2018) community-based literacy program where three pro-Black counternarratives were identified, including asserting Black humanity, affirming Black intelligence, and cultivating identities of possibility and achievement:

One important way was through the transmission of powerful counternarratives from adult community workers to youth, which were based on personal experiences, critical analysis of literary works, and oral storytelling of historical events. Counternarratives attested to the resilience, ingenuity, and determination of African Americans as a collective group. Counterstories also transmitted messages affirming the individual and collective capabilities of African Americans. Moreover, adult community workers passed down counternarratives that offered Black youth strategies for navigating and negotiating an often racially hostile world. (Acosta & Duggins, 2018, p. 53)

This example reflects how the empowering impact of culturally relevant pedagogy is magnified through the use of counterspaces. In alignment with the concept of Youthtopias (Akom et al., 2008), counterspaces should include five core elements:

1. An explicit commitment to understand how race intersects with other forms of social oppression such as class, gender, religion, nationality, sexuality, phenotype, accent, immigration status, and special needs;
2. Challenging traditional paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of students of color;
3. Fore-grounding the experiential knowledge of students so that young people and adults are “co-constructing” the learning environment;
4. A commitment to developing critical consciousness; and finally,

5. A commitment to social justice. (p.116)

Across the studies in this review, the core elements of counterspaces corresponded with a Black radical praxis that was developed through cultural workshops, history lessons, political education, and YPAR projects designed to actualize individual and collective empowerment (Akom et al., 2008; Brooks & Smith; Ginwright, 2007; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Harvey & Hill, 2004; King & Pringle, 2019; Turner, 2012; Wade-James et al., 2019). Consequently, the pedagogy of community workers, teachers, and school counselors must be grounded in pedagogical theories that center the lived experiences of Black students from an empowerment-based youth development perspective (Travis & Leech, 2013):

Teachers must embrace theories such as critical race theory, settler colonialism, Black feminism, dis/ability, critical race studies, and other critical theories that have the ability to interrogate anti-Blackness and frame experiences with injustice, focusing the moral compass toward a North Star that is ready for a long and dissenting fight for educational justice. (Love, 2019, p. 12)

Black radical praxis is the embodiment of the Black Radical Tradition's principles in practical, actionable efforts to combat systemic oppression and foster healing and empowerment within Black communities (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016; Goodkind et al., 2020). It is critical in this context because it translates historical and theoretical frameworks into tangible strategies for social change. Addressing the core of injustice, Black radical praxis involves developing critical consciousness, where individuals and communities gain a profound understanding of the endemic and systemic nature of anti-Black racism and oppression (Turner et al., 2013). This awareness, which includes both affective and cognitive components, is the foundation for

grassroots community organizing, mobilizing collective action to challenge and dismantle systemic injustices (Travis & Leech, 2013).

Black radical praxis provides the tools and strategies to envision and co-create pro-Black counterspaces that affirm Black identity, offering refuges of resistance and solidarity that nurture a sense of belonging and collective power. Abolition and transformative justice within this praxis shifts the focus from punitive measures to restorative and healing practices by addressing the root causes of harm and fostering communal healing (Ginwright, 2016; Love, 2019).

Additionally, cultural resistance plays a significant role, using music, art, and literature to reclaim and celebrate Black identity and history (Akom et. al, 2008). Political education is also essential for equipping communities with the knowledge and skills to engage in radical actions aimed at achieving justice and equality.

Hence, Black radical praxis is not only a continuation of the rich legacy of the Black Radical Tradition but also a dynamic and adaptive approach to addressing contemporary challenges faced by Black communities (Dumas, 2016, 2018). Ultimately, the use of culturally sustaining pedagogy in pro-Black counterspaces is crucial for supporting Black students' healing and empowerment processes through a Black radical praxis that sustains critical awareness and collective action to address structural inequities and promote social justice.

### Chapter 3 METHODOLOGY

Without new *visions*, we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics, but a *process that can and must transform us*.

(Kelley, 2002, xii, emphasis added)

This study aims to contribute to asset-based research on Black male youth by focusing on their personal and collective healing and empowerment in community-based education spaces. These youth face significant challenges in urban contexts that reinforce and reproduce race-based trauma (Ginwright, 2010a), including being relegated to under-resourced urban schools (Howard, 2008), being the least supported academically and socially (Noguera, 2014), and facing biases and stereotypes from teachers (Dumas & Nelson, 2016). To support Black male youth healing and empowerment (Ginwright, 2016; Travis & Leech, 2013), community-based spaces are crucial. Such spaces support positive racial and gender identity exploration while cultivating collective advocacy and action for Black liberation. Therefore, this study intentionally centers on these critical aspects of Black male youth development.

To this end, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. During program activities, what observable behaviors or interactions suggest that participants are experiencing healing and empowerment?
2. How do Blue Heart staff describe their experiences in supporting Black male youth?
3. From the perspective of Blue Heart alumni, which elements of the programming were most influential in their healing and empowerment journey?
4. Which specific Blue Heart components or activities reflect a Black educational fugitive space?

This chapter begins with the design of the study and sample selection. Next, I describe the methods for data collection and analyses. Thereafter, I discuss the validity, reliability, and the limitations of the study.

## **Research Design**

### **Qualitative Case Study**

To conduct this case study, I used a qualitative approach to explore Black male youth experiences in The Blue Heart Foundation (Blue Heart), which is a community-based youth development organization based in Southeast San Diego. The underlying purpose of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of phenomena or experiences from the emic (i.e., insider) perspective to reveal nuanced meaning-making processes (Merriam, 2016). According to Merriam (2016),

Four characteristics are identified by most as key to understanding the nature of qualitative research: the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive. (p. 15)

Case study research is a qualitative approach “in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports)” (Creswell, 2012, p. 75). Subsequent to data collection, the researcher analyzes and reports the data through case-based themes in a case description.

The use of case study methodology is appropriate for this research study because the research questions are exploratory in nature and they focus on the bounded case of The Blue Heart Foundation. This case study examines how Blue Heart programs facilitate the radical



healing (Ginwright, 2016) and empowerment (Travis & Leech, 2013) of Black male youth. Additionally, this case explores the ways in which Blue Heart functions as a Black educational fugitive space (ross, 2021).

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The study is grounded in three theoretical frameworks: Radical Healing (CARMA), Empowerment-Based Youth Development (EMPYD), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS). The FRESH HEART framework aligns with and extends these theoretical frameworks by using a systems approach to provide a cohesive structure for analyzing the dynamics within community-based educational spaces. FRESH HEART stands for Fulfilling Relationships Enhance Social Harmony; Healing and Empowerment Actualize Resilience and Thriving.

### **FRESH HEART Framework**

The FRESH HEART framework emerged as a novel conceptual model from the iterative phases of data collection and analysis, weaving together empirical findings with the study's guiding theoretical frameworks. The development of FRESH HEART was driven by the complementary strengths and synergistic potential of the existing frameworks. Specifically, FRESH HEART integrates the principles of Radical Healing (Ginwright, 2016), which emphasizes culturally sustaining environments for both individual and collective healing; Empowerment-Based Youth Development (Travis & Leech, 2013), which focuses on nurturing youth characteristics across various dimensions; and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (ross, 2021), which conceptualizes spaces that resist systemic anti-Blackness where Black youth can thrive.

FRESH HEART is a multidimensional model that highlights the importance of fulfilling relationships, healing, and empowerment within a systems-oriented approach. It emphasizes the

dynamic interplay between personal experiences and community environments with the aim of advancing a holistic understanding of Black male youth development.

- **Fulfilling Relationships:** At the core of FRESH HEART are the relationships among youth, their peers, mentors, and the broader community, which form the cornerstone of identity development, self-efficacy, and socioemotional well-being. These relationships provide a supportive network that fosters a sense of belonging and collective strength, crucial for counteracting the isolation and marginalization often resulting from systemic racism. The framework underscores the significance of culturally affirming and trauma-informed relationships in promoting both individual well-being and social harmony.
- **Healing and Empowerment:** The HEART aspect addresses the critical need for healing from past and present traumas, which is foundational for emotional health. Empowerment involves equipping individuals with the necessary skills, education, and resources to positively influence their destinies. Emphasizing both healing and empowerment provides pathways to racial progress by mitigating the persistence of racial trauma through individual and collective agency.
- **Actualize:** Actualization is emphasized in the framework to center the process of an assets-based and agent-based approach that nurtures Black male youth toward fulfilling their personal and collective aspirations and potential. The youth are encouraged to leverage their strengths, skills, and cultural backgrounds as active agents in their development, involved in shaping their paths, making decisions, and taking actions that lead to their goals. This process encompasses both the personal and shared experiences of actualization among the youth and the intentional strategies designed to nurture their development.

- **Resilience and Thriving:** Resilience includes the ability to rebound from setbacks, an outcome of effective healing and empowerment processes. Thriving reflects academic, emotional, and social well-being, representing a state of flourishing beyond mere survival. While resilience is necessary for navigating and overcoming systemic challenges, it is the combination with a vision and the capacity to thrive that truly supports holistic development and leads to lasting healing and empowerment.

The FRESH HEART framework emphasizes the crucial connection between healing and empowerment within community-based educational spaces. Healing and empowerment are intertwined processes that together offer a comprehensive approach to addressing trauma and fostering resilience. Healing from past and present traumas is foundational for emotional health and provides the psychological readiness for empowerment activities. Empowerment, in turn, equips individuals with the skills, confidence, and agency to navigate and influence their environments positively, reinforcing their healing journey. The integration of Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS) is essential, as these spaces provide culturally affirming and liberating environments that resist systemic anti-Blackness. BEFS provide refuge and support for the holistic development of Black youth. They create a sense of belonging and identity. The FRESH HEART framework integrates these elements to address the immediate effects of trauma and promotes long-term resilience, agency, and community engagement. This integrated approach supports the overall well-being and thriving of Black male youth.

### **Unit of Analysis**

In case study research the unit of analysis defines and bounds the case (Yin, 2013). The unit of analysis for this case study is The Blue Heart Foundation programs, events and activities, such as the Mentor Connection, HBCU College Tour, and Signing Day. Blue Heart is a non-

profit youth development community-based organization that supports the socioemotional and academic needs of Black males youth ages 13-18 throughout San Diego County. Founded in 2013 by Tracy Morris and his wife April Ray Morris, the foundation was developed to address the need for male role models and consistent support for underserved Black male youth in the community. According to the Blue Heart website, Tracy Morris grew up in Southeast San Diego in an unstable and abusive home environment, which inspired him to create a program offering the guidance and resources he desired in his youth. Blue Heart focuses on character development, academic excellence, and emotional intelligence, which uplifts the importance of building fulfilling relationships and creating culturally sustaining spaces for Black male youth.

Blue Heart was chosen as the unit of analysis for this study both for its local presence in San Diego, which facilitated the research process, and for its alignment with the study's focus on Black male youth experiences. Created by local Black leaders with the express purpose of supporting Black male youth, Blue Heart has established a reputation as an impactful organization. The organization's mission, "Building our community by providing an equitable and secure path to higher education, emotional health and character development for young African American males," aligns with the objectives of this study and offers a unique setting to investigate how community-based initiatives contribute to the healing and empowerment of Black male youth.

During the preliminary data collection phase, which involved collecting and analyzing artifacts from Blue Heart, it became evident that the organization's programming uniquely supports the healing and empowerment of its participants. Early participant-observations also highlighted how Blue Heart's innovative practices, such as their Signing Day event, are critical components of their approach. Signing Day, in particular, serves not only as a celebration of

academic achievements and college acceptances but also as a profound affirmation of cultural identity and community pride. This event fosters a deep sense of belonging and continuity, connecting the youth to a legacy of Black excellence and resilience. The rich data emerging from these practices makes Blue Heart an ideal case study for exploring the dynamics of community-based youth healing and empowerment.

The rationale for participant selection focused on exploring the mindsets and strategies of the adult staff and mentors, along with the lived experiences and perspectives of Blue Heart alumni. Engaging with adult staff and mentors was crucial to understanding the methodologies and approaches that drive the organization's success. Additionally, the alumni, many of whom had relationships with the late founder, provided valuable insights into the organization's evolution and the lasting impacts on their healing and empowerment processes. This was essential for ascertaining how the organization functioned before and after the leadership change and to develop a comprehensive view of its sustained influence on the participants' lives. Observations of current Blue Heart youth further enriched this perspective, offering a real-time understanding of how the organization's strategies continue to shape the experiences and development of its participants. Their ongoing journeys, witnessed during participant-observations, underscore the continued relevance and impact of Blue Heart's programs, making them an integral part of this study.

The data collection involved interconnected phases and included four sources of data (see Table 1):

1. **Preliminary Phase: Artifact Analysis:** The initial phase involved analyzing artifacts to gain a comprehensive understanding of The Blue Heart Foundation's context, mission,

and goals. This included examining the organization's website, program reports, promotional materials, and internal documents. The artifact analysis provided crucial contextual information that informed subsequent phases of data collection and analysis.

2. **Phase 1: Observations:** Observations were conducted during various Blue Heart programming activities such as Mentor Connection, HEART College & Career Prep, STEM Program, and Mindful Heart: Culinary Therapy. Detailed field notes were taken to document the interactions and behaviors of participants and mentors.
3. **Phase 2: Interviews with Adult Staff:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Blue Heart staff, mentors, and guest speakers. These interviews aimed to explore the participants' mindsets, examining why and how they engage in their work, as well as their detailed accounts and perceptions of the program's impact.
4. **Phase 3: Interviews with Blue Heart Alumni:** Additional semi-structured interviews were conducted with Blue Heart alumni. These interviews focused on their personal experiences and the aspects of the programming that were most influential in their healing and empowerment journeys.

**Table 1***Data Collection Phases*

Data Collection Phase #	Research Questions	Data Collection Methods
Preliminary Phase	Preliminary Inquiry: How does The Blue Heart Foundation (BHF) mission and vision align with healing and empowerment?	Artifact Analysis
1	RQ1: During program activities, what observable behaviors or interactions suggest that participants are experiencing healing and empowerment?	Participant-Observation
2	RQ2: How do Blue Heart staff/mentors describe their experiences in supporting Black male youth?	Adult Interviews
3	RQ3: From the perspective of Blue Heart alumni, which elements of the programming were most influential in their healing and empowerment journey?	Alumni Interviews
1, 2, 3	RQ4: Which specific Blue Heart components or activities reflect a Black educational fugitive space?	Participant-Observation, Adult Interviews, Alumni Interviews

The key terms and concepts of the healing and empowerment frameworks (see Tables 2 and 3) guided the iterative process of organizing and coding the data collected from artifacts, participant-observations, and interviews. The FRESH HEART model was developed by mapping these codes, derived from key terms and concepts of healing, empowerment, and Black educational fugitive spaces, onto a systems approach. Additionally, new codes were created to capture emerging themes that synthesized and extended the guiding frameworks through the

FRESH HEART model. This iterative coding process is aligned with systems characteristics such as paradigms (e.g., "mindsets" and "goals"), structures (e.g., "resources" and "components"), elements, and feedback loops. These FRESH HEART codes were developed and applied during data analysis to ensure a comprehensive examination of the collected data (see Appendix A).

For example, codes related to "mindsets" and "goals" from the paradigms characteristic included belief in education as a tool for individual and collective repair of harm and trauma (Healing) and goals related to developing individual skills and competencies to enhance self-efficacy and self-advocacy (Empowerment). From the elements characteristic, codes such as "resources" (e.g., mentors, funding for programs, well-equipped classrooms) and "components" (e.g., specific programs and services) were used. Additionally, codes related to Black educational fugitive spaces included creating spaces that offer refuge and resistance against systemic anti-Blackness, emphasizing the development of healthy Black subjectivities. These codes were applied to identify and categorize key themes across the data.

Together, these codes served as the basis for examining and explaining the case study through a systems lens, illustrating the synergistic effects of healing, empowerment, and Black educational fugitive spaces in the context of The Blue Heart Foundation. The application of these codes allowed for a nuanced understanding of how the frameworks operate within the organization's programs, ultimately contributing to the evolution of the FRESH HEART framework as a holistic systems-oriented approach to Black male youth development.



**Table 2**

*Radical Healing Framework (CARMA)*

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<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Culture	<i>Culture</i> serves as an anchor to connect young people to a racial and ethnic identity that is both historically grounded and contemporarily relevant. This view of culture embraces the importance of a healthy ethnic identity for youth of color while at the same time celebrates the vibrancy and ingenuity of urban youth culture.
Agency	<i>Agency</i> is the individual and collective ability to act, create, and change external and personal issues. Agency compels youth to explore their personal power to transform problems into possibilities.
Relationships	<i>Relationships</i> are the capacity to create, sustain, and grow healthy connections with others. Relationships build a deep sense of connection and prepares youth to know themselves as part of a long history of struggle and triumph.
Meaning	<i>Meaning</i> is discovering our purpose and building an awareness of our role in advancing justice. Meaning builds an awareness of the intersections of personal and political life by pushing youth to understand how personal struggles have profound political explanations.
Achievement	<i>Achievement</i> illuminates life's possibilities and acknowledges movement toward explicit goals. Achievement means to understand oppression but not be defined by it and encourages youth to explore possibilities for their lives, and work toward personal and collective advancement.

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(Ginwright, 2016, pp. 25-26)

**Table 3***Empowerment Based Positive Youth Development (EMPYD) Framework*

Code	Definition
Connection	<i>Connection</i> refers to positive and supportive bidirectional bonds with family, friends, and other proximal relationships (Lerner et al., 2005). These perceived relationships often reflect how youth are cared for, accepted, and affirmed in life. Indicators of this support have included family support, positive family communication, nonfamily adult relationships, caring neighborhoods, caring school climate, and parent involvement in schooling.
Caring & Compassion	<i>Caring and compassion</i> , as one concept, reflects empathy, sympathy, and identification with others. Davis (1983) described empathy with multiple dimensions, including awareness of others' experiences and emotional responsiveness to the awareness.
Character	<i>Character</i> reflects attitudinal and behavioral assessments of perceived morality. Using an attitudinal definition, character is morality or moral identity, attitudes about societal and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behavior, a sense of right and wrong, and integrity (Lerner et al., 2005).
Confidence	<i>Confidence</i> includes self-worth, self-efficacy, and one's overall self-regard, not specific to a behavior or activity (Lerner et al., 2005). In general, it captures an assessment of satisfaction regarding one's current circumstances, future possibilities, and agency. It is a correlate of self-esteem and other indicators of positive mental health.
Competence	<i>Competence</i> refers to perceived mastery across ability domains. It is often captured by beliefs about academic success and work achievement and productivity (Lerner et al., 2005), but it also applies to physical, social, and emotional competencies.
Sense of Community	A <i>sense of community</i> for adolescents involves feeling a part of "a readily available, supportive, and dependable structure" (Evans, 2007), where they feel a sense of membership, influence, a fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008). Sense of community also highlights the value of being empowered within that community of interest (Evans, 2007).
Active & Engaged Citizenship	<i>Active and engaged citizenship</i> is multi-dimensional, transcending common behavior-only assessments. It includes a sense of civic duty, civic skills, civic connection, and civic participation.

(Travis &amp; Leech, 2013, pp. 94-95, 104, 107)

## **Preliminary Phase: Artifact Analysis**

The data collection process began with an artifact review to analyze what Blue Heart states about its mission, vision, and goals. The review included examining all relevant documents and materials about the program, such as the mission statement, program curricula, administrative documents, program agendas, presentations, etc. (see Table 4). I analyzed these materials to understand the Blue Heart goals and mission, and the approach it takes to healing and empowerment for Black youth. Next, I analyzed these materials using the radical healing and empowerment frameworks, which were also used in later stages of data analysis. During this process, I identified patterns and themes in the documents that helped to answer the research questions.

To code the data, I used both a priori and open-coding techniques. I developed a priori codes based on the radical healing and empowerment frameworks. For instance, for the preliminary inquiry, "How does the Blue Heart mission and vision align with healing and empowerment?", I applied a priori codes related to the goals and structures of the organization, such as "political dreaming" and "connection" (ross, 2021; Travis & Leech, 2013). In addition to a priori coding, open coding was employed to capture emergent themes that are not represented in the existing frameworks, such as "brotherhood".

To enhance the efficiency and accuracy of the coding process, I used NVivo software. NVivo facilitated the organization and analysis of large volumes of qualitative data by providing tools for coding, searching, and modeling data. The software allowed me to systematically code the documents and quickly retrieve coded segments, which improved the consistency and thoroughness of the analysis. I was able to leverage NVivo's capabilities to manage the data

more effectively and ensure that all relevant patterns and themes were captured and analyzed comprehensively.

The codes were organized into a systems-oriented coding framework to categorize the data and identify patterns and themes (see Appendix A). The coding framework was reviewed and revised as needed throughout the data collection and analysis process. The manual coding process involved identifying and labeling specific words, phrases, and sentences in the documents that relate to the goals and mission of the program. I kept a record of the codes and their definitions for reference. Identifying patterns and themes in the documents informed the development of a coding framework that helped guide the data collection and analysis in the later phases of the research.

### **Phase 1: Participant-Observations**

Participant-observations were conducted throughout the case study to collect data on how the organization goals were implemented and how the program dynamics influenced the experiences and perceptions of participants in the setting. I observed the program's activities and interactions between participants and staff to understand how the goals and mission of Blue Heart were operationalized. Direct observations provide “relevant social or environmental conditions” and participant-observations are specifically conducted when a researcher assumes a certain role within a fieldwork situation (Yin, 2013, p. 113). While conducting this case study, I engaged in program activities as a volunteer adult mentor with the youth.

Observations were recorded in two ways during this case study. First, I jotted brief participant-observation notes in a journal during the day while participating in program activities. Second, I audio-recorded participant-observations using thick descriptions on the drive home each day. These audio recordings captured detailed descriptions of the day's events,

personal reflections on interactions, and how these related to the guiding frameworks. For example, I described how specific activities, such as group discussions and mentoring sessions, aligned with the principles of radical healing and empowerment, and noted instances where Blue Heart functioned as a Black educational fugitive space.

Throughout the data collection phases and upon the completion of this case study, these audio recordings were transcribed and analyzed along with interviews. The transcriptions were coded using NVivo software, which allowed for the identification of patterns and themes related to the implementation of Blue Heart's goals and the impact on participants. This method provided a comprehensive understanding of how the program's activities fostered healing, empowerment, and community engagement among the youth. Additionally, the dual method of recording observations ensured that both immediate and reflective insights were captured, enhancing the richness and depth of the data collected.

### **Phase 2 & 3: Individual Interviews with Blue Heart Alumni and Staff**

In-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted with 11 Blue Heart alumni, three mentors, two program staff, four instructors, and one guest speaker (see Appendix B). All adult study participants were asked to review and sign an informed consent form before participating in an interview, and all Blue Heart alumni, who were all 18 or older, were also asked to review and sign an informed consent form (see Appendix C). In addition to this, the following safeguards were employed to ensure participant's rights: 1) the participants were informed of all data collection procedures; 2) transcriptions and a final report were made available to the participants; 3) participant's preferences were taken into consideration when choices are made about reporting the data from this case study; and 4) the entire research design was reviewed and approved by the UC San Diego Institutional Review Board.

During the consent process, I assured all Blue Heart alumni participants and adult program staff that their identities would not be associated with any interview comments and provided them with pseudonyms. This method aligns with Giordano et al. (2007), who noted that maintaining anonymity can encourage participants to more candidly share their personal experiences. Anonymity allowed participants to feel more comfortable and secure in sharing sensitive and personal insights about their involvement with Blue Heart. This approach also helped facilitate open and honest dialogue by building trust between the researcher and participants. The use of pseudonyms allowed for the protection of participants' identities while still enabling the rich, qualitative data to be shared and analyzed, which bolstered the integrity and depth of the research findings. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Interview protocols were developed based on the components of the frameworks guiding the study and in alignment with the study research questions (see Appendix D).

**Table 4**

*Overview of Data Collection Methods*

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<b>Research Component</b>	<b>Details</b>
Artifacts Analyzed	<b>Types:</b> Program flyers/announcements, program/workshop materials and curricula, mentor training manual, family orientation materials, photographs/images, Blue Heart's social media content and interviews with local newspaper and news stations <b>Number:</b> 40 artifacts were analyzed
Observations Conducted	<b>Number of Observations:</b> 20 participant-observations <b>Time Spent on Each:</b> Approximately 3 hours per session <b>Timeframe:</b> Conducted over the course of 2 years, from Spring 2022 to Spring 2024
Reflections Recorded During Commute	<b>Number of Reflections:</b> 15 reflections <b>Duration:</b> Each reflection was recorded for 10 to 15 minutes during commutes after observations
Interviews Conducted	<b>Number of Interviews:</b> 21 interviews <b>Participants:</b> 11 Blue Heart alumni, 3 mentors, 2 program staff, 4 instructors, and 1 guest speaker <b>Duration:</b> Average interview length was approximately 1 hour and 10 minutes

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**Data Analysis**

The data analysis process for this study was guided by the components of the radical healing and empowerment frameworks, employing methods such as explanation-building (Yin, 2013) and second order narrative (Creswell, 2012). These methods were essential for handling the rich narratives shared by participants during semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The

analysis aimed to build a coherent narrative that integrates the principles of radical healing and empowerment within the context of the Blue Heart Foundation.

**Explanation-Building.** Explanation-building (Yin, 2013), a form of pattern matching, was used as a primary strategy for data analysis. This method involves iteratively examining the data to construct an explanation about the case. The goal was to develop a narrative that illustrates how the Blue Heart Foundation's activities foster healing and empowerment among Black male youth, positioning it as a Black educational fugitive space. Through this method, patterns and themes related to the radical healing and empowerment processes were identified and examined.

**Second Order Narrative.** Second order narrative analysis (Creswell, 2012) was employed to synthesize individual participant stories into a collective account. This approach helped to capture the complexity and depth of participants' experiences, highlighting the interplay between their personal narratives and the overarching frameworks of radical healing and empowerment. This method allowed for a comprehensive presentation of how the Blue Heart Foundation's programs influence the socioemotional well-being and development of its participants.

To ensure the integrity and consistency of the analysis, NVivo software was utilized to systematically code and organize the data. NVivo's capabilities in managing large volumes of qualitative data allowed for a meticulous examination of the documents, observations, and interview transcripts. This software facilitated the retrieval of coded segments and supported the identification of emerging themes, which were essential for the iterative process of explanation-building. Employing both a priori and open coding techniques extended the analysis to capture both predefined and emergent themes. This comprehensive coding approach ensured that the



data analysis remained flexible and responsive to new insights, thereby enriching the overall narrative. The systems-oriented coding framework, detailed in Appendix A, provided a structured yet adaptable guide for categorizing and synthesizing the data, ensuring that all relevant patterns were thoroughly explored.

The integration of explanation-building and second order narrative analysis provided a robust methodological foundation for understanding the complex dynamics within the Blue Heart Foundation. This combined approach highlighted the individual and collective experiences of the participants and also illuminated how the principles of radical healing and empowerment were operationalized in a community-based educational setting. The study's thorough and methodical approach to data analysis emphasizes its comprehensive nature. This sets the stage for subsequent discussions on trustworthiness and validity, positionality and reflexivity, and the conclusion in the remaining sections of this chapter.

### **Trustworthiness and Validity**

Trustworthiness was established through the use of data triangulation, a “process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation” (Stake, 2005, p. 454). Data collected from the artifact analysis, interviews, and participant-observations were examined to contextualize the multiple meanings and different realities of youth in the Blue Heart programs. The convergence of these multiple sources of evidence was essential in analyzing, drawing conclusions, and strengthening the construct validity of this case study.

To further enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several techniques were employed during the data analysis stage:

1. **Coding Checks:** Multiple rounds of coding checks enhanced the consistency and reliability in the application of codes. This process involved cross-checking codes with another researcher to confirm accuracy and agreement. Discussing and resolving discrepancies in coding helped me to maintain a robust and consistent coding framework.
2. **Reflexivity and Bias Management:** Reflexive practices were used to uncover and address any potential biases that might have influenced the research. Maintaining a reflexive journal throughout the research process allowed for documentation of my reflections, thoughts, and potential biases. This approach aimed to minimize the impact of biases on the study's findings and interpretations.
3. **Comparative Analysis:** The outcomes of this research were compared with findings from other studies that focus on the radical healing and empowerment of Black male youth. This comparative analysis contextualized the results within the broader literature and ensured that the findings resonated with existing research.
4. **Member Checking:** Validating the findings through member checking involved sharing the preliminary findings and interpretations with a subset of participants. This step verified the accuracy and resonance of the results with their experiences. Incorporating feedback from participants into the final analysis ensured accurate representation of their voices.
5. **Thick Description:** Providing rich, detailed descriptions of the contexts, settings, and participants' experiences allowed for a deeper understanding of the study's findings. These accounts enable readers to determine the transferability of the findings to other contexts.

6. **Debriefing:** Engaging in regular peer debriefing sessions with colleagues and mentors provided an additional layer of scrutiny and critical feedback. These sessions refined the research design, analysis, and interpretations, which contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the study.

These rigorous methods were utilized to provide a comprehensive and credible account of the healing and empowerment processes within the Blue Heart Foundation. These strategies enhanced the trustworthiness and validity of the findings while accurately capturing and representing the diverse perspectives and experiences of the participants.

### **Positionality and Reflexivity**

As the primary researcher for this case study, it is important that I address my positionality and how it influences the ways in which I approach the research process. By reflecting on my positionality as a Black male former foster youth and current youth development researcher, I intend to explore the experiences that inform my methodology.

I am the youngest of three siblings who were born in Chicago and raised by our aunt in a small city in the San Gabriel Valley of Southern California. During moments of reflection in my youth, I slowly began to reflect on what it meant to be a foster kid. I wondered why my parents got caught up in drugs and why these issues were so prevalent and destructive in Black communities. It was a mix of conflicting emotions. I felt a deep sadness at the thought of whether I'd ever see my mom and dad again, but I also felt fortunate that, even though we were in the foster care system, Auntie Barbara was raising us. I wasn't sure if my parents loved me, but I knew Auntie Barbara's love. She wasn't my mom, but she showed me what love meant. It was a choice she kept making, a commitment to recognize my humanity and help me actualize my potential, even before I knew who I was. Auntie Barbara later told me that when she spoke

with my mom, she promised to take care of us. By the time I turned 18 and emancipated, I had received word that my father had been killed a few years earlier, and I never saw or heard from my mom again. Growing up, I often questioned the circumstances that shaped my identity and aspirations. I couldn't help but notice the stark contrast between the ideals of freedom and equality in our society and the persistent stereotypes and biases that portrayed Black men as deviant, disruptive, and disposable. These inquiries helped fuel my passion for social justice and propelled me to pursue opportunities to contribute to Black liberation through the field of education.

As an undergraduate student, I volunteered with a non-profit organization that advocated for foster youth. The summer programs utilized sports and music production instruction to provide a safe environment for the youth while facilitating self-expression and inclusive participation. The program was expanded the following year and I was hired full time as the Assistant Program Director. In working directly with marginalized youth, I was able to literally come full circle in addressing the same needs I had as a child that persist among the youth today as a result of the inequality structured into our education system and society. This experience informs my engagement as a youth development researcher and mentor with Blue Heart by providing a deep understanding of the systemic barriers these youth face and the importance of creating supportive environments that foster self-expression and empowerment.

While in my master's program in education, I became the College Aide with the CSULB-LBUSD Math Collaborative (CLMC) program. CLMC was a partnership between California State University, Long Beach and David Starr Jordan High School in Long Beach. The program provided after school math tutoring and culturally sustaining youth development for 9th through 12th grade cohorts of Black male students. A two-week summer session was held each year on

the CSULB campus to create an uplifting academic experience in a college environment including guest speakers, academic enrichment, community-building activities, and cultural workshops. In the College Aide position, I was involved with coordinating aspects of the program during the school day including outreach to parents, assisting students with school assignments and applying to college, and chaperoning field trips. This role deepened my appreciation for college preparation resources and the need for programs that affirm the identities of Black male youth, which directly informs my work with Blue Heart by emphasizing the importance of mentorship and academic enrichment.

Additionally, while in my master's program, I worked for a non-profit education organization (CCEJ) where I collaborated with middle schools and high schools to implement Conscious Classrooms (a social justice curriculum series), while I also worked as a Restorative Justice Coordinator at two middle schools in Long Beach. Since then, I have been involved in creating and implementing programming for social justice youth programs for several years. As a result, there are specific elements related to social justice-oriented programming during this research study that closely align with my experiences and expertise, such as community building activities and healing circles. It is important to note that my positionality as a Black male youth development researcher, practitioner, and social justice advocate provide invaluable insights to this case study (Fine, 1994). My identities and connections to social justice advocacy programs for Black youth inform the meanings and interpretations that I develop throughout the study process.

My journey with The Blue Heart Foundation started when I discovered their work and reached out. Although my initial meeting with co-founder Tracy Morris did not occur due to his untimely passing, the subsequent connection with the new President was pivotal. Attending the

Signing Day event at the Jackie Robinson YMCA in May of 2022, I was profoundly moved by the stories of the Blue Heart seniors and their families. Their narratives and the organization's dedication to their growth inspired me to engage with the organization not only as a researcher but also as a mentor. Since then, my involvement has been deeply rewarding, and it has given me the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the local community.

For over two years, I have served as a Blue Heart mentor. While the exact number of hours varies, it is a significant part of my weekly and monthly schedule. I engage with all the youth in the program, but my specific focus is mentoring the juniors and seniors. I also help coordinate activities and programming to meet the diverse needs and interests of the youth to create opportunities for engagement and collaboration. Activities range from educational support and cultural enrichment to discussions aimed at boosting self-esteem and cultural awareness. Throughout my engagement with The Blue Heart Foundation, I have witnessed remarkable progress among the youth. Their feedback, along with their families', has been deeply encouraging, specifically highlighting positive changes in their confidence, perspectives, and aspirations.

My own background has influenced how I approach mentoring. I understand that mentorship is about applying what I have learned through my lived experiences. It is about showing genuine care and a commitment to uplifting the youth I serve. To truly make a difference, it has been crucial for me to be aware of the unique challenges our youth face and to understand the nuances of their specific community context. This helps avoid making stereotypical assumptions about their experiences or needs. For me, Auntie Barbara has been the most impactful and enduring mentor in my life. She embodies unconditional love and unwavering support. I am also fortunate to have had a Black male mentor who provided my first

opportunity to contribute to a community-based education program. He extended opportunities, resources, advice, and served as a role model. Based on my experiences and research, mentorship is all about pouring into someone's life, helping to expand their perspective of what's possible, and supporting them in actualizing their highest potential. It is about being a guiding light and source of support that every Black male youth deserves on their journey to healing and empowerment.

A social justice approach guided how I engaged reflexivity in the data collection and analysis phases. According to Ginwright and Cammarota (2015),

A social justice approach is akin to a critical humanism approach that emphasizes the importance of the researcher's "human subjectivity, experience and creativity"... The inclusion of critical humanism in social justice research allows the researcher to reflect on his or her own experience as a valuable source of knowledge to guide research questions. This personal reflection may reveal unjust experiences that, in turn, lead to critical insights about how research can serve as a practice of liberation. (p. 164)

Applying this social justice approach to my reflexivity, I designed this case study in alignment with the following three principles proposed by Ginwright and Cammarota (2015):

- The researcher's personal experiences can contribute to empirical insights about social justice
- Social justice research is informed by critical self-reflection and action
- Social justice research requires deep community relationships, time, and commitment

The first principle listed above is a focal point of the data collection process. As I conducted this case study, I gathered both direct observations and participant-observations as a volunteer youth mentor. Secondly, I used the Radical Healing (Ginwright, 2016) and EMPYD (Travis & Leech, 2013) frameworks to inform my own self-reflections during this case study. During Blue Heart

programming, I recorded detailed field notes recalling the activities and experiences from the day. Additionally, I cross referenced the emerging themes in relation to the in-depth interviews with Blue Heart alumni participants and program staff. The final principle requires establishing deep community relationships, time, and commitment. I continued to establish and maintain relationships with the Blue Heart organization staff, youth, and families while also seeking their feedback as I engaged in the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the case study.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a comprehensive overview of the methodology employed in this study, which focuses on the healing and empowerment of Black male youth in community-based educational spaces. The research utilizes a qualitative case study approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of participants involved with The Blue Heart Foundation. The methodology incorporated artifact analysis, participant observations, and in-depth interviews, all of which were analyzed through the FRESH HEART framework, a synthesis and extension of Radical Healing (Ginwright, 2016), Empowerment-Based Youth Development (Travis & Leech, 2013), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (ross, 2021).

The data collection and analysis processes were meticulously designed to ensure the richness and depth of the findings. The integration of NVivo software for coding and the use of explanation-building and second order narrative methods provided a robust framework for interpreting the data. The use of both a priori and open coding techniques allowed for a flexible and comprehensive examination of the collected data, ensuring that both predefined and emergent themes were captured.

Trustworthiness and validity were prioritized through various strategies, including data triangulation, coding checks, reflexivity, comparative analysis, member checking, thick



description, and peer debriefing. These strategies were critical in establishing the credibility of the study and ensuring that the findings accurately represent the diverse perspectives of the participants. Positionality and reflexivity were also central to this research. My background as a Black male former foster youth and current youth development researcher profoundly influenced my approach to the study. My experiences informed my engagement with The Blue Heart Foundation and shaped the ways I interacted with participants and interpreted the data. This personal connection provided valuable insights and added depth to the research findings.

In the next chapter, I explicate the findings of this study and explore the observable behaviors and interactions that suggest healing and empowerment among participants, examine the profound experiences of Blue Heart staff in supporting Black male youth, identify the most influential elements of the programming from the perspective of alumni, and assess the specific components of Blue Heart that reflect a Black educational fugitive space. Through a detailed analysis of these aspects, Chapter 4 will provide a rich narrative that highlights the impact of The Blue Heart Foundation's programs on the healing and empowerment of Black male youth.

## Chapter 4 FINDINGS

Social change begins in the *heart*, when teachers and activists declare an unapologetic and *radical love* for their communities and their young people. The worthy pursuit of justice has always been fueled by *love*, and driven by a powerful civic vision. What is important here, however, is that the complexity, depth, and breadth of social conditions call and beckon for merging new and old ways to change our lives and our communities.

(Ginwright, 2016, p. 38, emphasis added)

This chapter explicates the findings from an in-depth exploration into how The Blue Heart Foundation (Blue Heart) supports the healing and empowerment processes of Black male youth. Guided by a qualitative case study methodology, this research sought to answer the following questions:

1. During program activities, what observable behaviors or interactions suggest that participants are experiencing healing and empowerment?
2. How do Blue Heart staff describe their experiences in supporting Black male youth?
3. From the perspective of Blue Heart alumni, which elements of the programming were most influential in their healing and empowerment journey?
4. Which specific Blue Heart components or activities reflect a Black educational fugitive space?

The study is grounded in three frameworks that contribute to a comprehensive approach to the healing and empowerment of Black youth: Radical Healing (CARMA) (Ginwright, 2016), Empowerment-Based Youth Development (EMPYD) (Travis & Leech, 2013), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS) (ross, 2021). Together, these frameworks inform a community-based approach that fosters youth development by centering supportive relationships in educational ecosystems that serve as both pro-Black spaces and refuges from systemic anti-Blackness. This chapter highlights practices and thoughtful processes centered on restoring

community life. The intent is to share these lessons in hopes of strengthening and expanding healing justice and empowerment strategies in schools and community organizations. This research offers actionable insights that contribute to the broader discourse on educational equity and community thriving through in-depth analyses of Blue Heart's activities and outcomes.

### **Findings Overview**

Through participant-observation, interviews with Blue Heart staff and alumni, and analysis of organization and program artifacts, several key themes emerged, providing evidence of specific factors and conditions that are conducive for positive youth development. The data analysis offers critical insights into the lived experiences of Black male youth and the holistic strategies that are most effective in actualizing their healing and empowerment. These findings are discussed in detail in the subsequent sections of this chapter. The discussion is structured around the research questions and major themes, aligning with the systems approach characteristics such as socio-cultural artifacts, components, mindsets, goals, connections, and feedback loops (Watson & Collins, 2023).

This study emphasizes a systems approach to address the unique challenges and persistent inequities Black students face in traditional academic environments. The method leverages key system characteristics within Black educational fugitive spaces, promoting healing and empowerment through a holistic strategy for re-imagining educational spaces and advancing racial progress. The analysis of findings expands the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding this study and provides practical insights for their application. These contributions are significant for educational policy and practice, offering actionable strategies to inform future research and improve outcomes for Black students.

This chapter synthesizes empirical evidence with theoretical concepts to highlight the complex interactions that shape educational experiences and outcomes for Black male youth. It demonstrates how community-based organizations can nurture culturally sustaining ecosystems that promote both individual growth and collective flourishing through transformative paradigms. The synthesis emphasizes the importance of integrating healing-focused, empowering strategies into educational frameworks by illustrating the dynamic interplay between personal experiences and the collective ethos of community spaces. This chapter serves as an example of developing effective innovations and liberatory systems through community-based programs, which can also inform practices in traditional academic spaces.

### **Section 1: Theoretical Frameworks and Systems Approach**

This section provides an overview of the guiding theoretical frameworks—Empowerment-Based Youth Development (EMPYD), Radical Healing (CARMA), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS)—and introduces the FRESH HEART framework as a conceptual model emerging from the data analysis. The FRESH HEART framework—an acronym for Fulfilling Relationships Enhance Social Harmony; Healing and Empowerment Actualize Resilience and Thriving—expands on these existing theories by providing a holistic, systems-based approach. FRESH HEART focuses on the significance of cultivating meaningful connections and offers insights into the dynamics of supportive environments that sustain Black male youth healing and empowerment processes.

EMPYD, as conceptualized by Travis and Leech (2013), offers a strengths-based perspective on youth development. It emphasizes agency, self-determination, and positive identity formation among Black youth. This framework was chosen for its focus on empowering Black youth to navigate and overcome systemic challenges. However, critiques by Ortega-

Williams and Harden (2022) highlighted the need to more explicitly address anti-Black racism and historical trauma through healing-focused approaches. In response to these critiques, the Radical Healing framework (CARMA) was integrated into the study. Ginwright (2016) advocates for healing justice that addresses the historical and systemic trauma experienced by Black communities. CARMA emphasizes restoring community life through innovative practices and thoughtful processes, aligning closely with the aims of this research to foster holistic well-being and empowerment. BEFS, as articulated by ross (2021), conceptualizes pro-Black counterspaces that uplift the specificity of the Black experience. These spaces resist systemic anti-Blackness and create environments where Black youth can thrive. BEFS provided a crucial lens for understanding the unique cultural and social dynamics within The Blue Heart Foundation.

Upon conducting the literature review, it became evident that the deficit lens often ascribed to Black male youth in dominant discourse needed to be challenged. This realization guided the initial selection of EMPYD for its agent-based approach to youth development. Recognizing the critiques from Ortega-Williams and Harden (2022) about the lack of a healing-centered focus, I blended CARMA's healing justice principles with the EMPYD framework to iterate on the youth development paradigm. Further, BEFS was incorporated to specifically highlight the pro-Black counterspace aspect of Blue Heart, emphasizing the importance of culturally sustaining environments for Black youth. Throughout the data collection and analysis phases, the systems approach was employed to integrate these frameworks comprehensively. This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay of factors influencing youth development within Blue Heart.

A systems approach is crucial for addressing the multifaceted and interrelated factors that impact the healing and empowerment of Black male youth. Traditional interventions often rely on linear, "cause and effect" methods that focus on isolated aspects of a system. However, these methods have largely failed to dismantle the deeply rooted structures of systemic racism (Elias & Feagin, 2020; DeSantis et al., 2019). A more effective strategy involves leveraging "emergence"—a concept from complexity theory where interactions among system elements lead to new, transformative patterns, such as racial equity (Morell, 2021). This approach utilizes the power of interconnected relationships to cultivate environments that are resilient and adaptable. By emphasizing how changes in one part of the system can amplify positive outcomes across the whole, emergence helps create sustainable solutions and long-term social transformation.

Achieving transformative change necessitates focusing on leverage points within the system—critical areas where small changes can produce significant, system-wide impacts (Meadows, 1999). Systems scholars have identified leverage points in a descending order of influence: mindsets, goals, decision-making, regulations, connections, feedback loops (reinforcing, then balancing), resources, program components, and socio-cultural artifacts (Carey & Crammond, 2015; Meadows, 1999; Malhi et al., 2009). Interventions that target fundamental aspects such as mindsets or goals towards racial justice can initiate substantial, cascading changes throughout the system. By altering these core elements, subsequent changes in decision-making processes, regulations, and resource allocations can follow, effectively transforming the entire system towards greater equity and justice (Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2022).

In this study, the systems approach was applied to blend, extend, and depart from existing theoretical frameworks, leading to the development of my FRESH HEART framework. This

model emerged as a bespoke conceptual approach from the data analysis, intricately weaving together the empirical findings with the study's guiding theoretical frameworks. This emergence was especially significant in identifying and understanding key leverage points, such as mindsets and feedback loops, which are essential for supporting healing and empowerment within Blue Heart's programs for Black male youth.

The FRESH HEART framework evolved from rich qualitative data that revealed recurring themes centered on the powerful dynamics of relationships. Throughout the observations and interviews, the youth and adult staff frequently emphasized the unique presence of Tracy Morris, Blue Heart's late co-founder. Tracy embodied the essence of FRESH HEART through his dedication to building fulfilling relationships, grounded in trust and mutual respect, and his commitment to advancing the community's well-being. His influence exemplifies the healing and empowerment processes that the framework seeks to capture. The analogy of FRESH HEART grew out of these reflections, as data revealed the significance of creating an environment akin to a 'village of thriving trees,' where individual and collective flourishing is achieved through sustained, empathetic engagement.

This analogy crystallized the interconnectedness of various system characteristics within and among the frameworks of Radical Healing, Empowerment-Based Youth Development (EMPYD), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS). For example, deep-rooted cultural values aligned with Ubuntu ("I am because we are") and Sankofa ("reach back and get it") were evident in the observed practices and participant narratives, emphasizing the importance of historical continuity and communal interdependence in fostering resilient development. Ubuntu, as a principle of collective humanity and interdependence, resonates with the Black radical tradition's emphasis on communal solidarity and mutual aid in the face of systemic oppression. It

underscores the belief that individual flourishing is intrinsically linked to the well-being of the community. Similarly, Sankofa reflects the Black radical tradition's commitment to historical consciousness and the reclamation of cultural heritage as essential to resisting ongoing injustices and envisioning liberated futures. This approach advocates for a cyclical understanding of time where past struggles and triumphs inform present actions and future aspirations. Themes of 'planting seeds' and 'nurturing growth,' repeatedly mentioned in the data, illustrated how consistent engagement and intentional praxis are crucial in cultivating essential elements of relationships such as trust, commitment, cultural humility, and critical compassion. Together, these components amplify individual agency and community flourishing, laying the foundation for the framework's approach to healing and empowerment.

The FRESH HEART framework serves as a practical tool for applying the principles of Radical Healing, Empowerment, and Black educational fugitive spaces in a cohesive, systems-oriented manner. It highlights the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of various system characteristics (e.g., paradigms, structures, elements, feedback loops) in creating and sustaining youth organizations that are responsive to the needs and challenges of Black male youth. The FRESH HEART framework's application offers valuable insights into designing and implementing community-based programs that are not only culturally responsive but also deeply empowering and healing. This approach underscores the significance of viewing the support of Black male youth through a holistic, systems-oriented lens, ensuring that interventions are comprehensive, integrated, and aligned with the broader goal of advancing racial progress, which manifests in individual and collective thriving.

The application of a systems approach in this study provides a robust framework for understanding how Blue Heart supports the healing and empowerment of Black male youth. The



following sections provide the empirical findings that illuminate each research question. This study examines how the unique interplay between individuals and their environments influences the healing and empowerment of Black male youth within Blue Heart. The focus here is on how specific conditions—such as positive relationships, supportive community contexts, and effective program interventions—enhance or diminish these outcomes. Applying a systems lens undergirds this research in explicating the significance of individual experiences and interactions within the broader community. This approach demonstrates how particular dynamics foster positive development among Black male youth. Section 2 presents observations from Blue Heart programming, highlighting the behaviors and interactions that suggest participants are experiencing healing and empowerment. In Section 3, I explore the perspectives of Blue Heart alumni, staff, and mentors, providing insights into their experiences and the influential elements of the programming. Finally, in Section 4, I apply and extend the conceptualization of Black Educational Fugitive Space as a liberatory ecosystem, emphasizing how these spaces sustain cycles and feedback loops of healing and empowerment. Each section will contribute to a comprehensive understanding of how community-based organizations like Blue Heart help actualize the thriving of Black male youth.

## **Section 2: Empirical Observations (RQ 1)**

The purpose of this section is to provide an integrated analysis of my empirical observations within the theoretical frameworks that guide this study. By weaving together personal narrative and academic analysis, I aim to present a holistic understanding of how various program activities at Blue Heart embody and exemplify key concepts from healing, empowerment, and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS). My role as a participant-observer allows me to engage deeply with both the subjective experiences and the broader socio-cultural

contexts of the youth I mentor. This dual perspective enables me to reflect on my own journey and the impact of these programs on the participants. This section is structured to highlight how different system characteristics, specifically socio-cultural artifacts and components, are manifested in Blue Heart's activities. I recount specific events and interactions with a personal narrative describing the experience, interwoven with analyses aligned with the FRESH HEART framework. Through this approach, I aim to provide a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the transformative power of culturally sustaining and community-driven educational practices. To frame this section, I begin with the research question and present a summary of the findings in a bulleted format, followed by a detailed exploration of the observations.

- **Research Question 1:** During program activities, what observable behaviors or interactions suggest that participants are experiencing healing and empowerment?

### **Sociocultural Artifacts**

- **Engagement with Cultural Heritage:** Participants deeply engaged with socio-cultural artifacts during the HBCU College Tour, reinforcing their cultural identity and heritage.
- **Positive Reinforcement of Identity:** Activities such as visits to historically significant sites provided positive reinforcement of participants' racial identity, contributing to their sense of belonging.
- **Connection to Historical Narratives:** Interactions with historical sites and artifacts fostered a deeper understanding of their cultural history and legacy.
- **Empowerment Through Historical Context:** Participants connected their personal experiences to broader historical narratives, fostering a sense of empowerment through historical context.

## Components

- **Increased Confidence and Resilience:** Participants exhibited increased confidence and resilience through their active participation in culturally sustaining educational experiences.
- **Sense of Achievement and Community:** Events like Signing Day and Mentor Connection fostered a sense of achievement and community among participants.
- **Supportive Relationships:** The mentorship and community support within Blue Heart were crucial in promoting healing and empowerment.
- **Development of Positive Racial Identity:** The interactions and experiences during the program activities supported the development of a positive racial identity among the youth.
- **Reflections on Personal Growth:** Participants' reflections during program activities indicated significant personal growth and a deeper understanding of their potential.
- **Motivation and Future Aspirations:** The program activities inspired participants to envision their future goals, motivated by the examples of Black excellence and resilience they encountered.

The HBCU College Tour of 2023 provided a unique and transformative experience for the Blue Heart seniors. This tour, which spanned several historically Black colleges and universities, including Morehouse College, Tuskegee University, Jackson State University, Philander-Smith College, and Howard University, as well as significant historical sites like the National Museum of African American History and Culture, allowed these young men to envision themselves within spaces that celebrate Black excellence, resilience, and intellectual

achievement. As a participant-observer, I had the privilege of witnessing the impact of this tour on the youth while also reflecting on its significance in my journey as a mentor and educator.

Each day of the tour offered distinct opportunities for the youth to engage with their cultural heritage, develop a positive racial identity, and build a sense of community. The socio-cultural artifacts encountered during the tour, including the campuses themselves and the historical sites visited, played a crucial role in fostering a deeper connection to their history and identity. The following is a detailed exploration of these experiences and their broader implications for the healing and empowerment of Black male youth. In this context, socio-cultural artifacts refer to the tangible and intangible elements—such as historical documents, artworks, memorials, and educational institutions—that embody and reflect the collective experiences, values, and histories of the Black community (Watson & Collins, 2023). They serve as powerful tools for cultural transmission and identity formation, providing the youth with concrete links to their heritage and a sense of belonging within a broader historical and social narrative. Engaging with these artifacts exposes participants to the legacy of Black excellence and resilience, encouraging them to envision their own roles within this continuum.

Within the FRESH HEART framework, these socio-cultural artifacts are leveraged to create environments that support the healing and empowerment of Black male youth by reconnecting them with their cultural roots and reinforcing positive self-perceptions. They help bridge past struggles and present achievements, emphasizing the importance of understanding historical contexts in shaping contemporary identities and aspirations. Through this lens, the artifacts encountered on the HBCU College Tour function as critical components that nurture fulfilling relationships and foster a community that thrives on shared history, collective memory, and cultural pride. This integration of socio-cultural artifacts into Blue Heart's programming

exemplifies how community-driven educational practices can sustain cycles of healing and empowerment by embedding cultural richness and historical awareness into everyday experiences.

### **Socio-Cultural Artifacts (HBCU Tour)**

One of the most memorable days of the HBCU College Tour was the first day of the trip, which began with our visit to Morehouse College in Atlanta. The sense of brotherhood and community was evident as soon as we entered the campus, a place steeped in history and specifically dedicated to the education and upliftment of Black men. The principles of Ubuntu, which emphasize mutual care and collective well-being, were evident throughout our visit. The Morehouse scholars emphasized the importance of community and mutual support, highlighting how their success was not just an individual achievement but a collective one. They spoke about the strong network of support and friendly competitive culture at Morehouse, where students set high expectations for themselves and encouraged each other to thrive. This sense of collective humanity and interconnectedness resonated deeply with the Blue Heart seniors, which reinforced the idea that their success is tied to the well-being and support of their community.

The College Prep Coach organized a dinner that provided the Blue Heart seniors with invaluable insight and encouragement from Morehouse scholars who were also Blue Heart alumni. According to my field notes, the dinner was an intimate and empowering session where each Morehouse scholar introduced themselves and shared key pieces of advice about navigating college life. They emphasized the importance of networking and building relationships, urging the seniors to pay attention, ask questions, and invest in mutual support systems. The scholars also discussed the necessity of developing better habits, such as balancing time between studying and social activities, and maintaining focus on their passions and goals.

One Morehouse scholar highlighted the significance of surrounding oneself with the right people who share similar ambitions and values, while another spoke about the discipline and positive mindset required to succeed in college. The transition from high school to college was a major theme, with advice to stay grounded and focused on their own paths. The scholars also stressed the importance of supporting those who come after them, encouraging the seniors to lead by example, reach back, and show others what is possible.

One alumnus described his move from San Diego to Atlanta as "going from the frying pan to the fire," noting that social toxins like violence still exist in college. He advised the seniors to prepare for danger without living in fear, emphasizing the need to "stay prayed up", build a strong support system, and remain aware of their surroundings. The scholars encouraged the seniors to avoid procrastination by keeping their goals visible in multiple places and to be mindful of their future selves by rewarding their efforts. The advice shared during this dinner provided practical guidance and also strengthened the connection between the current seniors and the alumni, many of whom later participated in interviews for this study.

From a theoretical perspective, the tour reinforced the importance of culturally sustaining environments in fostering positive racial identity and resilience. The Morehouse scholars, as role models and mentors, provided tangible examples of success and perseverance, demonstrating the power of supportive community networks. The socio-cultural context of Morehouse College, with its rich history and commitment to Black excellence, created an empowering space where the youth could see themselves as part of a larger legacy of Black achievement and resistance.

The second day of the tour took us to Tuskegee University in Alabama. This visit was particularly significant due to our time at the Legacy Museum, where we engaged in in-depth discussions about the history and contributions of Tuskegee University. Tuskegee University,

like Morehouse, serves as a vital socio-cultural artifact, reinforcing the significance of Black educational institutions in promoting collective identity and cultural pride. The visit to the Legacy Museum and the discussions with Tuskegee students underscored the role of HBCUs in providing culturally relevant education that addresses both academic and socio-emotional needs. The Tuskegee students' involvement in various clubs and councils exemplifies the integration of academic rigor with cultural affirmation, promoting a balanced and holistic approach to education. This also demonstrates how HBCUs cultivate spaces for Black youth to excel academically while remaining connected to their cultural roots.

Jackson State University (JSU) in Mississippi provided another enriching experience for the Blue Heart seniors. The day began with an admissions presentation that emphasized the supportive and familial atmosphere of JSU. The idea of a “home away from home” resonated with the Blue Heart seniors, many of whom had experienced feelings of isolation in educational environments with less exposure to Black peers and Black adult mentors. This sense of belonging was crucial for our youth, offering them a vision of a college experience where they could thrive both academically and socially, surrounded by peers and faculty who understood their cultural backgrounds and challenges.

A significant part of the day was the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) Civil Rights Center tour, where an historian and JSU graduate guided us through the history of civil rights organizations in Mississippi. The discussions during this tour were profound, connecting the struggles and achievements of past civil rights activists like Medgar Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Aaron Henry to the present-day aspirations of the Blue Heart seniors. These historical insights provided a broader context for understanding their own journeys and the importance of activism and community engagement. The historian's personal anecdotes and

detailed explanations of key events in civil rights history made the past come alive, inspiring the youth to see themselves as part of a continuing legacy of resilience and change.

The visit to JSU and the COFO tour highlighted the impact of historical and cultural immersion on youth empowerment and socio-emotional development. By engaging with the history of civil rights movements, the Blue Heart seniors could draw parallels between past struggles and their own experiences, reinforcing their sense of identity and purpose. This connection to their heritage empowered the youth to envision themselves as active participants in their communities, motivated by the examples of those who had fought for justice before them. This kind of historical engagement is critical for fostering a strong sense of agency and belonging, elements that are essential for their development and future leadership.

Our journey to Philander-Smith College in Arkansas was filled with excitement and a deep sense of purpose. As we approached the campus, I felt a mix of anticipation and pride. The conversations leading up to this visit had been thought-provoking and introspective, and the significance of the trip was apparent among the youth. We began our day with an open discussion about what this tour meant to each of us. The young men shared their reflections on how seeing these historic institutions inspired a deeper connection to their cultural heritage and personal aspirations. They spoke about the pride they felt in walking the same grounds as so many influential Black leaders and scholars. This connection to history provided them with a sense of belonging and motivation to pursue their own educational and career goals. Additionally, the discussions highlighted their desire to contribute positively to their communities, carrying forward the legacy of excellence and resilience exemplified by the HBCUs.



During the campus tour, led by enthusiastic college students and dedicated admissions staff, we were introduced to the rich history and vibrant community of Philander-Smith. One of the standout moments was our interaction with the college's athletic director who spoke passionately about the importance of accountability, discipline, and community support. He emphasized that representing one's name and family goes beyond individual achievement; it is about honoring the investments made by those who believe in us. The athletic director's words resonated deeply, reminding us all that our efforts are part of a larger collective journey.

Philander-Smith College exemplifies the role of community and supportive environments in fostering resilience and empowerment. Ubuntu, the idea that "I am because we are," underpins the ethos of Philander-Smith, where the success of each student is seen as a shared victory for the entire community. This philosophy was reflected in the interactions we observed between students, staff, and faculty, where mentorship and peer support were integral to the educational experience. Philander-Smith creates an environment where students feel valued and empowered to succeed by fostering a culture of mutual respect and collective responsibility. This environment aligns with the FRESH HEART framework, particularly the element of creating socio-cultural artifacts that nurture positive racial identity and socio-emotional health. The sense of belonging and support at Philander-Smith empowers students to strive for excellence while staying grounded in their cultural identity. The close-knit nature of this relatively small HBCU, where everyone seems to know each other, enhances the feeling of being part of a large, supportive family.

Our visit to Howard University was a profound experience, both intellectually and emotionally. Interacting with the students and faculty, we engaged in meaningful discussions about the purpose of college, the importance of exploration, and the power of community

building. One memorable conversation was with a student who spoke about the transformative journey from uncertainty to finding their purpose through education and community support. This student shared how Howard's supportive environment and its legacy of fostering Black leadership helped them navigate their academic and personal growth, which provided them a sense of direction and empowerment.

As we walked through the historic halls of Howard, I reflected on the power of literacy and knowledge in Black liberation. The university's legacy of producing leaders, activists, and scholars who have significantly contributed to societal progress was a testament to the enduring spirit of Black excellence and resilience. We visited the Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall, a symbol of intellectual freedom and Black scholarly achievement, which underscored the profound impact of education on social change.

Howard University plays a critical role in fostering a sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy among its students. The culturally affirming environment at Howard aligns with the principles of FRESH HEART, particularly in promoting collective identity and community engagement. The university's emphasis on exploration and intellectual growth helps students to excel academically while also developing a strong sense of purpose and direction. During our visit, we observed how Howard's programs actively encourage students to engage with their cultural heritage, further reinforcing their confidence and sense of identity.

The connections formed at Howard illustrate the importance of culturally sustaining pedagogy, where education is intertwined with the students' cultural and historical backgrounds. This approach enhances their self-efficacy and motivation by encouraging them to pursue their goals with confidence and resilience. Howard's environment supports the idea that knowledge is a powerful tool for liberation, which supports students in challenging systemic barriers and

contributing meaningfully to their communities. The interactions with faculty members, who themselves are often prominent figures in their respective disciplines and advocates in the fight for social justice, provided the youth with powerful role models and a deeper understanding of the impact of their education beyond the classroom.

### **National Museum of African American History & Culture**

Culminating our impactful HBCU Tour in the nation's capital, we visited the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The museum, located in the area designed by Benjamin Banneker, stands as a testament to the significant contributions of Black Americans throughout history. As we explored the intricately detailed exhibits, we were taken on an emotional journey through the narratives of Black liberation and resilience. Each exhibit told a powerful story, immersing us in the lived experiences of our ancestors and their relentless pursuit of freedom and justice.

From the harrowing experiences of enslavement to the triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement and beyond, the museum vividly depicted the struggle and achievements of Black Americans. The exhibits covering the Black Panther movement, the impact of mass incarceration, and the presidency of Barack Obama were particularly moving. These stories of individual and collective thriving outside the bounds of white supremacy resonated deeply with the Blue Heart youth, who expressed a newfound sense of pride and connection to their heritage. Many of the youth mentioned that these exhibits filled gaps in their knowledge, providing a fuller picture of their identity and history.

The National Museum for African American History and Culture helped the Blue Heart youth connect with their historical lineage and cultural heritage, which deepened their understanding of the significant contributions that Black people have made to society. This

experience reinforced their sense of identity and pride, highlighting aspects of history and culture often omitted from traditional educational curricula. The museum's comprehensive portrayal of Black history offered the youth a broader context for understanding their own experiences and the systemic challenges they face.

The youth gained a more comprehensive understanding of their place within a legacy of healing and empowerment. This aligns with the principles of Radical Healing, which emphasize the importance of historical awareness and cultural affirmation in fostering individual and collective well-being. The museum visit reflected the essence of the FRESH HEART framework, embodying a fugitive space that promotes a deeper connection to cultural roots and inspires a commitment to personal and community growth. The youth and I left the museum with a renewed sense of purpose, eager to apply the lessons learned to our own lives and communities.

Reflecting on the cumulative experiences of the HBCU College Tour, both the youth and I, as a mentor, felt a substantial shift in our perspectives from the journey. Each visit to the historically Black colleges and universities strengthened our connections to our cultural heritage and showcased the resilience within our community. The youth expressed a renewed sense of pride in their identity and a clearer vision for their future. They were inspired by the examples of Black excellence and resilience we encountered. Personally, this tour reaffirmed my commitment to supporting Black youth. Witnessing their growth and enthusiasm reinforced my belief in the transformative power of culturally sustaining educational experiences. The interactions with students, alumni, and faculty at these institutions demonstrated the importance of providing environments where young Black men can see themselves reflected in positions of success and influence. This journey enriched the lives of the youth and also deepened my understanding of the vital role mentorship plays in their development.

The HBCU College Tour revealed key insights reflecting the FRESH HEART model. The tour showed how socio-cultural artifacts can foster a positive racial identity and socio-emotional well-being. At each institution, the interactions and experiences demonstrated the value of supportive and culturally affirming environments. These environments contribute significantly to academic and personal growth. FRESH HEART emphasizes the importance of building fulfilling relationships and collective well-being. This was clear as the youth connected with their historical lineage and cultural heritage. During our conversations at the colleges and historical sites throughout the trip, they expressed feeling a stronger sense of identity and well-being. The tour also showcased the model's focus on providing tangible examples of success and perseverance. These examples inspired the youth to pursue their goals with confidence. Additionally, FRESH HEART highlights the creation of liberatory educational spaces. The immersive, pro-Black environments at the colleges provided refuge from systemic anti-Blackness. They fostered a sense of belonging and community, aligning with the model's principles.

The HBCU College Tour offered significant findings, exemplifying the healing and empowering potential of culturally sustaining and community-driven experiences. The youth's engagement with their cultural heritage and the examples of Black excellence encountered at each institution fostered a renewed sense of identity, purpose, and motivation. These experiences were critical in enhancing their socio-emotional well-being and academic self-efficacy. The transformative influence of the tour was evident in the youth's increased confidence, their willingness to engage in intellectual discussions, and their eagerness to envision a future where they are active contributors to their communities. The youth gained a deeper understanding of their potential and the importance of collective empowerment. This transformative experience

aligns with other key components of the Blue Heart Foundation's programming, such as Signing Day and Mentor Connection. These initiatives, which include celebrations of Black joy and excellence, healing circles, and mindfulness practices, further exemplify the FRESH HEART principles of healing, empowerment, and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS).

### **Components of Blue Heart Activities**

Components refer to the essential elements, structured programs, services, and activities within the Blue Heart Foundation's system that contribute to its overall functioning and outcomes. These components are integral to implementing the organization's mission and vision, providing the necessary framework to support the development of Black male youth. They encompass specific initiatives, like mentorship programs and academic support activities, designed to foster a supportive and enriching environment. The subsequent parts of this section highlight key components, such as Signing Day and Mentor Connection, to illustrate their impact on the youth's academic and personal development.

### **Components (Signing Day 2023)**

Signing Day marks the culmination of the Blue Heart participants' high school journey and their acceptance into various colleges and universities. It is an opportunity for the students to publicly announce their college choices and to be recognized for their academic achievements. The event is a powerful testament to the collective effort of families, mentors, and the broader community. The excitement in the room was palpable, as each student stepped up to the podium to share their future plans. This celebration not only highlighted individual successes but also underscored the support systems that played a crucial role in their achievements.

City and county officials were present to formally recognize the students' achievements. Certificates and awards were presented, adding an official and celebratory tone to the

proceedings. This formal recognition from community leaders reinforced the significance of the students' accomplishments and highlighted the broader community's investment in their success. The presence of these officials also underscored the importance of public acknowledgment and the role it plays in fostering a sense of accomplishment and motivation among the youth. Such accolades from esteemed figures provided a tangible sense of validation and encouragement for the students.

I also spoke on my perspective as a mentor and the HBCU college tour ([Video Link Here](#)). As I stood before the gathered crowd on Signing Day, I couldn't help but reflect on my own journey from a challenging upbringing to my current role as an educator and mentor. Sharing my story with the students, parents, and mentors present, I emphasized the importance of community, resilience, and the transformative power of education.

Already today, we heard some words about Black excellence, right? What does that mean? To me, that means Black joy, Black resistance, Black resilience. Looking back on our history, recognizing that again, together we rise, and that indeed it does take a village. For these young Black men to be here today, it took a village. It took family support; it took long nights. And for me to be here, it also took that as well.

I paused, looking out at the faces of the young Black men who were about to embark on another phase of their transformative journeys into adulthood.

I recounted the moments of struggle and triumph that shaped my path, underscoring how essential it was to have supportive relationships that reflected and nurtured a belief in my potential:

Luckily, I had my aunt to provide me with that rich understanding of our Black history and our Black culture so that I could be firmly rooted in developing my identity beyond the limiting ideas and stereotypes and messages that I saw in the media so often and that we still see today. When we turn on the news, when we look at social media, we're inundated, we're saturated with very limiting portrayals of what it means to be a Black man, of the types of things that we can seek to aspire to become. So, to me, it's really important to think about: What do we see when we look in the mirror as Black men? What do we see in each other when we look at our peers or other Black brothers? And a

part of this question, I feel, comes back down to: How do we cultivate environments where as Black young men, we feel uplifted, we feel supported, we feel seen, heard, and understood? And that's what Blue Heart is all about. That's why I'm so passionate about being here.

I continued reflecting on how I came across Blue Heart and how that Signing Day event marked my first year being engaged with the organization:

This time last year was my first introduction to Blue Heart, my first event that I participated in, just viewing, right? And it was Signing Day of last year. Before that, I tried to set up a meeting with Tracy Morris in February, and unfortunately, he had passed right before I got a chance to meet him. But when I went to Signing Day, I felt his presence. When I went to Signing Day, I could see in all the young men, all the lives that he touched, who Tracy was and who he still is because his impact is still felt. He's still here with us.

That's what I want to be a part of, and that's why I feel so passionately about Blue Heart and what we do with our young men. Because we pour into them, because we see in them not only ourselves but who they can be—all the possibilities, all the different pathways. So, we take all those limits off, take all the limiting ideas and the stereotypes that we've seen for centuries, for generations, since the beginning of this society, right, that has put Black men in a box, that has labeled us as dangerous, as deviant, and we flip that, and we say Black excellence. [Looking at the tables with Blue Heart youth] We see you, young Black men. We see you. You are special. You are worthy. You are excellent.

One of the things that we also have to remember is how our Black young men are treated in our schools. Now, we all know it wasn't until the Civil Rights Movement, 1954, Brown versus Board of Education, that as Black folks, we were even legally allowed to integrate schools. And part of the reason and the argument that was put forth in that court ruling was that separate also meant unequal. You cannot separate us as Black folks in our schooling environments and expect us to have the same opportunities and resources. So, we sought to integrate.

But generations later, what we continue to see are the implicit biases and the same stereotypes being put upon our young Black men as early as preschool. There are various studies that indicate that when preschool teachers are looking for deviance or challenging behavior in the classroom, they more often than not focus on the Black students. They more often than not focus on the Black boys. We're talking about preschool.

So, when we fast forward and we think about the events and the tragedies that led to the social unrest and the movements during 2020, right? George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others that we see in the news. These implicit biases, they don't just start with our interactions with the police. They don't just start when we're pulled over or when we're walking down the street wearing a hoodie like Trayvon Martin was. They start as early as preschool.



Because these ideas, these ideologies, these perceptions are so saturated in our society, so saturated in our culture that they are replicated and reproduced in the classroom. Why is that important? Because when we send our young Black boys off to school, we want them to be taught. We want them to be supported. We want our teachers to see in them that potential and possibility that we see in our own children and have that same love and care for them when we send them off to school.

And yet, we still see the disproportionate disciplining of our Black boys for the same infraction that a white kid will get a slap on the wrist we might have our Black boy get put in cuffs. The reason why that's important is because not only are we having to educate our young Black men in reading, writing, math, and science, but we also have to help them heal from this onslaught of this pervasive level of anti-Black violence. There're various forms of racism.

So, we need the healing, and we also need the empowerment. The empowerment for our young Black men to see themselves in what is possible, in the history and the rich culture that we come from and that we maintain, because they're not always getting that in the curriculum in their school.

Connecting this to the HBCU tour, I highlighted the profound impact that visiting historically Black colleges had on our students. My speech reinforced the themes of Radical Healing and Empowerment-Based Youth Development by illustrating the importance of culturally affirming experiences and community support. These elements are vital in fostering resilience and academic success. The HBCU tour played a pivotal role in providing our seniors with a sense of belonging and pride in their cultural heritage, much like the ways in which my aunt provided opportunities and support systems that guided me throughout my own adolescent development and adult life.

Another unique and memorable aspect of Signing Day was the presentation of senior jackets, which the students designed themselves. These jackets symbolized their achievements and sense of belonging to the Blue Heart community. During the college tour, George (pseudonym) and the other Blue Heart seniors noticed the letterman jackets worn by the Gentlemen of Drew Social Club at Howard University, a male leadership organization focused on academic success and community service. This sparked George's idea to collaborate with the

other seniors to create their own Blue Heart letterman jackets, starting a tradition that has continued to this year. The pride in wearing the jackets was evident as they celebrated their past accomplishments and marked their transition into a new phase of life. They were tangible representations of their hard work, dedication, and shared identity within the Blue Heart family and became lasting mementos of their journey with the organization. The jackets, emblazoned with the Blue Heart motto “Together We Rise!”, also signified the continuation of the values and lessons learned, carrying forward the spirit of their experiences.

Some of the most poignant moments of the event were the emotional speeches from parents and caregivers. These speeches offered heartfelt reflections on the students' journeys, the challenges they overcame, and the pride they felt in their achievements. The parents expressed deep gratitude to the Blue Heart Foundation for its unwavering support and guidance, emphasizing the collaborative effort required to reach this milestone. Many parents shared personal anecdotes that illustrated the struggles and triumphs experienced along the way, creating a deeply emotional and inspiring atmosphere. Their words resonated with everyone present, highlighting the power of community and collective effort in overcoming adversity.

George, one of our graduating seniors, took to the stage after being introduced by his parents. He shared his genuine gratitude for the support he received from the Blue Heart Foundation.

I also didn't really see myself up here, I'm not gonna lie. It's kind of a little awkward, but you know, Blue Heart has really made a huge impact on me. I joined this past last year around Signing Day; that was my first event I attended. Just seeing all the past seniors go up here, talk about themselves, and pick a college that they want to go to really inspired me, and I wanted to be in their shoes on this stage picking a college as well. It kind of reminded me of the NFL draft, but you know, it's better because not a lot of young Black males get this type of opportunity to go to college, and it's overlooked a lot.

He spoke about the positive changes he observed in his confidence and leadership skills, attributing these improvements to the mentorship and community support provided by the organization.

George expressed a deep sense of gratitude connecting his growth to the experiences from the support of Blue Heart staff:

I want to say thank you, Blue Heart, for giving me this opportunity and really loving on me. Thank you, Miss Lorraine. I want to say thank you, Miss Harriet also. She couldn't be here today, but she really played a huge part in the college applications and scholarships, because without her, I probably would have been lost. I wouldn't have known what to do, how to apply, or anything. But she really helped...

George recounted the transformative impact of the HBCU tour as a turning point igniting inspiration and motivation that he previously struggled to maintain.

The HBCU tour played a really big factor. I never thought about going to college, but this past January, we went on the HBCU tour, experiencing many different schools and learning about our history, which brought me closer towards going to college, especially at an HBCU. So, I thank you for that.

George's speech highlighted the crucial role of family and community in the development of Black youth. His reflections underscored the collective effort needed to support academic and personal growth. George's narrative illustrated how the HBCU tour reinforced his belief in his capabilities and the importance of striving for excellence.

Following George's speech, Martin, another graduating senior, echoed similar sentiments, further emphasizing the impact of the Blue Heart community and the dedicated support they received:

Another big help with our college experience was Mr. James. I want to thank him too. He was also up late with us, helping us bring us up to the best that we could be, and he was by our side the entire time. Blue Heart changed my life. It changed my life for the better, and I'm forever grateful for being a part of Blue Heart.

Martin's words encapsulated the transformative power of mentorship and the unwavering support provided by Blue Heart. His gratitude highlighted the significance of community and the profound effect it had on their personal and academic journeys. The sentiments shared by both George and Martin underscored the essence of the Blue Heart experience—an experience rooted in collective upliftment and a deep commitment to nurturing the potential of Black male youth.

After their reflections, each Blue Heart senior proudly announced their college choice, sharing their excitement and gratitude for the opportunities ahead. This public declaration of their hard work and academic success was a moment of immense pride for the students, their families, and the mentors who supported them along the way. The joy and pride on the faces of the students were mirrored by their supporters, creating a collective atmosphere of celebration. These announcements served as public affirmations of their perseverance and dedication, validating the efforts they had invested throughout their high school years.

The public declaration of college choices, along with formal recognition from city and county officials, validates the significance of these accomplishments. This formal recognition from community leaders confirms the broader community's investment in the students' success. It highlights the role of external validation in empowerment. Such public acknowledgments are essential for promoting a positive self-concept and socio-emotional well-being. These recognitions serve as a powerful reminder that their hard work is valued and celebrated by the entire community. This, in turn, reinforces their sense of belonging and achievement.

Emotional speeches from parents and caregivers illustrate the critical role of familial support in the students' journeys. Their narratives express the collective resilience and empowerment themes central to the FRESH HEART framework. They highlight the collaborative effort required to achieve these milestones. Parents' reflections emphasize the

importance of a supportive home environment and community involvement. Such support helps youth to overcome challenges and actualize their potential. Through their heartfelt stories, parents and caregivers share the sacrifices and unwavering support that helped their children reach this pivotal moment. These stories showcase the strength and unity within the community.

Signing Day demonstrates the lasting significance of public recognition, community support, and culturally significant symbols. These elements cultivate a sense of achievement, belonging, and empowerment among Black male youth. Visibility, validation, and community engagement are crucial in the developmental process. Celebrating academic achievements in a communal setting reinforces the value of education. It also highlights the collective effort needed to overcome systemic barriers. The shared experiences of joy and pride strengthen community bonds. These experiences also inspire younger generations to pursue their goals with confidence and resilience. Smiles, tears of joy, and proud declarations of future plans show the sustained impact of such events.

### **Components (Mentor Connection)**

The Mentor Connection Program at Blue Heart is a cornerstone of our approach to youth development. Meeting in-person or virtually every second Saturday either, these mentor sessions provide a structured environment for mentors and mentees to connect, discuss, and grow together. This program is vital in addressing the socio-emotional needs of Black male youth by nurturing a sense of belonging and empowerment within the community.

We recently held a virtual Mentor Connection session. This session, like many others, was intentionally planned to address relevant and impactful topics for the youth. The focus of this session was "Relationships with Mothers/Mother Figures." We began with an inspirational video about Warrick Dunn, a former NFL player who overcame personal tragedy and adversity

to achieve remarkable success. His story highlighted themes of responsibility, resilience, and the profound impact of forgiveness. This set a powerful tone for the discussions that followed.

Dunn's narrative of becoming the man of the house after his mother's tragic death resonated deeply and illustrated the importance of taking on responsibility while finding strength in difficult circumstances.

Fred (Blue Heart CEO) facilitated discussions about personal experiences with mothers and mother figures, guiding participants to explore how their mothers or caretakers have shaped their lives. He framed the session by prompting reflections on the different roles mothers play and how these influence perceptions and responsibilities. Fred emphasized practicing empathy and gratitude for our mothers and not taking for granted what they do to support us.

After having us watch the Warrick Dunn video clip, Fred specifically called on Malcolm (Blue Heart mentor) to share about his experience growing up to open the conversation. Malcolm shared insights on growing up without a strong paternal figure and learning from his mother, contributing to his understanding of family dynamics and the challenges faced by youths with similar backgrounds. This story sharing was akin to a healing circle, helping the mentees connect with mentor experiences and vice versa.

Healing circles, as described by Ginwright (2016), are a healing justice strategy that is becoming increasingly common in schools and community organizations. These circles draw from African, indigenous, and other cultural traditions, where community members gather in a circle to share their stories, experiences, and emotions. Typically led by a community elder, the process is designed to create a safe and trusting environment. The elder guides the circle and also sets an example by sharing their own story with honesty and truthfulness. Each participant is then given the opportunity to share their story without fear of judgment, which allows for a

deeper level of connection and trust among the group. The act of sharing personal and often sensitive experiences encourages vulnerability and enables participants to engage in more profound and meaningful dialogue.

Malcolm's narrative set the stage for the youth to open up about their own experiences. A tenth grader spoke about the pressure of becoming the man of the house at a young age, highlighting the emotional and practical challenges that come with significant family responsibilities. His account shed light on the weight of expectations and the resilience needed to navigate these challenges. Afterward, another youth recounted a recent conflict he had with a peer at school and how his feelings of anger impacted his emotions and interactions, especially following his parents' tumultuous relationship. This led to discussions about self-awareness, managing emotions, and the support needed from family and mentors. His honesty about his struggles with anger and the resultant behavioral issues underscored the importance of emotional regulation and mentorship in providing guidance.

Then, another youth participant, discussed his habit of lying to his mom as a way to avoid trouble, sparking a discussion about honesty and the complexities of child-parent dynamics, particularly in stressful or high-expectation environments. This conversation emphasized the need for trust and open communication within families. Fred asked about my experience to intentionally connect my experience of not having my mother, but having my aunt as a maternal figure. I shared how the video about Warrick Dunn and his mom made me think of two things in relation to my aunt: love and purpose. Given my experience not growing up with my parents, I questioned what love and my purpose is. Through the unconditional love my aunt showed me, I came to see love as tied to purpose; love of self and love for others/community brings my purpose to uplift.

Connecting to my experience of not being raised by my mother, Fred called on a senior who was raised by his grandmother. He shared about his mother's health issues that led to him being raised by his grandmother, which broadened the conversation to the impact of health crises on family dynamics and youth development. His story highlighted the critical role of extended family members in providing stability and support. These narratives created a powerful collective experience, reinforcing the importance of community and mutual support in navigating personal challenges.

The Mentor Connection Program exemplifies the concept of radical healing by addressing the deep-seated socio-emotional wounds that many Black male youth carry. Through the structure of mentorship, the program provides authentic care and support, essential for nurturing confidence and a sense of belonging. The program aligns with the principles of healing and empowerment, which emphasizes healing through community and culturally relevant support systems. The session's structure, which included a motivational video followed by group discussions and personal storytelling, was deliberately designed to build empathy, trust, and community. These activities are integral to fostering an environment where the youth can freely express their emotions and experiences, thereby promoting self-awareness and mutual support. The reflective questions posed by Fred were particularly effective in encouraging the youth to explore their feelings and share openly.

By encouraging personal storytelling and reflective discussions, the Mentor Connection Program helps participants develop resilience and agency. The shared experiences and collective reflections foster a strong sense of belonging, crucial for the socio-emotional development of Black male youth. These sessions reflect more than just a series of meetings; they are an essential component of a support system that fosters radical healing and empowerment. By



providing a structured yet flexible environment for personal sharing and collective reflection, the program helps Black male youth develop resilience, agency, and a deep sense of belonging. These insights underscore the importance of mentorship programs that are culturally sustaining and community-driven, offering valuable lessons for similar initiatives aimed at empowering marginalized youth.

This section of findings has illustrated the profound impact of Blue Heart programs on the healing and empowerment of African American male youth. By weaving personal narratives with academic analysis, this section has demonstrated how various elements (socio-cultural artifacts) and structures (components) within Blue Heart’s activities—such as the HBCU College Tour, Signing Day, and Mentor Connection—embody the principles of Radical Healing, Empowerment-Based Youth Development, and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS). These experiences highlight the significance of culturally sustaining environments and community-driven support systems in fostering resilience, agency, and a positive racial identity among the youth.

### **Section 3: Perspectives Within the System (RQs 2 & 3)**

The following analysis of interview data reveals findings emanating from the perspectives within Blue Heart to explore how its staff and alumni reflect the FRESH HEART framework. To frame this section, I begin with the research questions and present a summary of the findings in a bulleted format, followed by a detailed exploration of the analysis:

- **Research Question 2:** How do Blue Heart staff describe their experiences in supporting Black male youth?
- **Research Question 3:** From the perspective of Blue Heart alumni, which elements of the programming were most influential in their healing and empowerment journey?

#### **Mindset: Healing (CARMA)**

- **Mentorship Emphasis:** The mentorship program focuses on empathy, compassion, and positive identity reinforcement. These elements are critical for healing and empowerment.
- **Trust and Authentic Care:** Relatable mentors build trust and provide authentic care. This creates an environment conducive to healing.
- **Emotional and Psychological Support:** Alumni reflect on the critical support they received during challenging periods. This highlights the importance of holistic support.
- **Personal Reflections and Faith:** Mentors emphasize forgiveness and faith as strategies for managing negative feelings. This approach aligns with discussions in mentor connection sessions.

### **Mindset: Empowerment (EMPYD)**

- **Community and Unity:** Empowerment is viewed as both an individual and collective endeavor, emphasizing the power of community and unity.
- **Spiritual Concepts:** Staff and alumni articulate empowerment through spiritual concepts such as Sankofa and Ubuntu. These concepts emphasize interconnectedness.
- **Confidence and Leadership:** Alumni describe significant boosts in confidence and leadership skills due to their involvement with Blue Heart.
- **Social Skills and Accountability:** Community service activities build strong social skills, accountability, and a sense of shared purpose among participants.

### **Goals: Empowerment (EMPYD)**

- **Personal Growth and Competencies:** Empowerment goals focus on developing individual skills and competencies through various activities and mentorship programs.
- **Leadership Development:** Alumni reflect on personal growth and leadership development due to mentorship and community service.
- **Community Service:** Community service projects nurture a sense of collective responsibility and solidarity. These projects provide diverse and impactful experiences.

### **Connections**

- **Fulfilling Relationships:** Blue Heart excels in nurturing fulfilling connections among its members, which are central to the principles of healing and empowerment and the FRESH HEART model.

- **High Expectations and Support:** Relationships with mentors are characterized by high expectations and genuine support. This balance between accountability and self-efficacy is crucial for youth to develop a sense of responsibility; both the duty to oneself and others to do and be their best while also developing and practicing socio-emotional and intellectual competencies (i.e., the ability to respond to internal and external dynamics).
- **Long-lasting Impact:** Alumni reflect on the long-lasting impact of mentorship on their identity and community engagement.
- **Peer Support Among Mentors:** Peer support among mentors provides a vital outlet for sharing experiences and mutual support. This reinforces the community-centric approach of Blue Heart.
- **Brotherhood and Community Bonds:** Shared experiences and activities foster a strong sense of brotherhood and connection among participants. This emphasizes the importance of collective identity and purpose.

The findings in this section focus on specific high-leverage system characteristics, particularly **paradigms** and **structures**, that shape youth experiences. Paradigms refer to the *mindsets* and *goals* that drive the organization's actions and decisions. Mindsets encompass the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives influencing how individuals within Blue Heart engage with issues of race and equity in education. Goals represent the overarching objectives that guide efforts toward promoting racial equity and justice. Structures, in this context, emphasize *connections*—how fulfilling relationships with peers, adults, and the community and the sense of brotherhood among Black male peers contribute to the overall empowerment and healing processes.

An emergent theme from the interview data is the concept of *brotherhood*, an in vivo code that captures the culturally nuanced aspects of Black male youth peer connections within

Blue Heart. This code was particularly salient in describing the unique bonds formed among the young men, highlighting the importance of creating a supportive and empowering environment. These connections reflect and extend the conceptualization of Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS), where the specificity of Black male youth subjectivities are centered and uplifted. The brotherhood code will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section on BEFS.

Through a systems approach, I examine how these mindsets and goals manifest in the interactions and experiences of Blue Heart staff and alumni. The emphasis is on understanding the intricate dynamics of healing and empowerment as described by the adult staff and observed in the lives of the alumni. This exploration provides insights into how these perspectives align with and also extend the theoretical frameworks of Radical Healing (CARMA) and Empowerment-Based Youth Development (EMPYD). This section aims to shed light on the transformative potential of community-based organizations like Blue Heart by integrating empirical observations with theoretical insights. The narratives of staff and alumni illustrate how Blue Heart's programming fosters environments conducive to healing, empowerment, and the positive development of Black male youth.

### **Mindset: Healing (CARMA)**

Reflecting on the interview data, one of the core aspects of Blue Heart is its mentorship program, which supports Black male youth in their healing and empowerment journeys. These processes are sustained through relationships that foster positive identity and values aligned with empathy and compassion. Mentors, who are relatable as Black men, provide perspective and support by being present and building trust over time with authentic care. They also invest in the youth with the expectation of growth, reciprocity, and collective engagement. For instance, one mentor, Malcolm, emphasized the importance of being present and relatable, particularly

highlighting his shared experiences as a Black male. When asked which aspects of his multidimensional identity resonate most when connecting with Blue Heart youth, he stated:

The first, the most obvious would be a Black male... **I see myself in them... when I see them, I see myself** as a young teenager. So, the most obvious would be that I'm a Black male just like they are. I'm someone that's relatable, that's approachable. And then they can talk to about some of the things that they have encountered, and I can help point out some things that they may not have encountered yet or point out some pitfalls or obstacles that may come up on their path, on whatever path they're on and **help guide them** and maybe prevent them from making some of the mistakes that I made and learn from some of my mistakes.

Malcolm's motivation to mentor stems from his upbringing in a single-parent household and his desire to fill the gaps for youth who might not have both parents present. He remarked:

I grew up in a single-parent household. It was my mom and two sisters. So, for all my formative years, until my mom remarried when I was 10, you know, I was like the man of the house and I'm a little kid. So that's my motivation to fill in the gap for the kids who are in the same position as me. And I know we have a lot of mentees who have both parents, but we have mentees who don't have both parents. So I can relate to both of them. **That's my why, and that's my motivation to provide them with what I didn't have growing up.**

These connections help build trust and create a safe space for the youth to open up about their experiences and challenges, fostering an environment conducive to healing.

Malcolm's perspective on healing and empowerment is deeply rooted in his faith and personal journey. He explained:

Definitely healing. So I talked about me being a man of faith and being a Christian. So definitely healing. A lot of prayer and I don't think I would have made it through this process without my faith and without having a relationship with God. So there's definitely a healing process. Forgiveness has got to be part of that healing process... me forgiving them and just moving on with my life because it would just be unhealthy to not do that and then I would be stuck in it and have a negative impact on me and my health.

This quote ties to the mentor connection sessions where discussions often opened up youth experiences with various emotions, including expressing frustrations or anger towards peers and family. Malcolm brought up forgiveness as a strategy for working through negative

feelings that could otherwise distract, overwhelm, and negatively shape actions. From the perspective of Blue Heart alumni, the education and support provided by the foundation play a significant role in their healing journey. Alex, a Blue Heart alumnus, reflected on the impact of having support during a challenging period in his life when he lost his scholarship offers due to an injury:

It kind of broke me down because it really made me feel like, oh wow, they really just saw me as a player... But going through that whole experience and having the Blue Heart community back me... show me how much education matters, how much being in your community matters... was really just like eye-opening.

Alex also shared his struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic and how Blue Heart provided critical support:

When COVID hit, it was really, really hard for me. Off the strength of living in California and being in school in Atlanta, I couldn't turn around and buy a plane ticket three days, four days later... Tracy, no question, asked, 'What do you need? How do you need? A storage? Do you need to put stuff here? I got family in Atlanta, you could stay there until we get you a plane ticket.'... They were all super duper helpful through that whole process.

These narratives illustrate the multifaceted support system Blue Heart provides, where education is not limited to academic learning but extends to emotional and psychological support. This approach aligns with the principles of Radical Healing, which advocate for environments that nurture emotional well-being, cultural identity, and collective healing.

The perspectives of Blue Heart staff and alumni align closely with the Radical Healing framework proposed by Ginwright (2016). This framework posits that healing from challenging circumstances and racial trauma requires more than individual therapy; it necessitates collective efforts within supportive community environments. Blue Heart embodies this through its mentorship programs, which are designed to be not only educational but also deeply healing. By offering spaces where youth can connect with mentors who share their racial and cultural

backgrounds, Blue Heart creates a sanctuary for overcoming obstacles, addressing trauma, and fostering resilience.

For example, Blue Heart's focus on mentorship as a vehicle for healing is evident in how staff members describe their interactions with the youth. Malcolm's commitment to being a constant, supportive presence underscores the importance of reliability and trust in the healing process. He stated:

If I had to sum it up in one word, I would just say **present**. We have events that we go to regularly, we have a minimum amount of events that we have to attend a month and we have to reach out to them on a regular basis and also track that communication and also communicate with them during these events. I just want them to know that I'm someone who's present there. If there's no one else that they can reach out to if they have something that they want to talk to that they don't feel comfortable talking to their mom about or their counselor or anybody else, I just want to make sure that they know that there's always, if it's just me, **you at least have me as someone who's present there for you whenever you need me**.

This mirrors Ginwright's emphasis on the need for stable, caring relationships as a foundation for emotional healing. The views and experiences shared by Blue Heart staff and alumni demonstrate how education at Blue Heart serves as a powerful tool for healing. The holistic approach taken by the organization, which integrates emotional support, cultural identity reinforcement, and community engagement, aligns seamlessly with the Radical Healing framework. This integration not only aids in individual healing but also fosters a collective sense of empowerment and resilience among African American male youth.

### **Mindset: Empowerment (EMPYD)**

Examining the mindset of agency and self-determination among Blue Heart staff and alumni reveals a deep commitment to fostering a sense of individual and collective empowerment. The Empowerment-Based Youth Development (EMPYD) framework emphasizes building individual and collective agency, enabling youth to navigate and transform their socio-political environments. This section highlights narratives that demonstrate how building



fulfilling relationships reinforces moral values, self-worth, and a sense of belonging within the Blue Heart community.

Empowerment at Blue Heart is viewed as both an individual and collective endeavor.

Staff members like Malcolm articulate empowerment through the lens of community and unity.

He explained:

So, um, empowerment in terms of... group empowerment and us coming together as a community and not trying to be an island and do things on our own. But there's power in numbers, and the empowerment I think is gonna come with unity and community relationships. Like we all came from Adam and Eve, we're all brothers and sisters, we're all one race, like we're the human race. So I think that empowerment is gonna come when we unite as the human race.

This perspective ties empowerment to values and beliefs rooted in spiritual concepts such as Sankofa and Ubuntu, emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity and the strength found in community bonds. Blue Heart alumni also highlight how their experiences within the organization contributed to their confidence and sense of self-worth. KeAun, for instance, described the significant boost in confidence he received from his leadership role at Blue Heart and the extensive community service he completed. He shared:

For me, Blue Heart definitely gave me a boost of confidence coming into college, not even just because of the leadership role. Like I was saying, you know, like being able to lead a group of guys in my senior year of high school...but also **knowing that I was a different caliber type of guy**. I came out of high school with over 1500 hours of community service. So when I'm talking to other guys, like, you know how many service hours you got? They're talking about 15, 20, 30. I'm telling them I got 1500. It's just like a confidence boost cause it's like I don't... what's understood doesn't need to be explained. Like I know I'm not like you, respectfully.

This sense of accomplishment and confidence underscores the impact of Blue Heart's emphasis on community service and leadership, fostering a strong sense of self-worth among its participants. The importance of moral values and community engagement is a recurring theme in the narratives of Blue Heart alumni. Mumia reflected on his experiences with community service and how it shaped his understanding of relationships and accountability:

Community service... I feel like it was probably **one of the best experiences** because it **taught me just to be kind to people**, you know, everybody's situation is different. It taught me how to take **accountability** for just **being present and showing up and helping out**. It also taught me the **importance of relationship building** and relationships in general... But it also allowed me, like, going to college to make friends easier. I feel like... community service every week... just became natural, like, helping out is natural to me. Like I'm always offering my help to whoever, if it's in the workspace or if it's, you know, friends, family, like I'm just offering help because, you know, I've been able to learn that in early on.

Mumia's reflection highlights how consistent engagement in community service not only fostered kindness and accountability but also equipped him with essential social skills that eased his transition into college and career.

The sense of belonging fostered at Blue Heart is also key to its empowerment strategy. The organization's emphasis on brotherhood and community creates a supportive environment where participants feel valued and connected. This is particularly evident in the alumni's reflections on their relationships with mentors and peers. The mindset of agency and self-determination at Blue Heart, as reflected in the experiences of staff and alumni, aligns closely with the principles of the Empowerment-Based Youth Development framework. By fostering positive relationships, instilling moral values, enhancing self-worth, and creating a strong sense of belonging, Blue Heart effectively empowers its participants to navigate and transform their environments, contributing to their overall growth and success.

### **Goals: Empowerment (EMPYD)**

The Blue Heart goals related to empowerment focus on developing individual skills and competencies among participants. Through various activities and mentorship programs, Blue Heart aims to instill a sense of agency and self-determination in its members, fostering their growth into confident and capable individuals. Mumia, a Blue Heart alumnus, shared how his involvement in the foundation's activities significantly contributed to his personal growth. Initially introverted, Mumia found that his experiences at Blue Heart, particularly the

encouragement from Tracy, Blue Heart founder, helped him develop leadership skills and confidence. He explains:

Tracy used to say I was an introvert, like I was very introverted. I wouldn't say I wouldn't talk to people, but I would say like, I wouldn't get out of my comfort zone to initiate conversations or go up to talk to talk to people. I will kind of wait for them to come to me. And he always say, "You're an introvert, but you're a leader." And I, I always never understood what that meant until I got probably to my junior year high school.

This mentorship helped Mumia transition from a quiet, reserved individual to a confident leader who could effectively engage with various stakeholders, including high-profile community members and leaders. He continues:

As I went through college, I was able to do a lot of things because all the things that I learned in high school in those four years from the age of 14 to 18, really set me up for a great success to go to Morehouse College and speak out for myself and, you know, do things that I would probably never see me doing in my, in my life, but it definitely helped.

Mumia's testimony highlights how Blue Heart's focus on empowerment through leadership roles and public speaking opportunities equipped him with essential skills for his future endeavors.

### **Goals: Community Empowerment**

In addition to individual empowerment, Blue Heart places a strong emphasis on community empowerment. The organization's goals include strengthening community ties and fostering collective agency among its members. By involving participants in community service projects and creating opportunities for meaningful engagement, Blue Heart nurtures a sense of collective responsibility and solidarity. Kwame, a Blue Heart alumnus, reflected on how the foundation instilled a passion for community service and a deeper understanding of collective empowerment:

Coming out of Blue Heart, I definitely developed my passion for community service with Blue Heart. I think my mom definitely showed me the love of like other kids and kind of giving back from an education standpoint. So education is like a very integral part of, you know, my values. But community service overall, I definitely developed a passion for with Blue Heart in large part because that's where I got to kick it with the homies on Saturday, you know, in the morning and they have the whole rest of the day.

Kwame's experiences illustrate how Blue Heart's community service activities, which often went beyond traditional forms of volunteering, helped build strong community bonds and a sense of shared purpose among participants. He elaborates on the diverse nature of these activities:

It wasn't the typical, you know, go feed the homeless, do a donation drive for clothes because like, don't get me wrong. Those are great things and like things that should be done more regularly. But I think a lot of people, when they think of community service, it automatically goes to the homeless population, which is, you know, a big issue that, that needs solving. But it's also one that doesn't get done overnight. Um and it's not as consistent, like people will do it maybe around the holidays and then slide and then I think of it again for a year. So sometimes it was going to help the fire department or learning about being a firefighter. Other times it was maybe going to the California Western School of Law and doing mock trials. Like other times it might be um uh what's it called? Uh, beautification, basically, like community beautification. Um picking up trash for lack of a better phrase, but it would be at the beach and then we might have surfing lessons or something like that.

These varied activities provided participants with a broader perspective on community engagement, reinforcing the importance of collective action and community empowerment. The goals of Blue Heart related to empowerment and community empowerment are deeply intertwined with the organization's activities and mentorship programs. Through fostering individual skills and promoting collective agency, Blue Heart successfully equips its participants with the tools necessary for personal growth and community leadership.

### **Connections**

The Blue Heart Foundation excels in fostering deep, meaningful connections among its members, which is central to the principles of healing and empowerment. Staff and alumni frequently highlight the importance of these relationships, emphasizing the sense of belonging and mutual support they cultivate. Bobby, an alumnus, reflects on his relationship with Tracy,

Blue Heart founder. He describes Tracy as someone who was "pretty much honest" and committed to the students' success, even when they did not fully understand his methods.

Coming from a teenage mind it's like, dang, he's on us again... But at the same time, he would also talk to us as well. He also would encourage us and tell us we did a good job. He would always uplift us and let us know the reason why he was on us because he wanted us to be the best people that we can be living in a world or living in a place where black men might not be seen as on an equal level as other people.

Bobby's reflection illustrates a crucial aspect of effective mentorship within the FRESH HEART framework: the balance between high expectations and genuine support. Tracy's approach of combining honest critique with encouragement reflects the dual necessity of fostering accountability while nurturing self-esteem. This method prepares the youth to meet the high standards expected of them and also instills a sense of purpose and resilience in facing societal challenges. Tracy's honesty and support helped Bobby and his peers develop a realistic understanding of their potential and the societal hurdles they might face, enabling them to navigate these challenges with confidence. It underscores how meaningful relationships can empower Black male youth by providing a supportive environment where they feel both challenged and uplifted.

Alex also speaks to the transformative power of these connections. He recounts his journey of joining Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc., inspired by Tracy's involvement and the values instilled in him through Blue Heart.

I was fortunate enough to become Tracy's fraternity brother... And it was through him that really, I joined the fraternity and he instilled the values of our fraternity in me. And I feel like it was through that experience and through like going through the experience of being on line and crossing and being able to call Tracy and talk to him and communicate with him.

Alex's experience highlights the long-lasting impact of mentorship on identity and community engagement. Tracy's influence extended beyond immediate educational outcomes, shaping

Alex's decisions and values as he navigated new social and cultural landscapes. Joining Phi Beta Sigma, inspired by Tracy, Alex gained a sense of shared purpose and an enduring connection to the principles and values that guided his mentor. This example demonstrates how mentorship extends beyond immediate educational outcomes to shape broader aspects of identity and community involvement. It illustrates how the relational dynamics within Blue Heart help cultivate a sense of community and shared identity.

Marcus, a Blue Heart mentor, also highlights the significance of the connections formed within the organization, not just between mentors and mentees, but among the mentors themselves. He explains:

The interaction with the Blue Heart mentors I think is also extremely important. One of the things that I like the most about the Blue Heart organization is what we call a mentor check-in. And I think that just like it's important to cultivate the relationship with the young men, it's important to cultivate the relationship with the other Black mentors. And the truth of the matter is there are a lot of Black men in this world that are hurting and don't have anybody to vent to. So I actually look extremely forward to just venting to other Black men that, you know, are either going through the same thing I am, whether it be you're married or you're just trying to live life and navigate, you know, America as a black man. Again, because all of us have somewhat the same story, we were raised by women so that could potentially also mean we didn't have a lot of male mentors. So essentially **here I am at 44 years old, still being able to be mentored by other men in this organization.** And to me that is just hands down great. I love it. I love that aspect or whoever thought of doing that. I think it is perfect just for us just to check in on each other and see how each other is doing.

Marcus's reflection emphasizes that the support network among mentors at Blue Heart is a core component of the organization's approach to holistic well-being. The "mentor check-in" process, as he describes, serves as a crucial space for mentors to share their personal experiences, challenges, and triumphs, thus fostering a sense of solidarity and collective healing among Black men. This peer support system is particularly valuable in addressing the unique struggles that Black men face, which often go unrecognized or unsupported in broader society. By providing a dedicated space for Black male mentors to "vent" and connect over shared experiences, Blue

Heart cultivates a supportive environment that acknowledges and validates the emotional and psychological burdens carried by these men.

This reciprocal mentoring relationship extends beyond traditional hierarchical dynamics, allowing mentors to both give and receive support, which enriches their own development and resilience. Marcus's experience of finding solace and mentorship among peers at his age illustrates the lifelong value of these connections and the need for guidance and community at every stage of life. This peer support among mentors provides a vital outlet for sharing experiences and mutual support, reinforcing the community-centric approach of Blue Heart. It showcases how the organization's commitment to nurturing relationships at all levels—between youth and mentors and among mentors themselves—strengthens the fabric of the Blue Heart community and exemplifies the principles of the FRESH HEART framework.

The relationships among peers at Blue Heart are equally significant. Alex describes the brotherhood that developed among the members, noting that despite initial reluctance, the shared experiences and activities fostered a strong bond.

At the time, like in high school, I honestly didn't want to spend all my weekends with the same group of kids... But it was really like the kids and the community behind it. You could just really tell that Tracy cared about us... I feel like for me coming from a single parent home, not having that male role model, Tracy was like that male role model that was like a lot of kids shoulders to lean on. And I feel like it was from like that, it was from his heart and his caring, and his ability to show it not just through his words, but through his actions, like just really going to bat for us. That really brought us all together.

Initially, Alex was reluctant to spend his weekends with the same group of peers, indicating a common sentiment among adolescents to resist structured social activities outside of their immediate interests. However, the genuine care and commitment demonstrated by Tracy and the broader community turned this reluctance into a deep sense of brotherhood and connection.

Tracy's actions, which went beyond mere words, demonstrated his unwavering commitment to

the youth. His willingness to “go to bat” for them developed a strong sense of trust and loyalty among the youth. This narrative emphasizes that the bonds formed within Blue Heart are not merely a product of forced association but are cultivated through consistent, meaningful interactions and activities that resonate with the participants’ needs and experiences.

The “kids and the community behind it” helped shift Alex’s experience from reluctant participation to enthusiastic involvement. This transformation illustrates how varied, purposeful activities—such as those organized by Blue Heart—serve as vital mechanisms for building a cohesive community. These activities provide common ground for shared experiences, which in turn foster a sense of belonging and mutual support among the youth. By actively participating in these activities, members develop a collective identity and purpose, which are crucial for their social and emotional development. Alex’s experience reflects how the intentional design of these activities, coupled with the genuine care from mentors like Tracy, creates an environment where participants feel valued and supported.

#### **Section 4: Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (RQ 4)**

The purpose of this section is to explore the specific components and activities within Blue Heart that embody the principles of Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS). By exploring how Blue Heart operationalizes the concept of Black educational fugitive space, this section aims to illuminate the high-leverage system characteristics that sustain these transformative spaces. Such liberatory educational ecosystems provide essential places where Black folks can engage in political dreaming and find refuge from oppressive societal norms (ross, 2021). BEFS are crucial for promoting racial equity and empowerment, particularly for Black male youth who often face unique challenges due to historical and racial trauma. By



creating pro-Black counterspaces, BEFS support individual healing and empowerment, as well as collective flourishing within the Black community.

In the context of this dissertation, the analysis of BEFS emphasizes the importance of specific system characteristics within Blue Heart. This includes a focus on paradigms such as political dreaming and the creation of a refuge. Additionally, this section aims to demonstrate the critical role of fulfilling relationships, particularly the concept of brotherhood, in the context of Blue Heart's activities and programs. The FRESH HEART model uniquely contributes to this analysis by operationalizing high-leverage system characteristics through feedback loops. These loops, categorized into reinforcing and balancing types, illustrate how various interactions and outcomes sustain or stabilize the system. Reinforcing feedback loops, such as FRESH Stories, FRESH Space, and HEART Connect, amplify positive outcomes, thereby creating cycles of motivation and success. Balancing feedback loops, including FRESH Connect, HEART Space, and HEART Roots, provide stability by addressing challenges and promoting resilience. These loops are essential for mitigating systemic anti-Blackness while sustaining the dynamics of healing and empowerment within Blue Heart's programs. This approach represents a departure from the guiding frameworks by emphasizing the dynamic interactions and systemic characteristics that support the foundation's goals and outcomes.

Through this exploration, the dissertation seeks to contribute to the theorization of BEFS, Radical Healing, and Empowerment-Based Youth Development. By highlighting the high-leverage system characteristics that distinctly align with and sustain BEFS, the goal is to provide insights into how community-based organizations like Blue Heart can effectively address the specific needs and experiences of Black male youth, ultimately contributing to racial progress.

To frame this section, I begin with the research question and present a summary of the findings in a bulleted format, followed by a detailed exploration of the analysis:

- **Research Question 4:** Which specific Blue Heart components or activities reflect a Black educational fugitive space?

#### **Mindset: Political Dreaming (BEFS)**

- **Vision Beyond Constraints:** Blue Heart staff and alumni envision futures beyond systemic constraints and work towards a just and equitable society.
- **Intergenerational Struggle:** Emphasis on ongoing struggles against systemic inequities and preparing future generations to continue the fight.
- **Afrofuturism:** Integration of Afrofuturism, linking past, present, and future to reverse engineer a desired future with actionable steps.
- **Inspired Careers:** Alumni, inspired by Blue Heart's support, pursue careers dedicated to actualizing their potential, impacting their communities, and empowering future generations.

#### **Goals: Refuge (BEFS)**

- **Sanctuary Against Anti-Blackness:** Blue Heart provides a refuge that fosters political dreaming and develops healthy Black subjectivities.
- **Personal Growth Platform:** Blue Heart offers critical support for personal growth, public speaking skills, and understanding the Black community.
- **Support During Challenges:** The pro-Black educational space provides resources and support during challenging times, which helps participants navigate setbacks and expand their vision of their future.

- **Exposure to HBCUs:** Tours to HBCUs introduce participants to environments that celebrate Black excellence, expands their horizons, and reinforces positive racial identity.

## **Brotherhood**

- **Deep Connections:** A deep ethos of brotherhood among Black male peers nurtures a positive racial identity, sense of belonging, and self-efficacy in a supportive environment where they can thrive.
- **Community Camaraderie:** Activities outside of sports, such as outreach opportunities and public speaking, create bonds that strengthen the sense of brotherhood.
- **Preparation for College:** Teaching the "sense of duality" helps participants navigate diverse environments and prepare for challenges in college.
- **Sustained Impact:** The concept of brotherhood continues to support alumni as they enter and succeed in college, reinforcing their sense of belonging and empowerment into adulthood.

## **Feedback Loops**

- **Reinforcing Loops: FRESH Stories**
  - **Success Stories:** Alumni achievements, such as college acceptances and personal milestones, inspire current participants and create a cycle of motivation and aspiration.
  - **Summer Exploration Program:** A nurturing environment that integrates socioemotional well-being, culturally responsive activities, mentorship, and academic enrichment to reinforce positive identity development and empowerment.

- **Reinforcing Loops: HEART Connect**
  - **Powerful Connections:** Relationships among members and community members support collaboration, trust, and accountability.
  - **Shared Visions:** The long-standing relationship and shared vision for empowering Black youth between members and mentors sustain and enhance the organization's mission.
  - **Community Impact:** Connections within Blue Heart extend beyond individual relationships to influence the wider community with a strong network that uplifts and empowers its members.
  
- **Reinforcing Loops: FRESH Space**
  - **Supportive Environment:** Daily interactions and activities that foster cultural pride, unity, and academic excellence.
  - **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:** Education deeply rooted in Black history and culture connects the youth's lived experiences to broader societal structures.
  
- **Balancing Loops: FRESH Connect**
  - **Sense of Belonging:** Strong relationships with mentors and peers counteract feelings of isolation, providing emotional and academic support.
  - **Transparency and Vulnerability:** Mentorship that emphasizes personal stories of persistence and overcoming obstacles, building trust and resilience.
  
- **Balancing Loops: HEART Space**
  - **Empowerment Pact:** Youth involvement in governance and decision-making fosters leadership, accountability, and a sense of ownership in the community.

- **Personalized Goals:** Goals in various domains guide participants in envisioning and embodying their best selves, addressing challenges collaboratively.
- **Balancing Loops: HEART Roots**
  - **Cultural Relevance:** Educational content rooted in cultural identities enhances engagement, self-esteem, and academic achievement.
  - **HBCU College Tour:** Exposure to historically Black colleges reinforces positive racial identity, socio-emotional well-being, and a sense of belonging.

The Blue Heart Foundation embodies the principles of BEFS through its various programs and activities designed to support Black male youth. Creating a safe and affirming environment allows Blue Heart to help participants navigate the challenges posed by systemic racism and develop a strong, positive identity. The foundation's focus on mentorship, community engagement, cultural education, and supportive relationships aligns with the core characteristics of BEFS. Blue Heart's activities are designed to create a space where Black male youth can engage in political dreaming and envision futures that go beyond the limitations imposed by systemic oppression. Through its programs, Blue Heart aims to reimagine Blackness and promote the development of healthy Black subjectivities by offering participants the tools and support they need to thrive both individually and collectively.

### **Mindset: Political Dreaming (BEFS)**

Exploring the vision of futures beyond systemic constraints as expressed by Blue Heart staff and alumni reveals a profound commitment to imagining and working towards a more just and equitable society. This section highlights narratives that exemplify the concept of political

dreaming within the framework of Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS), emphasizing radical imagination and the envisioning of futures free from systemic barriers.

Blue Heart staff and alumni frequently engage in envisioning futures where systemic constraints are dismantled, and equity prevails. Blue Heart mentor, Malcolm, reflects on the ongoing struggle against systemic inequities and the importance of his work for future generations:

I wish I knew how to make sense of it, but I still can't make sense of it. I feel like, you know, it's 2023 and we're still dealing with discrimination. We're still dealing with racism, bias. Um What is it called? Unconscious bias? Systemic racism and inequities. Like there's so many things that we deal with that I'm still fighting for today, for them, like for future generations, for my kids, for my kids' kids, for my mentees because there's stuff that you and I go through that we shouldn't be going through like our, our ancestors fought for, for our rights and, and for freedoms that we still really don't have today. So you say, how can I wrap my head around it? I can't like it's, it's not, we're nowhere near where we need to be. Have we made progress? Yes, but we're nowhere near where we need to be.

This quote underscores the ongoing nature of the struggle against systemic racism and highlights the role of mentors in preparing future generations to continue this fight.

This notion of intergenerational struggle echoes the ethos of Sankofa as well as the concept of Afrofuturism, which is integral to Blue Heart's approach to political dreaming.

Octavia, a guest speaker at Blue Heart, provides a nuanced introduction to Afrofuturism and its significance:

Conceptually, Afrofuturism was initially introduced in the framework of art and entertainment. So literature, music, um and media, film that represented African Americans in the future, primarily or particularly with the technologically augmented reality. So it relied heavily on technology as you know, a contextual element when looking at the future. After that initial introduction of the term and the initial definition, it was adopted by others who ascribed to the philosophy. And it has been augmented with a focus on social justice and also the concept of Sankofa which links the past, the present and the future... whenever we're projecting forward into the future, we're doing that based on information that we have about the present and the past. And for me, I practice what I call applied Afrofuturism where I um say, let's not just imagine the future that we want.

Let's reverse engineer the process of getting there and identify action items so that we can go forward and make the future that we want to see more likely to happen.

Octavia's explanation highlights the importance of integrating radical imagination with actionable steps to create a desired future. This approach encourages Blue Heart members to not only dream about a better world but also actively participate in its creation.

The alumni of Blue Heart reflect on how the foundation's support and educational programs have shaped their political dreaming. One alumnus, inspired by his experiences at Blue Heart, pursued a career in education to empower future generations:

So essentially, what made me want to be an educator was my love for youth. And my love for seeing the youth grow and their abilities and their dreams. Essentially, I've always been like a youth minister at church, worked in youth football camps, basketball camps, like, I've been around the youth as much as I can. And I feel like it was through my own educational experience with teachers. Like in high school, for instance, I had an English teacher named Mr Kall, who graded extremely, extremely hard. And on my first essay, I got like a 15% and went to his office hours and he sat there and talked me through why, like, everything was wrong pretty much... I feel like having those teachers that really, really showed that they cared. And really like gave back to their students was a real big thing for me. I feel like I wanted to have an impact or wanted to know that the impact I was leaving on this earth was meaningful and I feel like the best way and the, the most powerful way I could do that was through empowering youth... so it was more of like the **fulfillment of the why** you do your job and why you get up every morning that made me like, love my job that much more and want me to be a teacher.

This alumnus' reflection highlights the profound influence of Blue Heart's support, which inspired him to pursue a career dedicated to empowering the next generation. His journey illustrates how Blue Heart nurtures political dreaming while translating it into practical strategies for creating a more equitable society.

### **Goals: Refuge (BEFS)**

The Blue Heart Foundation has established itself as a sanctuary against systemic anti-Blackness, providing both a refuge and a platform for fostering political dreaming and developing healthy Black subjectivities. This refuge is essential in reimagining Blackness and

creating supportive environments that counter systemic constraints. Blue Heart's programs aim to nurture a sense of agency and purpose in participants. These initiatives help them develop a positive identity and explore their potential beyond societal constraints. Through mentorship, leadership opportunities, and exposure to historically significant institutions and narratives, Blue Heart creates a holistic support system.

One of the most poignant examples of Blue Heart's impact comes from Alex, an alumnus of the program. He reflects on how Blue Heart provided a critical platform for his personal growth, particularly in public speaking and understanding the Black community. Alex shares, "Blue Heart really gave me the platform to expand myself and really grow in my public speaking skills and understanding of the Black community. It helped me understand what it meant to be a Black man in America." This empowerment through education and community engagement allowed Alex to envision and pursue opportunities beyond traditional and often limiting societal expectations. He highlights the importance of having learned about Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) through Blue Heart, which ultimately led him to attend and graduate from Morehouse College.

Alex's narrative underscores the significance of Blue Heart as a refuge. He describes how the program provided him with resources and support during challenging times, such as when he lost his athletic scholarship due to an injury. "Tracy [the founder] really opened my eyes to the importance of education and being in your community, especially when I lost my scholarship offers. Blue Heart's community support was crucial for me," he recounts. This support not only helped him navigate personal setbacks but also expanded his vision of what was possible for his future, beyond the confines of athletic success.



The emphasis on creating spaces where Black youth can explore and affirm their identities is also evident in Blue Heart's proactive approach to introducing participants to HBCUs. Alex recalls, "Tracy sent me on a HBCU tour for free when I was a senior in high school. It was on that tour that I stepped on Morehouse's campus for the first time and knew I wanted to be there." Alex's experience highlights the importance of Blue Heart as a refuge that helps expand the horizons of its members. The foundation's emphasis on exposing participants to HBCUs is a strategic effort to counter systemic anti-Blackness by celebrating Black excellence and culture. This exposure allows participants to envision futures where their Black identity is not a limitation but a source of pride and opportunity.

Additionally, Alex highlights how Blue Heart's impact extended to influence his peers. He notes that all eight seniors in his high school graduating class who were part of Blue Heart went to college, although only three graduated initially, with some returning later to complete their degrees. This collective achievement underscores the broader community impact of Blue Heart's refuge-oriented goals, illustrating how the organization cultivates a supportive network that extends beyond immediate program participation to long-term educational and personal success. Moreover, Alex recounts how Blue Heart provided critical support during challenging times, such as when he lost his athletic scholarship due to an injury. The foundation's assistance during this period was instrumental in helping him navigate personal setbacks and envision new possibilities, "Tracy really opened my eyes to the importance of education and being in your community, especially when I lost my scholarship offers. Blue Heart's community support was crucial for me." This support system helped Alex overcome personal challenges while reinforcing the importance of education and community involvement in his life. The collective achievement of Alex and his peers, with all eight seniors in his high school graduating class who

were part of Blue Heart going to college, illustrates the broader community impact of Blue Heart's refuge-oriented goals.

## **Brotherhood**

The concept of "brotherhood" emerged as a salient in vivo code across the interview data, illustrating the deep connections and collective empowerment among Black male peers. The sense of brotherhood is a crucial component of Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS), as it fosters a supportive environment where young Black men can thrive. Alex recalls the brotherhood at Blue Heart, describing it as "the main word and the first word that comes to mind" when thinking about the foundation.

Just having that community camaraderie outside of sports... a lot of us came from like different high schools, different youth football teams or different youth basketball teams and stuff. So we have known each other but like not being on the same sports team, we wouldn't consider each other like brothers or like teammates. But it was really through those like just outreach opportunities, like being able to go snowboarding in Big Bear and then a weekend later being able to go and give out food to the homeless and being able to do different things in our communities and, and be on the news, be able to have an opportunity to public speak. I feel like it was through all those opportunities that we just all grew closer because we were with each other for a large amount of time, but at the same time it was, it was more of like a **brotherhood** outside of sports. Like a lot of us were always told like your key and your ticket to college is through a sport. Um Like you're, you're gonna get a full ride athletically. No one ever talks about full ride community service scholarships or stuff like that. So you have that different outlet and that different look and perspective. I feel like it's what really brought us all closer.

This sentiment is echoed by many alumni, who view the foundation as a space for forming positive, lasting relationships that extend beyond the program itself.

Kwame also reflects on how Blue Heart prepared him for the challenges of college by teaching him the "sense of duality" necessary to navigate different environments.

Being able to put on the white polo or the white button-up shirt and the famous blue tie... but then during the week, still having whatever respective sports practice, going to the classes... and then after all of that still like being the homie with the homies and being able to kick it... That was something that helped at Morehouse because I would say the **brotherhood** of Morehouse is somewhat of a graduated sense of a blue heart already

was. For those of us that experienced Blue Heart first, it was kind of like a demo version or a beta test version of what we were to get at Morehouse later.

This ability to adapt and thrive in diverse settings and the sustained impact of brotherhood upon entering college is a testament to the supportive and comprehensive preparation provided by Blue Heart. Through these narratives, it becomes clear that Blue Heart's emphasis on connections and brotherhood plays a critical role in fostering a sense of belonging and collective empowerment among its members. This supportive network not only helps participants navigate their immediate educational and personal challenges but also equips them with the skills and confidence to succeed in broader societal contexts.

### **Feedback Loops**

In the context of Blue Heart, feedback loops are essential for sustaining the dynamics of healing and empowerment among African American male youth. Feedback loops are mechanisms within systems that either reinforce or balance the outcomes of various interventions, creating cyclical patterns of influence that shape the system's overall behavior (Watson & Collins, 2023). By understanding and leveraging these feedback loops, Blue Heart can effectively maintain the momentum of positive change, ensuring that its programs and initiatives continuously adapt to meet the evolving needs of its participants.

Reinforcing feedback loops within Blue Heart amplify the positive outcomes of its interventions, creating a self-sustaining cycle of motivation and success. These loops are crucial for maintaining the organization's drive towards its goals by encouraging continuous improvement and engagement. Balancing feedback loops, on the other hand, provide stability by addressing and mitigating potential setbacks so that challenges do not derail progress but are instead integrated as part of the growth process. The importance of feedback loops in Blue Heart's strategies and programs lies in their ability to support both individual and collective

healing and empowerment processes. Through reinforcing loops, success stories and positive outcomes inspire further engagement and effort, while balancing loops ensure emotional regulation and resilience. This dual approach advances racial progress by addressing the specificity of the Black experience through environments that promote flourishing despite systemic challenges.

### **Reinforcing Loops**

**FRESH Stories.** Reinforcing feedback loops within Blue Heart are exemplified by success stories that inspire further engagement and effort among participants. These narratives of triumph and achievement act as motivational benchmarks, illustrating the tangible outcomes of perseverance and community support. For instance, alumni achievements, such as college acceptances and personal milestones, act as inspirational benchmarks for current participants. These stories celebrate individual successes while reinforcing the collective belief in the possibility of overcoming systemic barriers. Moreover, FRESH Stories encapsulate the lived experiences of participants, highlighting their journeys of growth and transformation, and providing relatable examples of how Blue Heart's support systems foster resilience and empowerment.

One such story involves the Morehouse experience of several Blue Heart alumni. These young men, having been nurtured by Blue Heart's supportive environment, found themselves excelling at Morehouse College. Their success stories, including academic achievements and personal growth, are regularly shared with current participants, reinforcing the belief that they too can achieve similar success. This dynamic creates an environment where success is not just an individual journey but a collective experience, bolstering the community's resilience and sense of empowerment.

The Tuskegee experience of a sophomore from San Diego offers another powerful example. The student's story of navigating and excelling in a historically Black university environment is shared with current Blue Heart participants, reinforcing the organization's mission to promote educational attainment and personal growth among African American male youth. The Tuskegee experience of a sophomore from San Diego provides a compelling exemplar of the transformative power of educational access and cultural immersion. From the outset, the sophomore faced both challenges and opportunities. Initially, he grappled with feelings of isolation and homesickness as she navigated a predominantly Black campus culture vastly different from her previous experiences. However, with time and the support of a tight-knit community, she began to embrace the richness and vibrancy of her new environment. By sharing the sophomore's story with current Blue Heart participants, the organization aims to inspire and motivate young men to pursue higher education and embrace the opportunities available to them.

George's speech at Signing Day further underscores the power of these reinforcing feedback loops. Reflecting on his first experience with Blue Heart, George spoke about how his first experience with the organization attending the previous year's Signing Day inspired him to aspire to the achievements of the seniors graduating. His journey from a participant to a role model for others exemplifies the reinforcing nature of success stories within Blue Heart. These stories circulate within the community, creating a self-sustaining cycle of inspiration and aspiration that motivates new generations of participants to strive for excellence. By consistently highlighting and celebrating these success stories, Blue Heart fosters a culture of achievement and empowerment. This approach not only reinforces the organization's goals but also ensures that the principles of healing, empowerment, and BEFS are continuously operationalized within its programs and activities.

**FRESH Space.** The Blue Heart Foundation Summer Exploration Program exemplifies how a nurturing and supportive environment can reinforce the positive development of Black male youth. This program serves as a space where students can explore and affirm their Black identity within a community that celebrates their cultural heritage. The reinforcing feedback loop created by this space ensures that as students develop a positive sense of self, they are further encouraged to engage and excel, enhancing their overall empowerment and well-being. The Summer Exploration Program, held at Lincoln High School, is a transformative five-week experience designed to amplify the voices and validate the dreams of African American youth. This program integrates socioemotional well-being with culturally responsive activities, mentorship, and academic enrichment, particularly in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM). The program's aim is to empower Black male youth by providing a nurturing environment that fosters cultural pride, unity, and academic excellence.

The daily structure of the program reflects its commitment to creating a supportive community. Upon entering the program, participants are greeted warmly by mentors, many of whom were once in their shoes. This daily interaction begins with a celebration of each individual, enhancing public speaking skills and fostering a sense of belonging from the outset. Activities such as acting and improv, etiquette lessons, STEAM projects, and college tours are woven into the program, providing a well-rounded journey of self-discovery and growth. For instance, mentorship connections and guest speakers offer invaluable insights and broaden students' horizons, reinforcing the goals of empowerment and academic achievement.

A significant component of the program is its focus on culturally relevant pedagogy. This approach combines academic rigor with critical engagement, which allows students to connect their lived experiences to broader societal structures. The curriculum is deeply rooted in African

American history, literature, and arts, offering a multidimensional approach to education that respects and celebrates the cultural heritage of the students. Lessons that explore the contributions of African American leaders in various fields not only educate but also empower the students, showing them that they too can be pioneers in their chosen fields. This creates a reinforcing loop where the students' cultural pride and academic success feed into each other, fostering a continuous cycle of growth and empowerment.

The impact of the Summer Exploration Program is profound. Success stories from participants illustrate the program's ability to serve as a healing space, addressing emotional wounds and transforming them into stepping stones for personal growth. One senior found a sanctuary in the program that filled the emotional void left by the absence of a father figure, evolving into a better version of himself through mentorship and community. Another participant eloquently captured the program's essence, stating, "When we come together as Black folks, we make great things happen." These stories reinforce the idea that Blue Heart is not just an educational initiative but a movement aimed at redefining education and community for African American youth.

In summary, the Blue Heart Summer Exploration Program provides a crucial environment where students can explore and affirm their Black identity within a supportive community. This space facilitates a reinforcing feedback loop where positive identity development and the establishment of fulfilling relationships contribute to an enhanced sense of empowerment and well-being among Black male youth. Blue Heart ensures that its participants are continuously motivated and supported, which leads to a ripple effect of positive outcomes in their lives and communities.

**HEART Connect.** The concept of HEART Connect within the Blue Heart Foundation is exemplified by the powerful connections and shared visions among its members and supporters. These connections foster collaboration, trust, and accountability, creating a reinforcing feedback loop that promotes more inclusive and equitable outcomes for Black male youth.

Octavia's experience with Blue Heart highlights the importance of these connections. She describes her long-standing relationship with Tracy, the founder of Blue Heart, and how their shared vision for empowering African American youth has shaped their collaborative efforts:

Tracy [Blue Heart Founder] and I were at San Diego State together as undergraduates and I was president of the African Student Union. He was involved heavily in his fraternity and there were many instances where, you know, we just crossed paths and he invited me to a meeting one evening where he was laying out his vision for The Blue Heart Foundation and making the case for why that work was important. And at that time, there were like maybe five people in the room, but it was very clear that that was something he was passionate about.

This early connection, rooted in a shared commitment to community and empowerment, laid the foundation for the impactful work that Blue Heart continues to engage in today. Octavia's account underscores the significance of building strong, vision-driven relationships that sustain and enhance the organization's mission.

Octavia also reflects on the broader impact of Blue Heart on the community and her personal connections:

I have many friends, you know, either that I went to school with or just who I know around town whose sons went through the Blue Heart process. You know, one of my close friends, her youngest son is actually still in Blue Heart now. Seeing the impact directly on people that I care about, seeing the impact on the community and even looking at the ability of someone to take a vision, which, you know, in many ways, we could say it was an Afrofuturist vision because everything that's happening now with The Blue Heart Foundation is part of the vision that he had decades ago. Her insights highlight how the connections within Blue Heart extend beyond individual relationships to influence the wider community. This reinforcing loop of support and shared



vision helps to create a strong, interconnected network that continuously uplifts and empowers its members.

In discussing the role of Afrofuturism, Octavia emphasizes the importance of encouraging youth to envision futures beyond their current experiences and systemic constraints:

I think a big part of it is to encourage them to dream and to imagine beyond what they see and beyond what they're experiencing and not in a way to create this false sense of reality, but to create an opportunity for them to one, not lose sight of the fact that what they're experiencing is not normal and it's not okay. But two, to hopefully inspire some of them to take an active role in making those visions come true.

This perspective reflects the notion of HEART Connect, where connections and shared visions inspire youth to actively participate in shaping their futures. By creating spaces where African American male youth can see themselves in diverse roles and environments, Blue Heart fosters a sense of agency and possibility.

Octavia's reflections on Afrofuturism and its interdisciplinary nature further illustrate the expansive potential of these connections:

In terms of Afrofuturism, understanding it's interdisciplinary... It's really, you know, all the spaces that we feel like we don't belong or the spaces where we don't feel like we can excel or have excelled or will excel again. Afrofuturism creates space for us to rewrite that narrative and change that paradigm.

Through these interdisciplinary and visionary connections, Blue Heart not only supports the immediate needs of its participants but also equips them with the tools and mindset to envision and create a more equitable future. This reinforcing feedback loop of connection and empowerment is essential for advancing racial progress and sustaining the goals of healing and empowerment within the community.

## Balancing Loops

**FRESH Connect.** The concept of FRESH (Connect) within the Blue Heart Foundation is highly impactful in fostering a sense of belonging, resilience, and motivation among Black male youth. By creating strong relationships with mentors and peers who understand their experiences, Blue Heart counteracts feelings of isolation and lack of representation, ensuring that participants are supported both emotionally and academically.

Martin's speech during Signing Day vividly captures the essence of FRESH Connect. He recounts his journey with Blue Heart, highlighting the profound sense of belonging and support he found within the organization:

Joining Blue Heart was a very amazing experience for me. One of my first memories of it is meeting Tracy Morris. He was such an amazing man. One of my first impressions of him was telling him about my grades, and at the time, they weren't the best. They're better now, but I had to come to him with that. The first thing that stuck out to me with him was he didn't really judge me for it. He still saw potential in me, and he saw me as great. He saw that I could do great things, and he treated me just like he treated everyone else.

Martin's experience illustrates how the support and belief of mentors like Tracy can have a transformative impact on youth, fostering a sense of self-worth and potential. This type of connection is crucial for young men who may not have previously felt seen or valued in their other environments. Martin further emphasizes the community and brotherhood he found at Blue Heart:

Going through Blue Heart was very amazing. I was surrounded by people that looked like me, people that accepted me, people that I could laugh with, and people that I could talk to. Blue Heart itself gave me a bunch of amazing opportunities. They introduced us to STEM and community service and stepping, which is very fun. It's just really important to me because I finally got that sense of brotherhood, that sense of belonging that I'd been lacking my whole life. This sense of brotherhood and belonging is fundamental to the FRESH Connect feedback loop. It creates an environment where participants feel supported and understood, which is essential for their emotional and social development.

Malcolm, a mentor at Blue Heart, elaborates on the critical role of mentorship in creating mirrors, windows, and doors for the youth. He explains how seeing successful Black men who look like them can inspire the participants to believe in their potential and strive for excellence:

Resources in terms of accessibility to college or our mentor connections where we just share with them and we're transparent and vulnerable. Us being there, representation like them visually, being able to see successful black men who look like them. That goes a long way where they're just like, OK, if, if he can do it, I can do it or they say like if you see it, you can be it. That alone goes a long way, which is you know, that's, that's why I'm here because I wanna be a real life example of some somebody who has, has been successful and they can see that for themselves to be like, ok, it's not impossible or this isn't just for other nationalities or other people who don't look like them.

Malcolm's reflections emphasize the importance of representation and role models in reinforcing the goals of empowerment and healing. By seeing mentors who have navigated similar challenges and achieved success, the youth can envision their own potential and are motivated to pursue their goals.

Malcolm also discusses the practical aspects of mentorship at Blue Heart, such as preparing the youth for college and providing them with diverse experiences:

Everything that we're doing with Blue Heart... resources in terms of accessibility to college, our mentor connections, computer training, going on college tours, chaperoned events, baseball games, and boating trips. These experiences expose the youth to opportunities they might not otherwise encounter, broadening their horizons and helping them develop new skills.

These activities not only prepare the participants academically and socially but also instill a sense of confidence and possibility. By providing consistent support and new opportunities, Blue Heart helps the youth build resilience and adaptability, crucial traits for overcoming challenges.

Malcolm highlights the importance of transparency and vulnerability in mentorship, which helps build trust and resilience among the youth. Sharing personal stories of persistence and overcoming obstacles provides valuable lessons for the participants:

When we have our discussions with them, it's a good time to share that nobody's perfect. We're gonna make mistakes. I made plenty of mistakes... but it's not how many times you fall, but how many times you get up and don't quit. Persistence and constantly trying to achieve their goals is key.

Malcolm's own story of applying for 104 jobs before securing a promotion exemplifies this lesson. His persistence, fueled by a desire to pave the way for future generations, serves as a powerful example for the youth:

Before I got promoted, I applied for 103 jobs. It wasn't until the 104th job that I just got promoted, and this is over a 13-year period. When I talk about persistence, I'm not just telling the story; I'm telling you based off what I live... I'm fighting for myself and generations that come after us. That's the Blue Heart mentees. I'm doing this for everybody who is feeling marginalized, excluded, overlooked.

By sharing such experiences, mentors like Malcolm help the youth understand the value of resilience and the importance of striving towards their goals, despite setbacks. The FRESH Connect component of Blue Heart plays a vital role in fostering a supportive and empowering environment for African American male youth. By creating strong mentor relationships and providing diverse opportunities, Blue Heart helps participants develop a sense of belonging, resilience, and motivation. This balancing feedback loop ensures that the youth are continuously supported in their personal and academic growth, which reinforces the organization's mission to advance racial progress.

**HEART Space.** The Blue Heart Foundation embodies the principles of Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS) by actively involving youth in governance and decision-

making processes through the Empowerment Pact. This co-created agreement between staff and participants emphasizes mutual respect, personal responsibility, and collective empowerment. Serving as a proactive tool, the Empowerment Pact centers the experiences, agency, and accountability of participants, fostering a space that supports healing, addresses challenges, and cultivates a nurturing educational environment.

The Empowerment Pact is a cornerstone of Blue Heart's approach to youth development, reflecting the organization's commitment to fostering leadership, teamwork, vision, service, learning, culture, advocacy, equity, and ethics among its members. By engaging participants in the creation and adherence to the Pact, Blue Heart ensures that the youth are active contributors to the community's governance, developing a sense of ownership and accountability. This involvement is critical for maintaining focus during sessions and reorienting youth to their goals and values during times of conflict or challenge.

The Pact outlines personalized goals in various domains, serving as a compass that guides participants in envisioning and embodying their best selves. Academic goals help participants focus on educational achievements and personal growth, supported by resources like tutoring sessions. Social goals aim to develop positive relationships and communication skills through activities that build empathy and understanding. Emotional goals emphasize fostering well-being and self-awareness, with practices like self-care and stress management workshops serving as reorientation tools during challenges. Community engagement goals involve active participation in initiatives like neighborhood cleanups and advocacy for educational resources, fostering civic responsibility and reinforcing the values of service and advocacy.

The Empowerment Pact's design ensures that participants are continuously engaged in activities that promote personal and collective growth. By committing to the Pact, participants

develop a deeper understanding of their responsibilities and the impact of their actions on the broader community. This proactive involvement creates a balancing feedback loop where the community's needs and challenges are addressed collaboratively, fostering a supportive environment that promotes healing and empowerment.

Octavia, a guest speaker at Blue Heart, highlights the importance of this proactive approach:

The Blue Heart Foundation and its establishment and manifestation is a great example of the power of internalizing locus of control and not waiting for somebody else to do something for us.

By internalizing a sense of control and responsibility, participants are empowered to take active roles in their communities, envisioning and working towards a better future. This approach aligns with the principles of BEFS, where creating spaces for refuge and resistance against systemic anti-Blackness is paramount.

The Empowerment Pact also facilitates the development of healthy Black subjectivities by centering the voices and experiences of the youth. As participants navigate their personal and academic journeys, they do so within a framework that respects and uplifts their identities. This balancing feedback loop ensures that the community remains resilient in the face of challenges, continuously reinforcing the values of healing, empowerment, and equity. The Pact is a critical component in creating a balancing feedback loop that supports individual and collective growth. By actively involving youth in governance and emphasizing mutual respect and responsibility, Blue Heart fosters a supportive environment that addresses challenges and promotes sustainable healing and empowerment.

**HEART Roots.** By providing students with educational content that is rooted in their cultural identities and backgrounds, this balancing loop can enhance engagement, self-esteem, and academic achievement among African American male youth. The HEART Roots component of the Blue Heart Foundation focuses on embedding cultural relevance into educational experiences, thereby fostering a strong sense of identity and pride among participants. The HBCU college tour provided The Blue Heart Foundation seniors with an opportunity to explore potential college options and envision themselves as college students. This experience has been transformative for Blue Heart seniors, as they were able to see and imagine themselves as part of a community of like-minded individuals who are also striving for Black excellence. The tour encompassed visits to several historically Black colleges and universities, including Morehouse College, Tuskegee University, Jackson State University, Philander-Smith College, and Howard University. Each institution played a vital role in reinforcing positive racial identity and fostering socio-emotional well-being among the students.

One of the profound impacts of the HBCU college tour was its reinforcement of the students' sense of identity and socio-emotional well-being. Engaging with these historically Black institutions helped the youth recognize and appreciate their cultural heritage, instilling a sense of pride in their identity. For example, during the visit to Morehouse College, the students interacted with Morehouse scholars, many of whom were Blue Heart alumni. These scholars shared their journeys, highlighting the significance of being in an environment that celebrates Black identity and supports personal and academic growth.

The tour also emphasized the importance of a sense of belonging. For many students, predominantly white educational environments can feel isolating. Visiting HBCUs provided a contrasting experience, where they saw that there are colleges where they will be valued and

supported, both academically and socially. This was evident during the visit to Jackson State University, where the admissions presentation highlighted the supportive and familial atmosphere of the institution.

The HBCU college tour reinforced the students' positive racial identity and pride in Black people. This was particularly evident during the visit to the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The exhibits, covering the Black Panther movement, the impact of mass incarceration, and the presidency of Barack Obama, among others, vividly depicted the struggle and achievements of Black Americans. These stories of individual and collective thriving outside the bounds of white supremacy resonated deeply with the Blue Heart youth. During my conversations with the youth as we explored the museum, many expressed a newfound sense of pride and connection to their heritage.

The HBCU college tour exemplifies how culturally sustaining educational environments, such as those provided by HBCUs, play a crucial role in the holistic development of Black male youth. By reinforcing positive racial identity, fostering a sense of belonging, and providing academic and socio-emotional support, these institutions help students envision and work towards a future where they can thrive and contribute meaningfully to their communities. This experience aligns with the principles of Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS), demonstrating the transformative power of environments that celebrate Black excellence and promote collective empowerment and resilience.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a detailed exploration of how The Blue Heart Foundation supports the healing and empowerment of Black male youth. Through a qualitative case study, guided by the frameworks of Radical Healing (CARMA), Empowerment-Based Youth



Development (EMPYD), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS), the findings illuminate the complex interplay of factors that contribute to the thriving of these young men.

The integration of these frameworks with empirical observations has led to the development of the FRESH HEART framework. This framework provides a comprehensive, systems-oriented approach to understanding and enhancing the experiences of Black male youth in community-based settings. The findings reveal that Blue Heart's programming embodies high-leverage system characteristics such as *paradigms, structures, elements, and feedback loops*, which collectively foster an environment conducive to healing and empowerment. Observations from Blue Heart programming highlight behaviors and interactions that suggest participants are experiencing significant personal growth and development. The perspectives of Blue Heart alumni, staff, and mentors further emphasize the importance of supportive relationships, community engagement, and cultural affirmation in their healing journeys.

Moreover, Blue Heart operates as a Black educational fugitive space, offering a liberatory ecosystem that sustains cycles and feedback loops of healing and empowerment. This environment allows for the reimagining of educational spaces that prioritize the specific needs and experiences of Black male youth, providing refuge from systemic anti-Blackness and fostering a strong sense of identity and belonging. This chapter underscores the significance of a systems approach in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by Black male youth. By blending, extending, and departing from existing theoretical frameworks, the study offers valuable insights into the design and implementation of community-based programs that are culturally responsive, healing, and empowering. These findings contribute to the broader discourse on educational equity and community thriving, offering practical strategies for supporting the holistic development of Black male youth and promoting racial progress.

## Chapter 5 DISCUSSION

I hope you see the God in me, I hope you can see...

(Lamar, 2022)

In this chapter, I transition from presenting the findings detailed in Chapter 4 to a broader discussion that synthesizes these findings with the theoretical frameworks and literature reviewed earlier. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the implications of my research, offering insights into theory, practice, and policy. The primary purpose of this chapter is to contextualize the empirical findings within the frameworks of Radical Healing (Ginwright, 2016), Empowerment (Travis & Leech, 2013), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS) (ross, 2021). By doing so, I highlight the contributions of this study to these theoretical domains and discuss how the FRESH HEART framework provides a distinctive approach to understanding and enhancing community-based youth organizations.

I begin by summarizing the key findings from Chapter 4, underscoring their significance and how they align with my research questions. Following this, I explore the theoretical contributions of my research, discussing how the findings extend existing theories and frameworks. The chapter also addresses the practical implications for community-based organizations, educators, and policymakers, providing actionable recommendations to enhance youth well-being. This discussion bridges the gap between empirical data and theoretical insights, offering a holistic view of how community-based educational initiatives can foster healing, empowerment, and systemic change. The chapter concludes with reflections on the methodological approach and suggestions for future research, aiming to broaden the study's contributions beyond the immediate context of The Blue Heart Foundation.

## Summary of Findings

In Chapter 4, I utilized systems thinking in the data coding and analysis to extend the theorization of Radical Healing (CARMA), Empowerment-Based Youth Development (EMPYD), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS). This intentional focus on specific systems characteristics allowed for a nuanced understanding of how these frameworks operate within The Blue Heart Foundation. The study revealed significant findings grouped according to the research questions and the systems characteristics emphasized, including *socio-cultural artifacts, components, resources, mindsets, goals, and feedback loops* (Watson & Collins, 2023).

- **Research Question 1:** During program activities, what observable behaviors or interactions suggest that participants are experiencing healing and empowerment?

Observations of Blue Heart program activities, such as the HBCU College Tour, Signing Day, and Mentor Connection, highlighted several key behaviors and interactions indicative of healing and empowerment. During the HBCU College Tour, participants engaged deeply with HBCUs and historical sites as *socio-cultural artifacts*, which reflected a positive reinforcement of their cultural identity and heritage. The Signing Day and Mentor Connection activities provided essential *components* and *resources* that fostered a sense of achievement and community. These activities demonstrated the transformative power of culturally sustaining educational experiences, as youth exhibited increased confidence, resilience, and a stronger sense of belonging.

- **Research Question 2:** How do Blue Heart staff describe their experiences in supporting Black male youth?

Interviews with Blue Heart staff and mentors revealed that their support for Black male youth is rooted in *mindsets* and *goals* of healing and empowerment. Staff members described their belief in education as a tool for repairing harm and trauma (Ginwright, 2016) and emphasized a mindset of agency and self-determination (Travis & Leech, 2013). They highlighted the importance of building positive relationships, moral values, self-worth, and a sense of belonging within the community. The goals identified by the staff focused on developing individual skills to enhance self-efficacy and self-advocacy and strengthening community ties and collective agency. These insights underscore the critical role of culturally sustaining mentorship in supporting the holistic development of Black male youth.

- **Research Question 3:** From the perspective of Blue Heart alumni, which elements of the programming were most influential in their healing and empowerment journey?

Alumni interviews indicated that several Blue Heart programming elements were particularly influential in their healing and empowerment journeys. The paradigms of *mindsets* and *goals* played a significant role, with alumni citing the importance of education in fostering agency and self-determination. Programs such as the Mentor Connection and community service projects were frequently mentioned as instrumental in developing their sense of self-worth and belonging. Alumni emphasized the impact of these programs in providing a supportive environment that encouraged personal growth and community involvement, aligning with the goals of individual and collective empowerment.

- **Research Question 4:** Which specific Blue Heart components or activities reflect a Black educational fugitive space?

Both observations and interviews highlighted specific Blue Heart components and activities that reflect a Black educational fugitive space (BEFS). The paradigm of political dreaming was evident in activities like the HBCU College Tour, which encouraged youth to envision futures beyond systemic constraints. The goal of creating a refuge was manifested in spaces that offered resistance against systemic anti-Blackness, encouraging political dreaming and healthy Black subjectivities. Additionally, feedback loops played a crucial role. Reinforcing loops, such as FRESH (Stories) and FRESH (Space), promoted positive identity development and fulfilling relationships, while balancing loops, such as FRESH (Connect) and HEART (Space and Roots), addressed challenges and enhanced engagement and academic achievement. These elements collectively created a nurturing environment that supports the holistic well-being and empowerment of Black male youth.

These findings highlight the effectiveness of Blue Heart's community-based approach in fostering healing, empowerment, and educational success among Black male youth. The integration of Radical Healing, Empowerment, and BEFS within the FRESH HEART framework offers a comprehensive model for understanding and enhancing community-based youth organizations. In the next section, I will elucidate the theoretical contributions of the FRESH HEART framework, illustrating how it bridges empirical data with theoretical insights to create actionable strategies for community empowerment. This exploration will highlight how the framework extends existing theories and provides new perspectives on the development and support of community-based educational initiatives.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

The integration of empirical data with the theoretical frameworks of Radical Healing (CARMA), Empowerment-Based Youth Development (EMPYD), and Black Educational

Fugitive Spaces (BEFS) within the FRESH HEART framework offers comprehensive insights into the complex dynamics of healing and empowerment and has yielded significant theoretical contributions. This study contributes to the theoretical discourse by providing a detailed understanding of how culturally sustaining and community-driven educational practices can support the holistic development of Black male youth. In the following section, I discuss the key theoretical contributions based on the findings from Chapter 4 and the FRESH HEART framework.

The findings align with the Radical Healing framework by emphasizing the necessity of culturally sustaining environments that support both individual and collective healing (Ginwright, 2016). Blue Heart's activities, such as mentorship programs and college tours, demonstrate how creating spaces that affirm Black identity and culture can facilitate psychological and emotional recovery from racial trauma. This holistic approach to healing justice aligns with Ginwright's (2016) advocacy for environments that restore community life through innovative practices and thoughtful processes. The integration of socio-cultural artifacts and community-building activities within Blue Heart highlights the importance of cultural affirmation in the healing process.

The study reveals how empowerment is a multifaceted process involving both individual skill development and community engagement. The EMPYD framework, as conceptualized by Travis and Leech (2013), is enriched by the findings that emphasize the role of agency, self-determination, and positive identity formation among Black youth. The narratives from Blue Heart staff and alumni highlight how empowerment is achieved through cultivating moral values, self-worth, and a sense of belonging. This aligns with the goals of developing individual skills to enhance self-efficacy and strengthening community ties.

The conceptualization of BEFS is extended through the identification of high-leverage system characteristics within Blue Heart's operations. Black Educational Fugitive Spaces are portrayed as both refuges from systemic anti-Blackness and as proactive spaces for political dreaming and radical imagination. Activities like the HBCU College Tour embody the BEFS principles by allowing youth to envision futures beyond systemic constraints and to engage with their cultural heritage in meaningful ways. The goals of creating refuge and centering political dreaming are evident in Blue Heart's emphasis on providing culturally sustaining environments.

The application of a systems approach in this study provides a robust analytical approach to explore how various system characteristics (i.e., *paradigms, structures, elements, feedback loops*) interact to support the healing and empowerment of Black male youth (Watson & Collins, 2023). The study illustrates how educational spaces can achieve transformational, system-wide impacts by grounding high-leverage system characteristics in a pro-Black onto-epistemology, rooted in the principles like Ubuntu ("I am because we are") and Sankofa ("reach back and get it"). This approach shapes mindsets, goals, and feedback loops through ideologies and cultural dynamics that center Black experiences and perspectives. This systems thinking perspective enhances the understanding of how community-based organizations can implement strategies that are effective and sustainable in uplifting Black youth healing and empowerment.

A key example of how these system characteristics interact can be seen in the influence of the HBCU College Tour on the tradition of Signing Day. The tour, as a socio-cultural artifact, fostered a positive racial identity and socio-emotional well-being among the students. Inspired by the letterman jackets worn by the Gentlemen of Drew Social Club at Howard University, the students displayed agency by creating their own Blue Heart jackets. This initiative established feedback loops where their efforts in designing and proudly wearing the jackets celebrated

achievements and strengthened community bonds. The Blue Heart jackets have become an integral part of the rites of passage associated with Signing Day, providing a tangible symbol of the students' transition into senior year and eventually becoming alumni. This new tradition not only enhances the current students' sense of accomplishment but also motivates underclassmen by giving them something meaningful to aspire to as they look forward to their own senior year. By signifying the progression from student to alumni, the jackets encapsulate the journey of growth and empowerment.

The FRESH HEART framework stands for *Fulfilling Relationships Enhance Social Harmony; Healing and Empowerment Actualize Resilience and Thriving*. FRESH HEART emerged as a novel conceptual model from the data analysis, weaving together the empirical findings with the study's guiding theoretical frameworks. This multidimensional model integrates key aspects of Radical Healing, Empowerment, and BEFS within a systems-oriented approach. Rather than being a one-size-fits-all solution, it exemplifies how these three frameworks can be applied using a systems approach to explore healing and empowerment processes in a specific local context. These frameworks have independently addressed various facets of emotional, academic, and social well-being. By synthesizing them, FRESH HEART creates a cohesive structure that serves as a blueprint for present interventions, community programs, and potentially future policy development.

Central to the FRESH HEART framework is the emphasis on *fulfilling relationships*. These relationships form the cornerstone of emotional development by providing a secure foundation for youth subjectivities and belonging. The act of *enhancement* indicates the dynamic process of improvement and elevation that these relationships reflect. The ultimate goal is *social harmony*, manifesting in reduced harm and violence, along with increased empathetic



interactions and cooperation within the community. Centering fulfilling relationships within the framework emphasizes the importance of a balanced and peaceful social environment, essential for the holistic well-being of Black male youth. Fulfilling relationships in this context are multi-dimensional and trauma-informed, culturally affirming, agency-enhancing, reciprocal, character-building, constructive, and healing. These relationships foster resilience, enhance community impact, and contribute to holistic well-being, mitigating the impacts of traumatic events during childhood that negatively impact health and well-being (i.e., adverse childhood experiences - ACEs) and amplifying the effects of nurturing experiences that act as protective factors (i.e., positive childhood experiences - PCEs).

The HEART component of the framework addresses the critical need for *healing* from past and present traumas, which is foundational for emotional health (Ginwright, 2016). *Empowerment* involves providing the necessary skills, education, and resources to enable individuals to positively influence their destinies (Travis & Leech, 2013). The term *actualize* underscores the transition from abstract ideas of healing and empowerment into tangible actions and changes. *Resilience* refers to the ability to rebound from setbacks, an outcome of effective healing and empowerment processes. Thriving encompasses not only academic success but also emotional and social well-being, thereby representing a state of flourishing beyond mere survival.

Additionally, healing cannot fully occur without an environment that nurtures meaningful relationships, while empowerment is the means through which social harmony can be achieved. Social harmony, in turn, provides the fertile ground necessary for healing and empowerment to take root and flourish. This interplay creates a feedback loop where individuals, as they heal, become empowered and contribute positively to their social environment. This enhanced social

harmony then supports further cycles of healing and empowerment, perpetuating a self-sustaining loop of growth and well-being. High-leverage system characteristics of the model, such as reinforcing and balancing feedback loops, highlight the importance of relationships and community connections in sustaining the holistic well-being of Black male youth. For instance, the reinforcing loops of success stories and positive identity development demonstrate how community support can enhance resilience and empowerment. Similarly, the balancing loops of nurturing strong mentor relationships and addressing challenges within educational spaces illustrate how continuous support and cultural affirmation contribute to healing. It offers a comprehensive approach to addressing the complex issues faced by Black male youth by incorporating both individual psychological aspects and broader social dimensions.

### **FRESH HEART Analogy - “Village Garden of Thriving Trees”**

Through ongoing iterations throughout the data collection and analysis phases, I developed the FRESH HEART model to reflect the frameworks of healing, empowerment, and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS) with a systems approach conceptualized through the analogy of a village garden. This analogy represents a pro-Black refuge and ecosystem that nurtures both individual and collective thriving. The framework extends existing theories by highlighting the co-constitutive nature of healing and empowerment and the systemic dynamics of racial progress advanced through BEFS. It is designed to adapt to the specific local context with an emphasis on the ways in which interconnected elements work together to support the holistic well-being of Black male youth.

The "Village Garden of Resilient Trees" is an analogy where each tree represents an individual youth nurtured by the collective wisdom and care of the community within a robust ecosystem. This symbolizes the interdependent nature of fulfilling relationships, healing, and

empowerment, contributing to a resilient and harmonious community. Dynamic, self-sustaining cycles reinforce and reproduce resilience and thriving at both individual and community levels, advancing racial progress as a function of social harmony and well-being. The approach is culturally sustaining, ethically, and historically informed by core principles such as Ubuntu and Sankofa, creating a strategy that is holistic and deeply anchored in pro-Blackness.

Imagine a thriving village encircled by a lush community garden where every plant is like an individual youth. In this garden, various seeds are nurtured in rich, fertile soil that is fortified by the collective wisdom and care of the village (fulfilling relationships enhancing social harmony). Each seed undergoes its unique journey of growth, representing the transformative healing and empowerment process. These seeds grow roots deep into the soil, drawing nourishment that fortifies them against life's adversities (healing). As they mature, branches spread out to capture sunlight, offering shade and fruits for the community (empowerment), thereby actualizing its resilience and thriving.

Just as in a tree, the roots and branches exist in symbiotic harmony, each enabling the other's strength and purpose. The trees (individuals) are interconnected through a network of roots, creating an ecological balance (social harmony) that benefits the entire garden and, by extension, the village. Everyone in the village plays a role: some water the plants (e.g., mentors aiding in healing), while others trim the branches (e.g., educators contributing to empowerment). The well-being of each tree directly impacts the social and ecological equilibrium of the entire garden and village. It's a dynamic ecosystem where fulfilling relationships, healing, empowerment, resilience, and thriving all feed into each other in a synergistic feedback loop.

In this analogy, the garden isn't just a physical space but an emotional and social landscape that each of us—parents, educators, policy-makers, community activists—have a stake

in nurturing. It is a vivid expression of how the FRESH HEART framework aims to integrate both healing and empowerment for the comprehensive well-being of African American male youth. Each aspect of the garden can be conceptualized as follows:

- **Soil:** The soil symbolizes the ethical principles of Ubuntu ("I am because we are") and Sankofa ("reach back and get it"), providing a nurturing foundation that emphasizes interconnectedness. These principles are the bedrock of the FRESH HEART framework, ensuring that the youth's development is grounded in a strong ethical and culturally sustaining base.
- **Roots:** The roots represent the youth's resilient foundation, anchored in the soil, drawing nourishment and support. This symbolizes the continuous cultural affirmation and healing that the youth receive from their community, akin to the nurturing relationships and supportive environment provided by Blue Heart's programs.
- **Trunk:** The trunk embodies the structural integrity needed to withstand challenges, representing the resilient core supported by the community. This core strength is developed through the healing activities and mentorship provided by Blue Heart, which help the youth navigate and overcome systemic challenges.
- **Branches:** The branches signify growing capabilities and reach, offering shade and contributions to the community, embodying empowerment. The youth's participation in community service and leadership roles within Blue Heart exemplifies how they extend their capabilities and give back to their community.
- **Fruit:** The fruit represents the youth's abilities and contributions, with mature trees returning to enrich the community, sustaining the cycle of growth. This is reflected in

Blue Heart alumni who return to mentor new participants, perpetuating a legacy of empowerment and community support.

- **Sunlight:** The sunlight symbolizes unconditional love and authentic care from the Blue Heart staff, mentors, and the broader community that is essential for actualizing the youth's potential. Blue Heart's programs are infused with genuine care and support, which are critical for the youth's development and well-being.
- **Clouds and Rain:** The clouds and rain provide emotional and spiritual nourishment, complementing the foundational principles. This nourishment is demonstrated by the emotional and spiritual support provided through Blue Heart's culturally sustaining pedagogy and community activities, fostering a sense of belonging and resilience.
- **The Garden:** The garden serves as a Black Educational Fugitive Space (BEFS), a sanctuary that affirms cultural identity, fostering healthy subjectivities and resistance against systemic inequities. Blue Heart's programs create spaces where Black male youth can find refuge from the endemicity of anti-Black social toxins and challenges while developing their identities and practicing political dreaming in a supportive environment.

Integrating the FRESH HEART framework with BEFS and a systems-oriented approach, and grounding them in Ubuntu and Sankofa, creates a holistic strategy for cultivating processes of Black male youth healing and empowerment. This approach addresses immediate emotional and academic needs while considering broader socio-cultural and historical contexts. This model, exemplified through Blue Heart's programs, demonstrates how culturally sustaining and community-driven practices can foster resilience, agency, and a positive racial identity. The FRESH HEART framework ensures that the youth thrive by creating a dynamic and self-sustaining ecosystem, which contributes to a resilient and harmonious community. This approach

aligns with the ethical principles of Ubuntu and Sankofa, creating a strategy that is holistic, resilient, and deeply anchored in the cultural and historical contexts of the youth it serves.

## **Implications & Recommendations**

**Implications for Theory.** The findings from this study extend the theoretical frameworks of Radical Healing (Ginwright, 2016), Empowerment-Based Youth Development (Travis & Leech, 2013), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (ross, 2021). By integrating systems thinking in data coding and analysis, this research highlights how specific systems characteristics—such as mindsets, socio-cultural artifacts, connections, and feedback loops—contribute to the theorization of these frameworks. For example, the FRESH HEART framework that emerged from this study illustrates how Black male youth healing and empowerment processes are co-constitutive and predicated on cultivating social environments that foster fulfilling relationships rooted in trust and authentic care. This interplay between healing and empowerment is supported by creating safe, supportive spaces that validate and uplift Black male youth (Ginwright, 2016; Travis & Leech, 2013). Furthermore, the concept of political dreaming, as a core aspect of Black Educational Fugitive Spaces, was shown to support Blue Heart youth in cultivating a radical imagination and envisioning futures beyond systemic constraints, thus exemplifying the theoretical discourse on educational spaces that nurture Black resilience and thriving (ross, 2021).

The study extends the concept of healing justice by demonstrating how culturally sustaining environments and community-driven educational practices can facilitate psychological and emotional recovery from racial trauma. The Blue Heart Foundation exemplifies this through activities such as healing circles during mentorship programming and culturally affirming events, which align with Ginwright's (2016) advocacy for restoring community life through innovative

practices. These healing circles provide a safe space for youth to express their experiences and emotions, reinforcing a sense of community and collective healing. Additionally, culturally affirming events celebrate Black heritage and identity, reinforcing the importance of cultural pride and community solidarity in the healing process. This approach simultaneously addresses immediate emotional needs of the youth while also building a resilient community that can collectively respond to systemic challenges.

The research underscores the multifaceted nature of empowerment, highlighting both individual skill development and community engagement. The study's findings reveal how programs that foster agency, self-determination, and positive identity formation can enhance self-efficacy and community ties. The Blue Heart Foundation's focus on leadership and skill-building activities, such as service projects and public speaking opportunities, illustrates the practical application of EMPYD principles. For instance, service projects develop practical skills while also instilling a sense of responsibility and community involvement. Public speaking opportunities empower youth by building their confidence and communication skills, essential for leadership roles. Through these platforms, Blue Heart helps youth to see themselves as capable leaders and active contributors to their communities, thus promoting a sense of agency and self-determination.

The study enriches the BEFS framework by showing how these spaces serve as both refuges from systemic anti-Blackness and as platforms for political dreaming and radical imagination. The HBCU College Tour, for example, enhances positive identity development through immersive experiences that allow youth to envision futures beyond systemic constraints. This aligns with BEFS goals of creating culturally sustaining, pro-Black environments. During these tours, youth interact with successful Black scholars and professionals, which helps them to

imagine their potential and future successes. The supportive and affirming atmosphere of these tours provides a stark contrast to the often hostile environments they face in traditional educational settings. Participation in these empowering spaces encourages youth to dream radically and challenge the limitations imposed by systemic inequities.

**Implications & Recommendations for Practice.** For community-based youth organizations (CBYOs) and school-community collaborations, the findings underscore the importance of designing culturally sustaining programs that are relationship-based and developmental in focus. These programs must be structured around activities that promote positive youth development through an agent-based approach, empowering youth to actively shape their own resilience and growth (Travis & Leech, 2013). Relationship-based programs emphasize the significance of building strong, supportive relationships between youth and mentors, peers, and the broader community. These connections provide a stable foundation for youth to explore their identities, develop their skills, and navigate challenges.

CBYOs like The Blue Heart Foundation exemplify how mentoring, education, and community engagement initiatives can provide critical emotional and social support to youth. Blue Heart's approach integrates comprehensive mentoring programs that connect youth with positive role models who offer guidance, support, and encouragement. These mentors help youth set and achieve personal goals, providing a sense of accountability and motivation. Education initiatives within these organizations often include academic support, college preparation, and career readiness programs that equip youth with the knowledge and skills needed for future success. Community engagement initiatives, such as service projects and advocacy efforts, allow youth to develop a sense of civic responsibility and contribute positively to their communities.



Community-based organizations should also focus on creating environments that affirm cultural identity and enhance resilience. This involves incorporating activities that celebrate cultural heritage and provide emotional and psychological support. For example, Blue Heart's Mentor Connection program offers a structured environment for youth to engage in meaningful dialogue about their experiences and aspirations, supporting emotional well-being and a sense of belonging. Additionally, the HBCU College Tour immerses youth in environments that celebrate Black excellence and history, reinforcing their cultural pride and identity. These experiences help youth develop a strong sense of self and community, which are essential for resilience and empowerment. By creating culturally affirming spaces, CBYOs can help youth navigate and overcome systemic challenges, ultimately supporting their holistic development and well-being.

To enhance their impact, organizations should integrate empowerment strategies that build both individual skills and community engagement. This can be achieved through leadership training, skill-building workshops, and opportunities for youth to participate in decision-making processes. The Empowerment Pact at Blue Heart, which involves youth in self-reflection and collaborative governance, is a prime example of this practice. The Pact encourages youth to set and pursue specific goals in areas such as academics, social skills, emotional well-being, and community engagement. By having youth commit to the Blue Heart core competencies, including leadership, teamwork, vision, service, learning, culture, advocacy, equity, and ethics, the Pact fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility. Youth are encouraged to actively participate in shaping Blue Heart programs and initiatives, ensuring these programs meet their needs and aspirations.

Engaging the Blue Heart youth in self-reflection and governance empowers them to develop critical thinking and leadership skills essential for their personal and professional

growth. This involvement helps youth build confidence in their abilities to influence change and contribute positively to their communities. The Empowerment Pact also promotes a culture of collaboration and mutual respect, where the voices of young people are centered and uplifted. When youth are given the opportunity to lead and make decisions, they are more likely to remain engaged and committed to the organization. This sustained engagement can lead to better program outcomes, as youth feel more connected and invested in their development. Additionally, involving youth in governance helps to break down hierarchical barriers, creating a more inclusive and participatory organizational culture. It encourages intergenerational learning and mentorship, as experienced leaders work alongside young leaders, encouraging a continuous exchange of knowledge and ideas. Empowerment strategies like the Empowerment Pact can serve as a model for other CBYOs, demonstrating the benefits of youth-led governance in creating responsive, effective, and sustainable programs. Prioritizing youth agency and leadership allows organizations to cultivate a new generation of empowered, socially responsible leaders who are equipped to tackle the challenges of their communities and beyond.

Recruitment efforts that connect with local communities and sustainability measures that include ongoing support systems for youth are crucial. Effective recruitment involves engaging with local families, schools, churches, and other community organizations to identify and attract youth who can benefit from the program. Once recruited, it is essential to provide ongoing support to ensure sustained engagement and success. For example, Blue Heart's model of continued mentorship, where mentors provide guidance and resources to Blue Heart alumni even after they transition to college, highlights the importance of sustained, caring relationships. This ongoing support is critical for long-term well-being and success, as it helps youth navigate new challenges and reinforces their sense of belonging and community (Ginwright, 2010).

Enhancing visibility and securing recurring funding are also essential for the growth and stability of such programs. Increasing visibility can be achieved through community outreach, social media campaigns, and partnerships with local media. Raising awareness about the program's impact and success stories helps organizations attract more participants and supporters. Securing recurring funding is equally important to provide consistent support and resources for the youth. Funding can be used for essential resources like technology, facilities, and academic scholarships, which are vital for the comprehensive development of the participants. Consistent funding ensures that programs can offer stable, high-quality services and adapt to the evolving needs of the community.

Moreover, developing strong partnerships with local families, churches, and community organizations can help in creating a supportive network that extends beyond the program itself. These partnerships are crucial for fostering a holistic support system that addresses various aspects of the youth's development. Collaborating with families ensures that the support extends into the home environment, reinforcing the values and skills learned in the program. Churches and community organizations can provide additional resources, mentorship, and volunteer support, enriching the program's offerings and strengthening the community bonds. Such partnerships create a network of support that helps sustain the youth's growth and development long after they have graduated from the program.

**Implications & Recommendations for Policy.** The study's findings have several significant policy implications at local, regional, and national levels, particularly in the areas of youth empowerment, education, and community engagement. At the local level, policies can be designed to support grassroots initiatives and community-based organizations that provide direct services to youth. For example, local governments can allocate funding to programs that offer

mentorship, leadership training, and cultural enrichment, ensuring that these services are accessible to all youth, particularly those from marginalized communities. At the regional level, policies can promote collaboration between municipalities to create a network of support that leverages resources and expertise from multiple areas. This can include regional conferences, workshops, and shared services that address the common challenges faced by youth across different localities.

Nationally, policies can establish standards and frameworks that ensure consistency in youth services and support across the country. These policies can mandate the inclusion of culturally responsive teaching practices and trauma-informed care in educational curricula, ensuring that educators are equipped to meet the diverse needs of their students. Additionally, national policies can encourage the formation of partnerships between schools and community organizations, creating comprehensive support systems that address the academic, emotional, and social needs of youth.

Policies should support the development of community-based programs that provide safe, culturally affirming spaces for Black youth. This includes funding for mentorship programs, leadership training, and cultural enrichment activities. The findings from the study highlight the importance of mentorship programs like Blue Heart's Mentor Connection, which offers consistent support and guidance to youth. For example, participants in the Mentor Connection program expressed feelings of increased confidence and being capable of pursuing their academic and personal goals due to the strong, supportive relationships they formed with their peers and mentors. Leadership training initiatives, such as those integrated into Blue Heart's programs, help youth develop critical leadership skills and a sense of agency. Additionally, cultural enrichment activities, including events like the HBCU College Tour, provide

opportunities for youth to engage with their heritage and see successful role models who look like them, thereby reinforcing a positive racial identity and well-being.

Educational policies should promote culturally sustaining teaching practices and trauma-informed care. This involves engaging educators in reflexive trainings that foster collaboration and praxis, engaging both the affective and cognitive aspects of critical consciousness and pro-Black pedagogy. The findings from Chapter 4 illustrate that youth participants often face systemic barriers and microaggressions in their educational settings, which can hinder their academic success and emotional well-being. Training educators to practice cultural humility can help mitigate these negative experiences by co-creating an inclusive and anti-racist classroom environment. For instance, implementing curricula that reflect the histories and contributions of Black communities and social justice movements can help students feel more connected and valued. Trauma-informed care is also crucial, as many youth have experienced significant adversity. Educators trained in trauma-informed practices, including cultural humility and an understanding of racial trauma associated with systemic anti-Blackness, can better reflect on their positionality and biases to provide the socio-emotional support necessary for these students to thrive. Through such comprehensive training, educators can develop the skills and awareness needed to create supportive and empowering learning environments that affirm the identities and experiences of Black youth.

Policies should encourage collaboration between schools and community-based organizations to create holistic support systems for youth. This includes partnerships that provide access to resources such as mental health services, academic support, and extracurricular activities. The study underscores the effectiveness of comprehensive support systems that extend beyond the classroom. For example, Blue Heart's incorporation of mindfulness practices and

socio-emotional wellness through culinary therapy, and the use of healing circles during Mentor Connection addresses the emotional and psychological needs of youth. Similarly, academic support programs, such as tutoring and college preparation workshops, help bridge educational equity gaps and prepare students for higher education. Extracurricular activities, including sports, arts, and community service, provide additional opportunities for personal growth and development. By strengthening partnerships between schools and community organizations, policies can ensure that youth receive well-rounded support that addresses their diverse needs.

### **Future Research**

To understand the impact of community-based programs and the application of theoretical frameworks, future research should explore several critical areas, including longitudinal and comparative studies, theoretical explorations, and policy impact analyses. These areas are particularly salient given the study's focus on the well-being and empowerment of Black male youth through the frameworks of Radical Healing, Empowerment-Based Youth Development (EMPYD), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS).

Conducting long-term studies is essential to assess the sustained impact of community-based programs on youth empowerment and well-being. The interview data revealed long-term impacts among Blue Heart alumni who are currently in college or have recently graduated in the past few years. These findings indicate that the benefits of community-based programs extend well beyond immediate outcomes, suggesting significant potential for long-term positive effects on educational attainment, career success, and ongoing community engagement. For instance, many alumni mentioned how their participation in Blue Heart's programs provided them with a supportive network that continued to influence their academic and professional journeys (Griffin et al., 2021). These longitudinal studies can provide deeper insights into how early interventions

influence life trajectories and can identify potential areas for program improvement and iteration so these programs remain adaptive and relevant to the evolving needs of the youth they serve.

Comparing different community-based programs can help identify best practices and effective strategies for supporting Black youth across various intersections and contexts. The study of Blue Heart highlighted specific successful elements such as the Mentor Connection and HBCU College Tour. Through comparisons of these and similar initiatives in other organizations, researchers can evaluate the relative effectiveness of different program components. For example, cross-case analyses might compare how various mentorship models impact youth outcomes or how cultural enrichment activities from different programs influence identity development and community involvement. This can involve examining how different programs implement mentorship and cultural affirmation strategies and their respective impacts on youth empowerment and academic success (Nelson et al., 2020). Such comparative studies are crucial for identifying the most impactful practices and tailoring them to address the diverse needs and contexts of Black male youth. This will help each program be responsive to the specific challenges and opportunities within different communities.

Further exploring the integration of theoretical frameworks such as Radical Healing, EMPYD, and BEFS within a systems approach can yield significant insights. The current study highlighted how Blue Heart's programs operationalized these frameworks to create a pro-Black refuge and revealed the FRESH HEART model as a powerful tool for holistic development. Future research could refine this framework by incorporating critical media and AI literacies. For instance, the consistent engagement in critical media and AI literacies through program activities can equip youth with essential skills for navigating and challenging systemic barriers in the digital age (Anyiwo et al., 2021). Iterating bespoke conceptual models that address emerging

challenges and opportunities in youth empowerment can help in creating more robust and adaptable programs that are better suited to meet the needs of Black youth in a rapidly changing world.

Investigating the impact of specific policies on the effectiveness of community-based programs can provide valuable insights for policymakers. The findings from Chapter 4 emphasize that supportive policies are essential for the sustainability and expansion of programs like Blue Heart. Policy impact studies could focus on how funding allocations, educational reforms, and community engagement initiatives influence program outcomes. For instance, Griffin, Williams, and Bryan (2021) highlight the critical role of school–family–community partnerships in promoting educational success and equity for Black male students. Similarly, Nelson et al. (2020) discuss the effectiveness of collaborative models in empowering adolescent African American male students. Researchers can identify which strategies are most effective and provide evidence-based recommendations by analyzing these and other policies. These insights will help enhance the impact of community-based programs, ensuring they receive the necessary support and resources to thrive and continue making a positive difference in the lives of Black youth.

The study illustrated the profound influence of culturally sustaining educational strategies on youth development. Future research should focus on how these educational approaches can be implemented across different settings and scaled effectively. For instance, investigating how cultural affirmation and identity development activities can be adapted for use in public schools versus community organizations could provide valuable guidelines for educators and program developers (Acosta & Duggins, 2018; Carey, 2020). Additionally, examining the impact of these practices on various outcomes, such as academic performance, self-esteem, and community



involvement, can offer deeper insights into their effectiveness and inform best practices for broader implementation.

As technology continues to play a significant role in education and community engagement, future research should explore how digital tools and platforms can enhance community-based programs. This includes evaluating the effectiveness of virtual mentorship programs, online cultural enrichment activities, and digital platforms for community building. The study's findings suggest that integrating technology could expand the reach and impact of programs like Blue Heart, especially in under-resourced areas (Mims et al., 2022; Sulé, Nelson, & Williams, 2021). Further research could also investigate the digital divide and its implications for equitable access to technological resources so that all youth can benefit from these advancements.

Addressing these areas, future research can build on the findings of this study and contribute to the ongoing development of effective, culturally sustaining practices for supporting Black youth. This approach helps programs remain reflexive, impactful, and aligned with the evolving needs and contexts of the communities they serve. Additionally, this research can inform policy decisions, guiding the allocation of resources and support to areas that have the greatest impact on youth development. It also provides a deeper understanding of the systemic barriers faced by Black youth and provides evidence-based strategies to overcome these challenges. Continuously refining and adapting theoretical frameworks and practical applications opens possibilities for future research that uplifts community-based programs that are well-equipped to nurture resilience, agency, and a positive racial identity among Black youth. This ongoing commitment to research and development promotes sustained progress and innovation in the field of youth development and education.

## **Reflections on Methodology & Positionality**

Employing a systems approach in this participant-observer, qualitative case study research revealed several methodological insights. One key insight was the challenge of capturing the dynamic and interconnected nature of systems characteristics, such as paradigms, structures, elements, and feedback loops. These characteristics are not static; they are constantly evolving and interacting with one another, making it difficult to isolate and study them individually. Addressing these challenges involved iterative data collection and analysis processes that allowed for the continuous refinement of the conceptual models. This iterative process included multiple rounds of data coding, feedback from participants, and integration of new insights, which collectively contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the systems characteristics at play. This approach provided a robust framework for understanding the complex interactions that support Black male youth healing and empowerment and emphasized the importance of adaptability and responsiveness in research methodologies.

As a participant-observer, my engagement with Blue Heart shifted significantly from being primarily an observer to becoming deeply involved in relationship building and supporting the organization. Initially, I maintained a "fly on the wall" stance to observe and document the dynamics within the program. However, as I spent more time with the participants and mentors, I found myself becoming increasingly welcomed and integrated into the community. This immersion allowed me to build trust and rapport with the Blue Heart youth and alumni, gaining deeper insights into their experiences and challenges. The relational aspect of my involvement enriched the data collection process and transformed my understanding of the importance of empathy and active participation in building meaningful connections and support within community-based programs.

My overall experience with The Blue Heart Foundation has been nothing short of transformative, both for the youth I have had the privilege to work with and for myself as a mentor. The sense of family and togetherness has created an environment where everyone feels connected and committed to the collective well-being and advancement of our community. The shared vision and dedication among the Blue Heart staff, mentors, instructors, and guest speakers have been the cornerstone of our efforts, driving us to make a meaningful impact on the lives of Black male youth. This communal approach has cultivated a deep sense of belonging and mutual support, which is critical for the emotional and psychological development of the youth. The collaborative atmosphere has also facilitated the sharing of resources, strategies, and support systems, which enhances the overall efficacy of the program.

Blue Heart's mentorship and programming extend beyond the individual, challenging pervasive deficit narratives and directly confronting racial inequity and injustice. The impact of our work on academic achievement, socio-emotional development, and community cohesion among the youth we serve demonstrates the necessity of such programs. Blue Heart's approach is holistic, addressing multiple facets of the youths' lives, including their academic needs, emotional well-being, and social development. This comprehensive strategy is designed to create a supportive and empowering environment that not only addresses immediate challenges but also equips the youth with the skills and resilience needed for long-term success. The organization's commitment to promoting a sense of pride, identity, and purpose among Black male youth is instrumental in challenging systemic barriers and promoting a more equitable society. This mission requires a united effort to encourage the broader community to engage with and support Blue Heart's objectives, thereby amplifying the impact and reach of the program.

The feedback from participants and their families has been overwhelmingly positive, reinforcing the value of our work. The term 'brotherhood' often recurs in discussions, reflecting the deep sense of connection and belonging experienced through Blue Heart programming. Participants frequently express how the Blue Heart Foundation has become a second family, providing them with a network of support that extends beyond the program itself. This sense of brotherhood emerges in the supportive context of a safe space where young men can openly share their experiences, challenges, and aspirations without fear of judgment. The cultural activities and discussions we incorporate help to ground them in their identity and instill pride in their heritage with a deeper understanding of their historical context. This environment, rich in cultural affirmation and exploration, allows our youth to feel seen, heard, and valued in ways that traditional educational settings often fail to provide. Blue Heart functions as a fugitive space where Black joy and excellence are celebrated by connecting the youth to their heritage and the broader tradition of Black liberation.

Parents and families have expressed heartfelt gratitude for the supportive 'village' The Blue Heart Foundation provides. They highlight the notable changes in their children—increased self-confidence, a stronger sense of identity, and deeper engagement with their education and community. These changes are significant for the individuals involved and extend their impact to the community as a whole. The positive development observed among the youth reflects a broader shift towards collective growth. Parents have noted improvements in their children's academic performance, social interactions, and overall demeanor as indicative of the nurturing environment and holistic guidance offered by Blue Heart. Families have expressed a renewed sense of hope and pride as they witness their children becoming active, confident, and engaged members of the community. The supportive network provided by Blue Heart bolsters individual

success and strengthens community bonds, creating a ripple effect that benefits everyone. This interconnected growth underscores the importance of community-based programs in cultivating resilient, empowered, and thriving communities.

In reflecting on my time with The Blue Heart Foundation, it is clear that the experience has been incredibly enriching. The opportunity to contribute to the empowerment of African American male youth has been an invaluable part of my journey. Blue Heart's commitment to nurturing the next generation of leaders and changemakers serves as a compelling testament to the profound effects that focused, community-driven efforts can achieve. This dedication underpins Blue Heart's mission and energizes our resolve to continue nurturing and empowering Black male youth towards a brighter, more equitable future. It is an honor to be part of this ongoing effort. The Blue Heart Foundation has created a supportive environment that enhances personal and academic growth, which uplifts the sense of confidence and purpose in the young men we serve. The positive feedback from participants and their families reflect the significant impact our programs have on their lives. Witnessing the transformation in our youth, from increased self-esteem to greater community involvement, reaffirms the importance of our work.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of community-based programs on the well-being and empowerment of Black male youth, utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Radical Healing, Empowerment-Based Youth Development (EMPYD), and Black Educational Fugitive Spaces (BEFS). This research aimed to understand how these frameworks can be integrated within a systems-oriented approach to nurture the holistic development in young Black males. Addressing the well-being of Black male youth is crucial for promoting social equity and empowering future generations.

This study illustrates the importance of confronting entrenched racial disparities that have long hindered the pursuit of social justice and perpetuated the marginalization of African American communities. By weaving Black critical theory with a systems thinking approach, this qualitative case study explicates the healing and empowerment processes of Black male youth within a local community-based organization. The study's focus on high-leverage system characteristics of Black educational fugitive spaces highlights the necessity of addressing the unique challenges faced by Black youth in traditional academic settings, while providing a refuge for cultivating fulfilling relationships and advancing racial progress. The findings and recommendations reinforce the essential role of community engagement in developing collaborative strategies that are deeply rooted in local contexts to co-create sustainable solutions that promote both personal and collective thriving.

Key findings from Chapter 4 revealed significant insights into how community-based programs like The Blue Heart Foundation can effectively support the healing and empowerment of Black male youth. Participants benefited from activities such as the HBCU College Tour, Signing Day, and Mentor Connection, which fostered a sense of achievement, cultural identity, and community belonging. Interviews with Blue Heart staff and alumni highlighted the importance of culturally sustaining environments that promote agency, self-determination, and positive identity formation.

This study has extended the theoretical frameworks of Radical Healing, EMPYD, and BEFS by demonstrating their practical application within the FRESH HEART framework. FRESH HEART, which stands for Fulfilling Relationships Enhance Social Harmony; Healing and Empowerment Actualize Resilience and Thriving, emerged as a novel conceptual model from the data analysis. Weaving together empirical findings with guiding theoretical

frameworks, the FRESH HEART framework illustrates how these theories can be applied to explore healing and empowerment processes in a specific local context. This multidimensional model is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, it serves as a cohesive structure that can guide interventions, community programs, and potentially future policy development. Synthesizing key aspects of emotional, academic, and social well-being, FRESH HEART provides a comprehensive model for understanding and enhancing community-based youth organizations.

Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers must collaborate to enhance the efficacy of community-based youth organizations and cultivate environments conducive to youth healing and empowerment. Our current historical context offers a unique opportunity to address entrenched racial disparities and build systems that promote social justice and equity. This qualitative case study integrates Black critical theory with a systems thinking approach to explore Black male youth healing and empowerment processes within a local community-based organization. The study highlights the need for community engagement to develop transformative frameworks deeply rooted in local realities to provide practical strategies that promote both personal and collective thriving. We can co-create programs that are effective, sustainable, and culturally responsive, ultimately forming vibrant ecosystems where Black youth can flourish. Just as the FRESH HEART framework envisions a "Village Garden of Resilient Trees," the goal is to build a future where Black youth can grow, thrive, and contribute positively to their community and society. This liberatory vision can help sustain a legacy of healing and empowerment that advances racial progress for generations to come.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Codes

Note: The code terms are aligned with various characteristics of systems thinking (e.g.,

**Paradigms** - sub characteristics: *mindsets & goals*; **Structures** - sub characteristics: *decision-making, regulations, connections*; **Elements** - sub characteristics: *resources, components, socio-cultural artifacts*; **Feedback Loops** - sub characteristics: *reinforcing loops, balancing loops*) and themed according to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks [i.e., healing (CARMA), empowerment (EMPYD)), and Black educational fugitive spaces (BEFS)].

Codes that have “(CE)” indicate a theme that aligns with/blends both healing (CARMA) and empowerment (EMPYD), hence the C & E to represent both frameworks. All of the codes are a priori, except for “brotherhood”, which was an in vivo code (“brotherhood” was salient across the alumni interviews and during observations). The themes associated with feedback loops are emergent codes that revealed an emergent conceptual framework: FRESH HEART

- **Paradigms**
  - **Mindsets**
    - Healing (CARMA)
      - belief in education as a tool for individual and collective repair of harm and trauma
    - Empowerment (EMPYD)
      - mindset of agency and self-determination, aiming to empower Black youth by building positive relationships, moral values, self-worth, and a sense of belonging within their communities
    - Political dreaming (BEFS)
      - envisioning futures beyond systemic constraints; radical imagination
  - **Goals**

- Empowerment (EMPYD)
  - goals related to developing individual skills and competencies to enhance self-efficacy and self-advocacy
- Community Empowerment (CE)
  - goals related to strengthening community ties and collective agency
- Refuge (BEFS)
  - creating spaces that offer refuge and resistance against systemic anti-Blackness, with goals centered on reimagining Blackness, fostering political dreaming, and developing healthy Black subjectivities
- **Structures**
  - **Decision-making**
    - PAR (BEFS)
      - encourages participatory decision-making processes within educational and community settings, allowing Black youth to have a say in matters affecting their well-being and learning environments
  - **Regulations**
    - Policy (CE)
      - creating norms and policies that support the empowerment and healing of Black youth, such as trauma-informed care, culturally sustaining teaching practices, and anti-racist education policies
  - **Connections**
    - Connections (CE)
      - fulfilling relationships w/ peers, adults, community etc.
    - Brotherhood (BEFS)
      - sense of belonging and collective empowerment w/ black male peers (specific type of pro-black connection)
- **Elements**
  - **Resources**
    - Resources (BEF; CE)
      - human, financial, physical space, community (mentors, staff; Funding for Programs and Services; Scholarships and Grants; Well-equipped classrooms, libraries, computer labs, and recreational areas; technology and educational tools; partnerships and collaborations; parent and family engagement
      - encompass the tangible and intangible assets that are available to the system to support its functioning and goals
    - Refuge (BEFS)
      - spaces that offer refuge and resistance against systemic anti-Blackness, with goals centered on reimagining Blackness, fostering political dreaming, and developing healthy Black subjectivities
  - **Components**
    - Components(CE)

- refer to the individual elements, programs, services, and opportunities within the system that contribute to its overall functioning and outcomes
    - Note: components refer to the specific elements and programs that make up the education system, while resources encompass the assets and support systems available to the system to enhance its functioning and outcomes; components focus on the essential building blocks of the educational environment, while resources encompass the tools and assets that can be leveraged to support and improve the educational experiences of Black male youth within the community-based education space
  - Socio-cultural artifacts
    - Artifacts (BEFS)
      - cultural symbols, narratives, and practices that reinforce Black identity and heritage, which plays a vital role in the healing and empowerment processes
- **Feedback Loops**
  - **Reinforcing**
    - FRESH (Stories)
      - success stories and positive outcomes that motivate and inspire further engagement and effort, such as increased community involvement or academic achievements, reinforcing the goals of empowerment and healing
    - FRESH (Space)
      - provide a crucial environment where students can explore and affirm their Black identity in a supportive community, facilitating a reinforcing feedback loop where positive identity development and the establishment of fulfilling relationships contribute to an enhanced sense of empowerment and well-being among Black male youth
    - HEART (Connect)
      - amplify the voices and perspectives of the community, this reinforcing loop can promote collaboration, trust, and accountability within the education system; leads to more inclusive and equitable outcomes for Black male youth
  - **Balancing**
    - FRESH (Connect)
      - foster strong relationships with mentors and peers who understand their experiences, students develop a sense of belonging, resilience, and motivation to succeed academically and personally; counteract feelings of isolation or lack of representation
    - HEART (Space)
      - support healing, address and mitigate challenges or conflicts within the educational space by focusing on repairing harm, building

empathy, and fostering accountability rather than punitive measures

- HEART (Roots)
  - provide students with educational content that is rooted in their cultural identities and backgrounds, this balancing loop can enhance engagement, self-esteem, and academic achievement among Black male youth



Appendix B

**Blue Heart Interview Participants**

Participant Pseudonyms	Role	Age	Interview Duration	Self-Identified Participant Information
Malcolm	Mentor	50	1 hr. 34 min	Father, Grandfather, Relatable, SD City Analyst, Black Man
Langston	Mentor	44	45 min	Naval Officer, Father, Public Speaker, Black Man
Marcus	Mentor	42	1 hr. 47 min	Naval Officer, Husband, Father, Compassionate, Black Man
Stokely	College Prep Instructor	46	1 hr. 35 min	Professor, Father, Traveler, Comic/Anime Fan, Black Man
Assata	Mindful Heart: Culinary Therapy Instructor	34	1 hr. 49 min	Educator, Small Business Owner, Creative, Black Woman
Angela	Director of STEAM Education	35	1 hr. 7 min	STEAM Educator, Small Business Owner, Black Woman
Harriet	Academic Coach	45	2 hr. 34 min	Educator, Small Business Owner, Bi-Racial Black Woman
Fred	President/CEO	33	1 hr. 52 min	San Diego-born, Political Leader, Black Man
Septima	VP of Development	32	1 hr. 17 min	Servant-Leader, Strategic Thinker, Mother, Mexican Woman
Octavia	Guest Speaker	43	1 hr. 8 min	Afrofuturist, Educator, Black Woman
Bayard	Alumnus	21	1 hr.	Communications Major at

				Morehouse, Photographer/Videographer
Huey	Alumnus	19	44 min	Business Major at Morehouse, Aspiring Entrepreneur
Kwame	Alumnus	22	1 hr. 15 min	Morehouse Grad ('23), Works at a Talent Agency
Douglass	Alumnus	19	32 min	Economics Major/ Chinese Minor at Morehouse, Graphic Designer
Mumia	Alumnus	22	34 min	Morehouse Grad ('23), Works at a Media Company
Bobby	Alumnus	18	1 hr. 6 min	Physics Major, Astrophysics Specialization at UCSD
Robeson	Alumnus	19	36 min	Film Major at CSUN, Blue Heart Class President '22
H. Rap	Alumnus	19	49 min	SD City College, Plans to transfer to a University
Eldridge	Alumnus	20	48 min	Business Marketing Major at Morehouse, Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Inc.
George	Alumnus	19	50 min	Mesa College, Plans to transfer to a University, Blue Heart Class VP '23
Alex	Alumnus	24	52 min	Morehouse Grad '22 (English Major, Journalism & Sports Minor), Pursuing M.A., Educator

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## Appendix C

### Consent Forms

#### **Adult Staff/Mentor Consent Form**

**Project Title:** Black Male Youth Empowerment in a Community-Based Organization

**You are being invited to take part in a research study being conducted by UC San Diego.**

**You are being asked to read this form so that you know about this research study. The information in this form is to provide information to help you decide whether or not to take part in the research or if there is someone you want to inform about this study.**

#### **Why Is This Study Being Done?**

The purpose of this study is to understand how a community-based mentorship and academic enrichment program supports the empowerment of Black male youth. This study specifically examines youth experiences and program elements to understand how empowerment is facilitated through areas such as: (1) culture, (2) the development of critical consciousness, (3) community engagement, (4) and the development of a positive cultural identity in youth development program settings. This study uses program evaluation methods, including interviews and focus groups, to explore the healing and empowerment of Black male youth that participate in the Blue Heart Foundation.

#### **Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you are an adult program staff, mentor, or guest speaker (age 18 and up) affiliated with the Blue Heart Foundation.

### **How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?**

Twenty-five people (participants) will be invited to participate in this study at the Blue Heart Foundation.

### **What Are The Alternatives To Being In This Study?**

The alternative to being in the study is not to participate.

### **What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?**

Your participation in this study will include one to two semi-structured interviews. The procedures you will be asked to perform are described below.

#### **Interview**

The interview will involve questions about the influence that specific program strategies and activities are having on the experiences of youth participants based on your perspective.

### **Will Photos, Video or Audio Recordings Be Made Of Me during the Study?**

The researchers will make an audio recording during the study so that semi-structured interview discussions can be transcribed only if you give your permission to do so. Indicate your decision below by initialing in the space provided.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

### **Are There Any Risks To Me?**

The things that you will be doing have no more risks than you would come across in everyday life. Although the researcher has tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions/procedures that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You can choose not to answer a question at any time.

### **Will There Be Any Costs To Me?**

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

### **Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?**

You will not be paid for being in this study.

### **Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?**

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. All participants who complete a survey will be assigned a Study ID number and during a semi-structured interview each participant will choose a pseudonym for when audio recordings are transcribed. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher, James Crawford, will have access to the records.

Information about you will be stored in a locked file cabinet; computer files protected with a password. These consent forms will be filed securely in an official area.

Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of the regulatory entity, UC San Diego Office of IRB Administration,

may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

### **Who may I Contact for More Information?**

You may contact the Principal Investigator, James Crawford, to tell him about a concern or complaint about this research at [jacrawford@ucsd.edu](mailto:jacrawford@ucsd.edu).

For questions about your rights as a research participant; or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you may call the UC San Diego Office of IRB Administration.

- Phone number: (858) 246-4777
- Email: [IRB@ucsd.edu](mailto:IRB@ucsd.edu)

### **What if I Change My Mind About Participating?**

This research is voluntary and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study.

You may decide to not begin or to stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or stop being in the study, there will be no effect on your participation in the youth development program at the South Dallas Cultural Center.

### **STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

**I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. I can ask more questions if I want. A copy of this entire consent form will be given to me.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_ Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_ Date

**INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:**

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

\_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Presenter

\_\_\_\_\_ Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_ Date

## **Alumni Consent Form**

**Project Title:** Black Male Youth Empowerment in a Community-Based Organization

**You are being invited to take part in a research study being conducted by UC San Diego.**

**You are being asked to read this form so that you know about this research study. The information in this form is to provide information to help you decide whether or not to take part in the research or if there is someone you want to inform about this study.**

### **Why Is This Study Being Done?**

The purpose of this study is to understand how a community-based mentorship and academic enrichment program supports the empowerment of Black male youth. This study specifically examines youth experiences and program elements to understand how empowerment is facilitated through areas such as: (1) culture, (2) the development of critical consciousness, (3) community engagement, (4) and the development of a positive cultural identity in youth development program settings. This study uses program evaluation methods, including interviews and observations, to explore the healing and empowerment of Black male youth that participate in the Blue Heart Foundation.

### **Why Am I Being Asked To Be In This Study?**

You are being asked to be in this study because you are an alumni participant of the Blue Heart Foundation.

### **How Many People Will Be Asked To Be In This Study?**



Twenty-five people (participants) will be invited to participate in this study at the Blue Heart Foundation.

**What Are The Alternatives To Being In This Study?**

The alternative to being in the study is not to participate.

**What Will I Be Asked To Do In This Study?**

Your participation in this study will last up to 5 months. The procedures you will be asked to perform are described below.

**Will Photos, Video or Audio Recordings Be Made Of Me during the Study?**

The researchers will make an audio recording during the study so that semi-structured interview discussions can be transcribed only if you give your permission to do so. Indicate your decision below by initialing in the space provided.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not give my permission for audio recordings to be made of me during my participation in this research study.

**Are There Any Risks To Me?**

The things that you will be doing have no more risks than you would come across in everyday life. Although the researcher has tried to avoid risks, you may feel that some questions/procedures that are asked of you will be stressful or upsetting. You do not have to answer anything you do not want to.

**Will There Be Any Costs To Me?**

Aside from your time, there are no costs for taking part in the study.

**Will I Be Paid To Be In This Study?**

You will not be paid for being in this study.

**Will Information From This Study Be Kept Private?**

The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. All participants who complete a survey will be assigned a Study ID number and during a focus group or semi-structured interview each participant will choose a pseudonym for when audio recordings are transcribed. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher, James Crawford, will have access to the records.

Information about you will be stored in a locked file cabinet; computer files protected with a password. These consent forms will be filed securely in an official area.

Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law.

People who have access to your information include the Principal Investigator and research study personnel. Representatives of the regulatory entity, UC San Diego Office of IRB Administration, may access your records to make sure the study is being run correctly and that information is collected properly.

**Who may I Contact for More Information?**

You may contact the Principal Investigator, James Crawford, to tell him about a concern or complaint about this research at [jacrawford@ucsd.edu](mailto:jacrawford@ucsd.edu).

For questions about your rights as a research participant; or if you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, you may call the UC San Diego Office of IRB Administration.

- Phone number: (858) 246-4777
- Email: IRB@ucsd.edu

**What if I Change My Mind About Participating?**

This research is voluntary and you have the choice whether or not to be in this research study. You may decide to not begin or to stop participating at any time. If you choose not to be in this study or stop being in the study, there will be no effect on your participation in the youth development program at the South Dallas Cultural Center.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT**

**I agree to be in this study and know that I am not giving up any legal rights by signing this form. The procedures, risks, and benefits have been explained to me, and my questions have been answered. I know that new information about this research study will be provided to me as it becomes available and that the researcher will tell me if I must be removed from the study. I can ask more questions if I want. A copy of this entire consent form will be given to me.**

\_\_\_\_\_ Alumni Participant's Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_ Alumni Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_ Date

**INVESTIGATOR'S AFFIDAVIT:**

Either I have or my agent has carefully explained to the participant the nature of the above project. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the person who signed this consent form was informed of the nature, demands, benefits, and risks involved in his/her participation.

\_\_\_\_\_ Signature of Presenter

\_\_\_\_\_ Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_ Date

## Appendix D

### **Blue Heart Alumni Interview Protocol**

#### **Introduction, Explanation, Interview Process**

Researcher introduces himself and explains the project's purpose:

*Hello, my name is James Crawford and I am a doctoral student at UC San Diego. I am working on a project to explore how the Blue Heart Foundation influences the positive development of youth participants. This project will help inform Blue Heart, other youth programs and education spaces, as well as future research on how to support healing and empowerment of Black youth. Before we begin, let me tell you about this interview and answer any questions you may have.*

*I am interested in your own opinions, in other words, what you think and feel about each topic. Everything you say in this interview will be kept private and no names, only pseudonyms will be used in the report. It is important that you give your honest opinions. I will be recording your comments today to review and summarize your thoughts in a final report. The recordings will be kept confidential.*

*This interview will last about one hour. Please speak clearly and share your opinions. There are no right or wrong answers. (Ensure everyone has signed the consent form)*

*Do you have any questions? (pause- answer any questions) May I turn on the recorder? (turn on recorder and begin with first question below)*

## **Blue Heart Alumni Interview Questions**

1. What is your name, age, and grade level?
2. How do you identify racially and ethnically?
3. How did you hear about and get involved with The Blue Heart Foundation?
4. Why did you choose to participate in The Blue Heart Foundation?
5. What have you gained the most while participating in this program?
6. What kinds of things do you believe that your peers have gotten the most out of while participating in this program?
7. What changes have you noticed in yourself that you think are related to the program?
  - a. PROBE: Was there a specific activity or interaction you had in the program that facilitated this change?
8. How do you think being part of The Blue Heart Foundation (BHF) program has helped you to feel more connected to your racial identity?
  - a. How participating in BHF helped you to feel more connected to your culture?
9. Can you describe a time when you felt like you had the power to make a change or make a difference? Please explain.
10. How would you describe a caring relationship?
  - a. PROBE: How does it make you feel?
11. Do you feel you have a caring relationship with any of your Blue Heart peers in this program?
  - a. PROBE: If no, why not. If yes, how has Blue Heart helped support these relationships?

12. 3. Do you feel you have a caring relationship with any of the adults and/or mentors in this program?
  - a. PROBE: If no, why not. If yes, how has Blue Heart helped support these relationships?
13. How would you define your community?
14. Can you describe a time when you learned something new about yourself or your community through your participation in the BHF program?
15. How do you think the BHF program has helped you to set goals for yourself and work toward personal and collective advancement?
16. Can you describe a time when you felt a sense of achievement through your participation in the BHF program?
17. How do you think the BHF program has helped you to feel more confident in yourself and your abilities?
18. Can you describe a time when you felt a sense of belonging and community through your participation in the BHF program?
19. What issues do you believe young Black males face in their community or school?
  - a. PROBE: How have your previous experiences and/or time in this program made you aware of those issues?
20. How do you think the BHF program has helped you to become a more active and engaged citizen in your community?

### **Closing Thoughts**

Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that I have not already asked?

*Thank you so much for spending your time answering my questions. I am going to stop the recording now.*



## **Adult Staff/Mentor Interview Protocol**

### **Introduction:**

*Hello, my name is James Crawford. I am an education scholar and researcher conducting a qualitative case study on Black male youth healing and empowerment at The Blue Heart Foundation (BHF). The purpose of this study is to understand the adult staff's/mentor's perceptions of BHF's mission and vision and how they align with the organization's programming. Additionally, the study aims to explore how the youth experience healing and empowerment through their participation in the organization. The goal is to understand the effectiveness of BHF in addressing the unique needs of Black male youth in urban contexts. Before we begin, I would like to inform you that participation in this study is voluntary, and all responses will be confidential. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns before we proceed.*

### Demographic Questions:

- What is your role at The Blue Heart Foundation?
- What is your age?
- What is your race/ethnicity?

### Interview Questions:

- Can you tell me about BHF's mission and vision to support Black male youth healing and empowerment? How do you interpret and make sense of it?
- In your opinion, how does the BHF programming align with the organization's mission and vision? Can you give examples?
- Can you describe how the BHF programming supports Black male youth?
- How does BHF programming address the needs of Black male youth in urban contexts?

- Can you share any challenges or barriers that Black male youth in BHF face in terms of healing and empowerment?
- In your experience, what outcomes have you observed for Black male youth who participate in BHF programming?
- How does BHF programming address issues of racial discrimination and promote positive identity development?
- Can you describe the role of community-based programs like BHF in promoting equity and justice for Black male youth in urban contexts?

Closing:

Thank you for your time and participation in this study. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not discussed? If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out to me.