FOR THE LOVE OF BLACK CHILDREN: TOWARDS BLACK LIBERATORY EDUCATIONAL SUBVERSION

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FOR THE LOVE OF BLACK CHILDREN:
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A Dissertation Presented
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Dissertation Abstract

For The Love of Black Children: Towards Black Liberatory Educational Subversion

American K-12 schooling is one cog in a system of structural racism, with antiblackness as a foundational pillar (Brown University, 2015; Dumas, 2014; Dumas & Ross, 2016). Within the structurally racist institution of education, Black students are most likely to experience criminalization, adultification, invisibilization, ostracization, and tokenization in school settings (Brown University, 2015; Bryan, 2020; Epstein, Black, & Gonzalez, 2017). For Black students in suburban schools, especially, the antiblack messaging can be more consistent and direct, having deleterious effects on their development (Chapman, 2017; Ferguson, 2002).

Centering my work inside a suburban school district via a Black women-founded-and-run non-profit, this study explored the “homeplaces” (hooks, 2014/1994) Black educators create amidst the backdrop of systemic antiblackness. I introduce the conceptual framework, Black Liberatory Educational Subversion (BLES), that codifies the fugitive and liberatory practices of Black educators in defense of Black students. Overall, this study unpacked two questions: (1) What necessitates the presence of BLES spaces in suburban schools, and (2) What is the perceived impact of BLES spaces from the viewpoint of Black suburban youth?

Through a series of four community circle sessions, students provided testimony about their experiences in BLES spaces and their respective suburban school sites during the course of a school year. Overall, the findings reflected that the totality of Black
students’ interactions with educators and peers in suburban schools had profound effects on identity development. What also emerged from the findings were various methods of what I called social surthrival that students developed through their engagement in the BLES space provided by the non-profit.

The implications of this study yield multiple pathways towards ensuring the futurity of Black student education. I posit the need for further scholarship on the schooling experiences of Black suburban youth. Additionally, I urge teacher education programs to better prepare Black student-teachers for the racialized experiences they may encounter in suburban faculties. I also suggest institutional pathways that ensure faculty and administration preparedness to receive Black students and teachers. Lastly, I advocate for a humanizing approach to funding that is unattached to deficit lenses and the exploitation of Black traumas in exchange for financial support.
This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate’s dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Dedication

I was four years old, being prepped for my first-ever surgery. My mother and I were sitting in a room on a hospital bed, awaiting the surgical team. Suddenly, they descended upon us, all clad in blue scrubs. I began to tense up. I was frightened and likely unaware of what I was doing there in the first place. My mother, my lifeline, my only safe person in the room, slowly inched aside to make way for the doctors. Immediately, they launched their attack, wielding constraints and sharp objects that they hurled in my direction. They had clearly done something to my mother too, performed some spell on her that turned her into someone else; surely, the mother I knew would have defended me against these treacherous doctors. I was clearly on my own and was armed solely with the power of my four-year-old vocabulary. So I loaded my clip and fired off loudly to the enemy, “You better get your hands off me. If you don’t stop, I’m gonna get my dad, and he HATES white people. He’s gonna get you!”

As I reflect on this moment with the clarity that 36 years later brings, I recognize two things. First, I definitely needed that hernia surgery. Secondly—and just as important—I recognize the power in that seemingly small moment and the source of that power. Innocent rage aside, that four-year-old version of me was doing some revolutionary shit in that moment. At such a young age, I was self-advocating my need for boundaries and bodily autonomy, demonstrating my awareness of our racial tension with white people, and being confidently vocal in letting that awareness be known. It was the kind of boldness that is harder to come by in your adulthood. But it did not come out of thin air; my budding perception was attributed to the lessons my father taught me. Morris James Jenkins Jr. was the type of parent who told it like it was. He shared vivid stories about
growing up in the 1950s and ‘60s and the antiblack racism he experienced. He taught his children not only about how beautiful Black really was, but also about the lengths the world would go to keep us from realizing it. He was the only adult I knew who stood unflinchingly in the face of whiteness. I admired him for it. And because this was the only way I had ever known him to be, I got to experience an insulated upbringing that was completely subversive against the ideals of white supremacy. As a child, it gave me the temerity to speak my truth as I saw it. As an adult, I can identify how this upbringing has been invaluable to how I process and understand the manifestations of systemic antiblackness in my daily interactions.

The homelife my father provided is indicative of all such spaces that provide Black children the sun in a world that often takes it away. In homes and schools and churches and rec centers and anywhere else we be, Black people are holding spaces for Black children that allow our children to see themselves in a light that ‘They’ Schools (Olugbala & Ibomu, 2000) never will. In the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 2008), the afterlife of segregation (ross, 2020), and in the midst of social death (Patterson, 1982) Black children are getting and giving life. This study is a tribute to all those spaces and all the Morris James Jenkinses across the country and around the world who work to uplift the spirits of Black children so that they may learn to see this antiblack world for what it is and speak their truths unapologetically, with their whole chests, no matter who is in the room.
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To my dearly departed father, Morris James Jenkins II,

This work would not exist if you were not my father. I credit you for how I critically view the world and my determination to work through oppression, no matter the odds. As a young person, I took for granted how dope of a father I had. I had no idea just how immaculately you were setting me up for life. You knew my academic potential well before I did; thank you, for never letting up. I got to watch you be a second father to so many of your students; some became part of my life, too. I’m grateful to have been BLESsed with a model of authenticity, tenacity, intellectual curiosity, and cultural pride. I needed it all to get through this doctoral journey—my first academic journey without you—and I’ll continue to need it as I move through this next phase of my life. I am so incredibly proud to have been your daughter.

To my fiercely loving mother, Patrice M. Cook-Manigo,

You gave me life through a turbulent labor. And we still made it. That has been the metaphor for my life and career. I remember going to work with you during summers and watching you work with clients, back in the day, when you were a paralegal. You humanized the Black, Brown, and poor folk who were looked down on by most of the lawyers. Your ability to develop fictive kinships was fascinating and undoubtedly had an impact on the future relationships I would come to build with my students.
To librarian and spirit-mother extraordinaire, Jackie Iweagwu,

Next to my father, you are my strongest influence; thank you for opening the world up to me. You were the first to inspire my love of Africa and my love for literature, especially texts that centered the narratives of Black women. Thank you for feeding me Ms. Hurston and Ms. Walker and Ms. Roy and Ms. Angelou and the literary love of my life, Ms. Morrison. You modeled Black femme freedom for me in a world that worked hard to mask it. I’ve spent my whole life aiming to fully manifest the essence I watched you wield. Because of you, I knew there was space in the world for Black girls like me.

To my love and resurrectionist, Deloris V. Brown,

Before I met you, I was certain that I was destined to move along this life alone. You made a liar out of me in the best possible way. Thank you for giving me space to safely be every aspect of myself. You have loved me through grief, depression, and this damn dissertation. You’ve provided a joy that is unparalleled by anything I have ever known. You are my cosmic partner; I have loved you in every lifetime. Thank you for challenging my faith and offering me perspectives that have been so important to my personal and academic development. However, most of all, thank you for providing me with the kind of peace at home that has been invaluable to my ability to put up a fight in these academic streets.

To my first real friend, my brother, Morris “Tre” Jenkins III,

I harbored the biggest fear months ahead of your birth; I was afraid that you
wouldn’t like me. To my delight, your entry into the world brought with it a sense of belonging that I hadn’t always felt. You are the greatest gift I have ever received; only your future nieces or nephews can take that from you. As adults, my love and regard for you has only intensified. There is no way I could have juggled grad school and caring for and then losing our father without you by my side. Thank you for proving yourself to be someone I can lean on; my love for you is unquantifiable.

My forever spirit-sister, Drina Harrison,

I’ll keep this short because I know that’s your preference. We been rockin’ together for over 30 years; that says all it needs to. Thank you for providing some of the most life-changing advice and perspectives I’ve ever been blessed with, whether I liked it or not at the time. You’re right up there with Morris Jenkins, in my book. I love you.

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Chapter I: The Research Problem

Statement of the Problem: School As A Site for Antiblackness

Admitted, But Not Welcome

If you walk into almost any high school in the United States with your ears first, you will hear Black culture. African American Vernacular English (AAVE) dances from wall to wall, finding its home in your head as you venture through the hallways, courtyards, and classrooms. Hip Hop, Afrobeats, and Afro-Caribbean music bumps rhythmically, passing between classes, the halls during lunch, and through the hum of earbuds during class time. When you open your eyes, you still see Black culture. It is in the clothes students wear and how they wear them; it is in gestures and mannerisms and hairstyles and the writing on the wall. And if you allow yourself to look closer, you will often notice that in the midst of all this Black culture co-existing throughout the building, there’s not a single Black person—or at most, very few—in sight.

The omnipresence of Black culture in the American school system is paradoxical considering its rootedness in antiblackness. As the saying goes, they love our rhythm, but ignore our blues. The landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954 may have marked the adjudication of school integration. However, as W.E.B Du Bois cautioned, when it came to meeting the specific socio-academic needs of Black communities, Black students would be “admitted, but not welcome” (Du Bois, 1935). K-12 schooling in the United States still runs on a system of separate and unequal; this is blatantly apparent across US high schools (Delpit, 2006; Kohli & Nevárez, 2017; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). American high schools staff low percentages of Black teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), creating an underwhelming presence of Black
professionals and figures of authority on school campuses. Despite being schooled under the same roof, course tracking has cultivated a new brand of school segregation for Black students who are often underrepresented in advanced courses (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2004) and overrepresented in special education classes (Vallas, 2009).

The sub-system of American schooling is an institutional cog in a larger system of structural racism, with antiblackness as a foundational pillar on which it stands (Brown University, 2015; Dumas, 2014; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Sojoyner, 2017). For Black Americans, this often means that school is where we learn that Black is intellectually inferior, Black culture is problematic, and Black beauty is non-existent. When this conditioning is left unchallenged, it manifests in ways that are destructive to the development of healthy Black identities (Ross et al., 2016; Rowley et al., 1998; Tatum, 2006; Tatum, 2017). This outcome is speculatively by design.

**Socio-Emotional Effects On Black Students**

The cost of school integration for Black students has been paid in the criminalization, adultification, invisibilization, and tokenization of their minds and bodies. For most Black students, school is a carceral space where they are subjected to multiple forms of policing (Jenkins & Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, 2024; Love, 2023). On the daily, Black students are kept from assembling en masse in school hallways, restricted from moving freely around campus, and admonished for illustrating acts of Black joy (Henning, 2021; Tatum, 2006). They are suspended and expelled from school at disproportionate rates (Bryan, 2020), often foisting them into the school-to-prison nexus (Becker et al., 2017; Love, 2023). Black girls, in particular, are often subject to hypersexualization and other forms of adultification (Epstein et al., 2017; Morris, 2018).
Stereotypes about Black women are affixed to Black school girls well before their teachers have ever met them, often resulting in verbal altercations with teachers who ultimately eject them from class. Statistically, Black girls garner the highest percentage of suspensions than any other student demographic (Annamma et al., 2019; Blake et al., 2011; Crenshaw et al., 2015). They are sent negative messages about their bodies through critiques about the clothes they wear and the style of their hair, often while watching girls who are not Black appropriate these styles without consequence (Farinde-Wu et al., 2022; Hill, 2021). In sum, Black students are experiencing spiritual arrest in school, regardless of their gender identity.

*Antiblackness in Suburban Schools*

While the manifestations of systemic antiblackness affect Black students across the country, it has unique underpinnings in suburban school settings. Suburban high schools characteristically enroll low numbers of Black students (Chapman, 2014), employ even lower numbers—if any—of Black teachers (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003), and provide little to no access to cultural programming or curriculum that is specific or meaningful to Black student populations (Gray et al., 2020). As a result, suburban school environments tend to have profound effects on identity development (Jones, 2018; Twine, 1996). For Black high school students in particular, this social conditioning takes place during a time when adolescents are coming into their socio-political awareness and navigating their intersectional identities.

Under the supervision of overwhelmingly white faculties and administrations, suburban Black students often experience the isolating effects of invisibilization. For example, when participating in advanced courses, they often experience ostracization
from their white teachers and fellow classmates (Kettler & Hurst, 2017), and are held at arm’s length when attempting to join extracurricular activities that are perceived as uncharacteristic for Black youth. These experiences are major contributors to the development of imposter syndrome (Edwards, 2019) and an early onset of Racial Battle Fatigue (Smith et al., 2011). Invisibilization is further compounded by the absence of space for Black students to comfortably exist undaunted by the threat of white gaze. Many suburban institutions do not house Black Student Unions (BSUs), and those that do are often facilitated by white faculty advisors. When suburban schools do engage in programming that centers Black culture—typically during Black History Month—the production is often described as performative or extractive of the labors of Black students and Black faculty (Tyler, 2016). In summary, the needs of suburban Black students are undervalued under the cultural gaze of the school.

Suburban Black students who are held in high regard often pay the price for their model minority status through the cost of tokenization. Black student athletes are accepted by suburban school communities to the extent that their athletic prowess can be commodified and their character can be controlled (Murty et al., 2014). The Black student academic, while praised, is treated like an anomaly to her race and is accepted because of her perceived foreignness from her culture (Tabron & Chambers, 2019). In 2021, I interviewed a group of former students, asking them to evaluate their high school experiences. On the topic of tokenism, one student who had attended a suburban high school in Atlanta offered that as a high-performing Black student, she felt that the love she received from her teachers and the school community was based on condition; she was aware—even then—that the reserve of her teachers’ love would not have gone to her
if she had not been a high achiever (Jenkins & Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, 2024). Similar to their cousins in urbanized districts, suburban Black students come to know school as a place where their authentic selves are unwelcome (Dumas, 2014, 2016).

As a high school teacher, I had a poster in the front of my classroom that read: “Love Black people the way you love Black culture.” It stood as a reminder to the non-Black students, faculty, and administration that the aesthetic value they placed on Black culture should not be acknowledged without also respecting the plight and the presence of the people who created it. This poster also stood as an affirmation for Black students in the school, reminding them that we have a right to declare our truths and demand respect, no matter how small in number we may be at any institution. The perpetuation of antiblackness across K-12 school sites is harmful to every student, not just Black youth. However, as the Black Lives Matter movement reminds us, when Black people are free, we will all be free. Until earnest efforts are made that exclusively center the socio-emotional wellbeing of Black youth, who they are perceived to be will be in constant conflict with who they actually are.

**Background and Need**

The majority of the scholarship on Black education in K-12 institutions focuses on urban schooling. This is for good reason, as Black students in urban environments are more vulnerable to experiencing the acute effects of systemic antiblackness (Anyon, 1997; Henig et al., 1999; Skiba, 2000). However, there is comparatively less scholarship dedicated to the ways in which structural antiblackness manifests itself in the lives of Black students in suburban schools (Chapman, 2017; Ferguson, 2002). This is understandable, as Black children growing up in upper-middle class neighborhoods are
commonly—atbeit, falsely—perceived as having their needs met due to the resources and opportunities they have access to. However, investing solely in this view trivializes and erases the social and academic experiences of Black suburban youth who frequently experience a combination of systemic and overt antiblackness. After all, resources do not cancel out racism. These experiences have stifling effects on their social and identity development. While significant research has been done to explore the experiences of Black students in predominantly white universities (Allen et al., 1991; Karkouti, 2016; Love, 1993; Smith, 2004), I illustrated the need for intense focus on what Black suburban students endure before they even enter the ivory tower.

It should not be forgotten that the movement that escorted Black children through crowds of screaming white racists into schools where they were then taught by another set of white racists was furthered in the name of equitable resources. The fight for desegregated schools rested in a lack of academic resources, not a lack of academic capacity of Black teachers and students (Hawkins, 1994; Hudson & Holmes, 1994). In fact, if we (re)examine the reflective narratives of some of the first Black students to be schooled in predominantly white spaces post Brown, we are (re)minded of the community care and racial uplift Black folks lost in school integration (Fairclough, 2007; Foster, 1998; Shircliffe, 2001; Siddle-Walker, 1993b; Walker, 2000). We went from schools that, as shabby as they may have been, were rich in love and pedagogies that reinforced a positive sense of self to schools that, as well resourced as they were, maintained a direct antagonism against Black youth in an effort to obscure their intellectual potential. Over time, “we [have] conflated our humanization with matriculation in school” (Marie & Watson, 2020, p. 15) rather than investing in a holistic acceptance of our beautiful Black
selves. In this light, it becomes easier to see the phenomenological parallels between the school experiences of Black suburban youth of today and the unintended consequences experienced by Blacks students of yesteryear.

As Black student populations continue to grow in suburban school districts (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2020; Fry, 2009), it becomes increasingly important to investigate their phenomenological experiences. More scholarship is required to determine the socio-emotional and academic tax that is placed on Black high school students in overwhelmingly white and non-Black spaces. Such scholarship helps to better understand the lack of preparedness of suburban faculties and administrations in meeting the racially specific needs of Black students. This information is invaluable in determining what provisions are necessary to ensure Black students are schooled in environments that foster and encourage healthy identity development.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine how the provision of racial affinity spaces would impact the schooling experiences of Black students attending high school in the suburbs. More specifically, this study highlighted the work of Black educators who utilized a pedagogy of care and humanization to subvert the antiblack messaging students received from interactions with overwhelmingly white faculties and non-Black peers. Through my role as Program Director of a Black woman-founded-and-run education non-profit in Northern California, I unpacked the deleterious effects that suburban schooling can have on Black student identity development and juxtaposed this with the establishment of a positive sense of self that was attained when Black youth participated in Black affinity spaces. This study
illustrated a (re)doing of the Black student spirit through the external work of Black educators who operated outside the carceral, antiblack mechanisms of systemic schooling (Sojoyner, 2017). Ultimately, this study revealed the perceived and observed impact that consistent access to Politically Relevant (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999) curriculum and community programming can have on Black students' self and community perception.

**Research Questions**

This qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What school conditions necessitate the presence of BLES spaces in suburban K-12 schools?
2. What are the characteristics of BLES spaces?
3. What are the challenges to creating and maintaining BLES spaces in suburban school settings?
4. What is the perceived impact of BLES spaces in suburban schools?

**BLESsing Ourselves: A Conceptual Framework**

Black, Liberatory, and Educationally Subversive (BLES) spaces are environments wherein Black educators and caretakers engage in the freedom of transmitting messages of racial uplift to Black youth, and Black youth are free to emote and demonstrate their ways of knowing, despite the permanence of systemic antiblackness. Because we are a parade of shades and textures, “Black” refers to all peoples of the African diaspora and is inclusive of Black people who are biracial (or representative of multiple races and ethnicities) and those who identify, but may not phenotypically present, as Black. In the context of BLES spaces, “liberatory” is most closely synonymous with the ease, comfort, and safety that affinity spaces provide (Mosley, 2018; Pour-Khorshid, 2018a; Volpe &
Jones, 2023). For Black people, these are spaces where we can collectively put our guard down and engage in a process of inquiry and self-expression without the pressures of white gaze that often require us to suppress or over-explain our thoughts and feelings. Lastly, “educational subversion” acknowledges that the education system is foundationally at odds with the development and furtherance of Black intellectual thought. Subversion implies a conscious awareness of the susceptibility to harm that educators in BLES spaces tactfully fly in the face of. The operation of a BLES space rests on the presence of three tenets: (1) Politically Relevant Black teachers (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999), (2) a network of Black resources, and (3) a fluid functionality, as BLES spaces can take form in schools, at home, in churches, at recreation centers, and anywhere else Black people commune.

Justification For A New Conceptual Framework

We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that “homeplace,” most often created and kept by Black women, that we had the opportunity to grow and develop, to nurture our spirits. (hooks, 2014, p.42)

BLES spaces are predicated on the acknowledgement that the social structure of schooling is dependent on the dehumanization of Black people (Dumas, 2014; Gordon, 2022; Woodson, 2020). These spaces are run with the understanding that the slave/master dynamic (Hartman, 2008) that existed between enslaved African Americans and their white enslavers, prevails within the contemporary context of the school system. As Hartman (2022/1997) put it:
The pedagogical injunctions to obedience and servility cast the freed in a world starkly similar to the one in which they had suffered under slavery. On the one hand, these texts heralded the natural rights of all men; and on the other, they advised blacks to refrain from enjoying this newly conferred equality. Despite proclamations about the whip's demise, emergent forms of involuntary servitude, the coercive control of black labor, the repressive instrumentality of the law, and the social intercourse of everyday life revealed the entanglements of slavery and freedom. (p. 151)

Just as emancipation did not change Black people’s status as objectified beings, having access to the “master’s” schoolhouse via desegregation did not magically change our positionality from inferiorized subjects to respected citizens. Within the structurally racist institution of education, Black students are the most likely to experience any combination of criminalization, adultification, invisiblization, ostracization, and tokenization in school settings (Bryan, 2020; Epstein et al., 2017). These conditions indicate the need for divestment—not reform—from a system that reflects a “longue duree of inevitable and widespread Black suffering” (Marie & Watson, 2020, p. 21).

BLES spaces most closely mirror kihana miraya ross’ description of fugitive space in Black education that posits fugitivity as being “in direct response to the rampant anti-blackness in the larger world, and in US public schools; it may serve as makeshift land, and provide makeshift citizenship to people whose humanity is consistently made impossible on the outside” (ross, 2020, p. 51). These spaces exist not only to provide Black teachers and students with a place to practice collective resistance, but also to provide a space where Black people can simply just be (Gordon, 2022). As an extension
of ross’ depiction, BLES environments are spaces of refuge wherein Black students are able to safely build an identity that is antithetical to the inferiorized identities imposed upon them through systemic white gaze. In this way, Black youth are able to develop a sense of self that feels less inclined to shrink or shapeshift into a whitewashed version of themselves (Givens, 2020).

For our enslaved ancestors, the fugitive trail was an escape from the systemic antiblack institution that dictated their existence; but it was hardly the destination. In the spirit of the fugitive trail, BLES spaces do not represent a final destination—as to mark a destination would assume that such a location of escape exists for Black people in an antiblack world—but rather, a vehicle through which we find ways to safely weather the storm. The following section unpacks the elements of this vehicle and their mechanisms towards educational liberation.

**Unpacking the Tenets**

**Politically Relevant Black Teachers.** Black teachers who develop and maintain BLES classrooms do so through a lens of Political Relevance. Politically Relevant Black teachers utilize their socio-political understanding of antiblackness and how it operates in education to inform their curriculum and pedagogy (Beaupre-Lafontant, 1999). More specifically, these teachers operate under “an everyday awareness that we are still very much in the echo of the historical disaster of chattel slavery” (Marie & Watson, 2020, p. 31). During segregation, Black teachers were utilizing Politically Relevant Teaching (PRT) when they clandestinely taught lessons that resisted the state-sanctioned curriculum that primed Black youth for service industries. In doing so, these teachers created a school culture that instilled a sense of self-determination and worthiness in
Black youth to occupy spaces that their segregated society barred them from entering (Fairclough, 2007; Foster, 1998; Shircliffe, 2001; Walker, 2005). Black teachers in the segregated South leveraged their social capital in the communities in which they taught and lived to push Black students to see themselves beyond the second-class citizenship imposed upon them by white supremacy culture (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). Today, Black teachers are still implementing Political Relevance in response to contemporary manifestations of white supremacy culture in schools that have been furthered by neoliberal school reform (Love, 2023). We are breathing life into our students through abolitionist, hip hop, and fugitive pedagogies (Love, 2019; Adjapong & Emdin, 2015; Givens, 2021), to name a few. Unable to dismantle the mechanisms of the existing school system, Politically Relevant Black teachers engage in insulated praxis (Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, 2024) to disrupt from within the liminal and outer spaces of schools (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1997).

My choice to center Politically Relevant Pedagogy over Culturally Relevant Pedagogy was intentional. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy supports students in affirming and appreciating their culture of origin (Ladson-Billings, 1995), while Politically Relevant Pedagogy supports students’ understanding of their positionality within the context of historical oppression. I do not suggest that Cultural Relevance should be replaced with Political Relevance; however, centering PRT draws an important distinction amongst Black teachers. Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant alluded to this while unpacking her own choice to center Political Relevance over Culturally Relevant Teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995):

Discussions of “culture” as a reference for teaching can gloss over the complexity
of class, gender, and ethnic diversity that exists within any “cultural” group.

However, centering on the political draws attention to the active decision making and commitments of an educator to uphold certain viewpoints (e.g., hegemonic or oppositional; oppressive or democratic) that transcend culture. (p. 718)

Decentering culture acknowledges that being Black is not a prerequisite for holding BLES spaces. In other words, just because a teacher is Black does not necessarily mean they are prepared to cultivate and maintain liberatory pedagogies. In fact, I am aware that there are several Black teachers in the profession who uphold white supremacy culture in their classrooms and contribute to making school life impossible for Black students. After all, we are not a monolith. Removing culture from the conversation acknowledges that just because Black people can share a culture, it does not guarantee that we share a set of politics. This is by no means a shade to Black teachers who stick to the letter of the district-mandated curriculum and those who still hold stock in respectability politics (Lee & Hicken, 2016). As Frank Wilderson pointed out in the concluding chapter of *Afropessimism*, as Black people, we are all playing our positions and scratching out ways to survive in the face of an antiblack, white supremacist society (Wilderson, 2020). As Black educators, we undeniably share a culture of oppression. However, the ways we process and react to this oppression—professionally and personally—is a matter of political consciousness.

**A Network of Black Resources.** One specific caveat of BLES spaces is rooted in the African American tradition of making a way when adequate resources are limited or denied. Black teachers have historically leaned into community to close the provision gaps that barred Black students from quality education. During segregation when
southern school districts delayed or denied necessary resources for Black schools, Black educators worked within their community networks to create bussing systems, perform building repairs, and construct annexes to accommodate growing student populations. In fact, it was understood between Black educators and white school boards that in order to make any requests for resources on behalf of Black schools, Black educators would have to prove that they already exhausted their own resources (Fairclough, 2001; Walker, 1998, 2000, 2001). Today, Black teachers are still making provisions in school districts where the specific needs of Black students and teachers are still being pushed to the periphery. Black teachers have been known to exhaust their personal funds and time to provide culturally specific resources that are unsupported by the district. Black education organizations that operate outside of institutional space often rely on the volunteered labor of relatives and community members, especially in startup spaces, as they work to grow funding. This is especially true for Black women-led organizations, as they disproportionately experience roadblocks to maintenance and expansion (Younge, 2021).

**A Fluid Functionality.** As a fugitive project, BLES spaces are created with the understanding that the potential for recapture is always within possibility. As history dictates, having secure networks of resources and strong political leadership has not safeguarded Black Americans from local and systemic acts of antiblackness. For Black educators intent on speaking truth and giving life to Black students, learning how to creatively navigate oppressive climates has been crucial. Like our fugitive ancestors before us, we embrace the technique of shapeshifting to create environments of care and liberation that are both reactionary to and defensive against the antiblack climate of the time periods in which we live (ross, 2020). In their illustration of Apocalyptic Education,
Marie and Watson (2020) liken fluid functionality to the survival instincts of moss:

Apocalyptic Education invites educators to align our methods and aims as a sort of moss that grows on top of the many statues of dead colonizers and slavers that dot the landscape of the plantation known as the United States. When looking at different structures covered in moss, it does not always register that they are in fact alive. However, mosses, small flowerless plants found throughout the world, are relevant to our Apocalyptic Education efforts in that they retain and dispense water (the lifeblood of the planet). As indicators of pollution, they refuse to build in toxic environments, and they can stop their metabolism almost completely during the hot periods of the year when water is not available… move with the rhythms of the Earth and overgrow the traps of modernity…to be present in the world as it really is, not the world as it has been constructed to be. (p. 38)

Like our foremothers, we finesse the art of gettin’ it how we live; we create mechanisms that are not impermeable to the violence of neoliberal and conservative school reform, but are adaptable to political landscapes in order to create new sites for nourishing the spirits of Black youth. Like a vehicle, BLES spaces move and match the terrain of the time. Take away our car, and we come back in a spaceship. Take away the funding necessary to keep our programs running, and we will freedom dream a new initiative to serve our youth. As always, we gon’ find a way; what may ultimately be made impossible in body remains alive in spirit. This is how we maintain our lives in the midst of a social death. The next section explores the theoretical frameworks from which BLES draws.
Supporting Frameworks

BlackCrit

BlackCrit not only positions white supremacy as a tool of systemic antiblackness, but also engages in reimagining how Blackness is conceptualized. BlackCrit draws its influence from Critical Race Theory (CRT), a legal theory coined by scholar Derrick Bell that focused on the relationship between legal outcomes and the social conceptions of race (Bell, 1980; Harris, 1993; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 1998). The theory was later applied to Critical Race Studies in Education (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2020; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT consists of five main components: (1) the idea that racism is normal; (2) the power of counter-storytelling; (3) the concept of interest convergence; (4) the idea of race as a social construct; and (5) the notion that whites were the true beneficiaries of the civil rights movement (Bell, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 2020).

BlackCrit rests on the foundational understanding that (1) antiblackness is central to how we conceptualize human life and relationships (2) Blackness is oppositional to neoliberal initiatives, and (3) the possibility for Black liberatory fantasy is crucial (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Black teachers who hold BLES spaces see beyond the smoke and mirrors of district and schoolwide diversity initiatives, recognizing them as distractions to larger issues that are often rooted in antiblackness. Instead of engaging in these distractions, we create liberatory fantasies of our own, reshaping the school experience not only for Black students, but for ourselves, too. Through a BlackCrit lens, we unpack the ways in which Black teachers use a combination of curriculum, healing, and community outreach to turn classrooms into safe spaces for resistance and liberation.
**Black Feminist Thought**

As a theoretical tool, Black Feminist Thought aims to empower Black women through a critical investigation of our intersectional oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill-Collins, 2000). Black Feminist Thought is grounded in the dialectical relationship between oppression and activism, the understanding that Black womens’ relationship with oppression is not monolithic, the connection between individual and collective group experience, the contributions of Black women intellectuals, a fluid sensibility, and relationships with other social justice projects (Hill-Collins, 2000). Black women educators have spearheaded and been integral to Black power movements, despite having our contributions often relegated to the shadows. Today, we make up over three quarters of this nation’s Black teachers and are leading theorists in the field. Black women teachers, in particular, have a noted history of activism, often utilizing their lifeworld experiences to bring equity into the school system and their individual classrooms (Evans-Winters & Love, 2015; Siddle Walker, 1996). In the context of Black fugitive space, we stand in the tradition of Black women educators who taught in the face of disrespect (Isoke, 2013), yet utilized their intellect to critically analyze their oppression (Hill-Collins, 2000) and offer their anger as a means to make change (Lorde, 2012/1984).

**Fugitive Pedagogy**

As explained by Givens (2020), “Fugitive connotes the dual image of one who escapes enslavement or jailed confinement which justifies one’s capture and even death at the hands of law enforcement” (p. 2). For Black people in the afterlife of slavery, the word “justify” signals our dehumanization; the established rationale for our death and recapture is entirely out of our hands. When self-appointed sensemakers are committed to
making nonsensical laws and codes that disregard the blatant humanity of Black people, flight becomes the only option for those who can no longer bear it.

When Black education is viewed as a fugitive project, the same can be understood. Given the antagonistic treatment of Blackness in the institution of schooling and the inability of individual Black teachers to affect systemic change, it follows that Black teachers would find fugitive methods to impart to Black students messages of racial uplift, from the margins. The presence of BLES classrooms creates a safe space of refuge wherein “Black teachers support students in developing an oppositional gaze, exposing them to critical narratives about black life and culture and helping them understand its relationship to their own family as well as black people’s struggle for education” (Givens, 2020, p. 219). Thus, we employ a Black fugitive logic that chooses disengagement over school reform, having acknowledged that reforms have been further harmful to the social, emotional, and academic development of Black youth (Love, 2023; Sojoyner, 2017).

*Where Afropessimism & Afrofuturism Meet*

I envision weightlessness as the ability for Black people to dream—exist, float—differently without the weighted existence caused by hegemonic institutions. (Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, 2024, p. 2)

I offer a non-competing view of Afropessimism and Afrofuturism to posit the possibility of one to act as the catalyst for the other, as both are essential to understanding the mechanisms of BLES spaces. Afropessimism rests on an understanding of the permanence of societal antagonism against Black people in the broader context of the
world (Wilderson, 2020), providing a sobering reckoning with the fixedness of white supremacy. However, as Gordon (2022) advised,

This is not to say that nothing has changed, but rather, as the theory suggests, that the fundamental relationship between Blackness and humanity continues to be structured by a similar, if not the same, conceptualization that undergirds the Master/Slave relation. (p. 3)

Several noted scholars have criticized the employment of an afropessimist lens, often rationalizing that such a lens produces a deeper divide between Black communities and other communities of color. Others criticize Afropessimism for its potential to push Black communities into inaction due to the perceived permanence of antiblackness (Akademie der Künste, 2018; Olaloku-Teriba, 2018; Trinity Social Justice Institute, 2022). However, “the long-standing posture of Afro-pessimism is not one of ambivalence or nihilism. It is actually a joy in the currently unthinkable: the undoing/destruction of a world predicated on Black undoing.” (Marie & Watson, 2020, p. 33)

In the context of BLES space, Afropessimism does not provide a defeatist view of Black education, but rather engages us in the racial realism (Bell, 1991) that the institution of schooling is inherently antiblack and is in direct opposition to the development of Black youth. In this light, we understand Afropessimism not as a claim of futility, but rather, as an implication for the necessity of afrofuturistic ideation. An afropessimistic lens wakes Black educators up to the sobering fact that despite the academic successes we may achieve, schooling has contributed to the “undoing” of Black youth development (Marie & Watson, 2020). Sojoyner (2017) posited that as a tool of
social reproduction, this institutional “undoing” is intentional as a means to prevent or control Black rebellion against a system that declares us not human.

In a BLESsed environment, Afropessimism and Afrofuturism meet at the nexus of racial realism and liberatory fantasy. Through their fusing, we acknowledge the institution of schooling as a dead thing, and rather than continuing to adorn flowers on a corpse through fruitless reforms, we collectively come up off the “hopium” and develop pathways to divest from schooling for the sake of Black futurities (Marie & Watson, 2020). BLES incorporates an afrofuturist lens in order to create a retreat from the permanence of systemic antiblackness that Afropessimism informs.

Black fugitivity provides the passageway through which we retreat from the “enclosed spaces” in schools that are antithetical and adversarial to our humanity (Sojoyner, 2017). In this way, we can begin to freedom dream what is possible on the other side of institutional antiblack racism. Through a (re)membrance of the humanity we enjoyed in our indigenous pasts (Brooks et al., 2023; Dillard, 2021), we construct a hereafter, right now, that defies the social deaths we are living. In this new world, we get to live out the fugitive’s marked destination. Obaizamomwan-Hamilton (2024) described this caveat of Black teacher place-making as the transition from “freedom from” to “freedom to”:

Abolition, at times, centers on creating systems focused on attaining freedom from things, and with insulated praxis, we can extend that and center our work on the freedom to, not just freedom from. We can make the conscious decision to stop struggling with the neoliberal frameworks of education and create a space without poisonous soil to constrict our growth. A space where microaggressions
and respectability politics are checked well before students get to the door. A space where Black people are given humanity and become the centerpiece of knowledge building. Insulated praxis removes the heaviness so students and teachers have the space to learn, create, and just be. (p.12)

When Black educators recognize the stark realities of systemic antiblackness in schooling and engage in a reflection on how the institution has contributed to our own “undoing,” we are free to develop “cognitive prosthetics” wherein we live out the liberatory fantasies of our fugitive ancestors (Brooks et al., 2023) and create learning environments where Black communities are held up in legacy rather than contempt.

**BLESSing Ourselves - Conclusion**

The construction of spaces that are Black, Liberatory, and Educationally Subversive are crucial to bringing up Black children who do not fall sway to societal determinations of their identities. In school systems where white and non-Black faculties and administrations disregard the needs of Black students, both willfully and neglectfully, BLESsed spaces can be a force to apply pressure in a way that does not push for school reform, but rather, a school departure. In a moment in time when Black families are disinvesting in the promise of public schooling, we have an opportunity to invest in educators and programs that work exclusively towards the advancement of Black children.

**Limitations & Delimitations**

Despite the year-long work that went into creating programming for Black students and families, community interactions were limited to bi-weekly workshops with students and seasonal family events. Because of this limited access, any information
learned regarding incidents of antiblack racism on campus were received second-hand; I relied on the accounts of students and school leaders. Additionally, while there are programs throughout the country that are likely engaged in similar work, this study focused on a single Northern California non-profit organization as an example of how BLES space is created and maintained. While some parallels may exist, this work took place in a suburban school district and therefore was not indicative of the school experiences of Black students in urban settings.

The student demographic in this study was centered on high school-aged youth and does not capture the experiences of Black suburban youth in primary and middle grades. Student participation in the end-of-year community circle sessions was voluntary, therefore, it is possible that student testimony only reflected the experience of students who viewed the program favorably. Consequently, my positionality as not only the researcher in this study, but also the lead educator who had the benefit of building relationships with the students could also affect student responses.

**Definition of Terms**

**Afrofuturism:** The futuristic placement of Black people in worlds where their humanity is made possible (Sojoyner, 2017).

**Afropessimism:** The fundamental understanding that the existence of Black people as human beings is antithetical to the social formation of western society (Wilderson, 2020).

**Antiblackness:** Antagonism towards Black people, their values, and their beliefs, both individually and systemically.
**Black Joy:** An unchecked, unapologetic display of happiness. While joy is a phenomenon that can be experienced by all people, the expression of joy amongst Black people is an act of resistance, as we have historically been policed for such expressions.

**Black Liberatory Educational Subversion (BLES):** A theoretical concept that codifies the liberatory practices of Black educators who develop environments wherein they are free to transmit messages of racial uplift to Black students, and Black students are then free to emote and demonstrate their ways of knowing despite the permanence of systemic antiblackness.

**Black Teacher/ Student:** In the context of this study, a Black teacher is an educator of African American descent who has been brought up and conditioned within the landscape of the hegemonic system of white supremacy in the United States; this includes biracial teachers who identify as Black. This term is extended to teachers who are the children of African and Afro-Caribbean immigrants who were born and/or raised in the United States.

**Fugitive Pedagogy:** The African American practice of teaching and learning as an act of subversion. It represents the covert pursuit of Black education as a means of racial uplift in the face of systemic antiblack racism (Givens, 2020).

**Insulated Praxis:** Coined by emerging scholar, Eghosa Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, this praxis works to disrupt institutional, educational oppression and empower Black communities by focusing inward (Obaizamomwan-Hamilton, 2024).

**Politically Relevant Black Teachers:** Black teachers who utilize their socio-political understanding of antiblackness and how it operates in education to inform their curriculum and pedagogy (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999).
Racial Affinity Space: Spaces dedicated to racial exclusivity for the sake of collective community, typically among BIPOC folk. (Mosely, 2018; Pour-Khorshid, 2018a, 2018b)

Racial Battle Fatigue: A term coined to describe the effect that the combined stresses of experiencing microaggressions and systemic antiblackness have on Black bodies and minds (Smith, 2004).

Social Surthrival: Social Surthrival nods to the Indigenous American practice of “survivance” that not only reclaims indigenous narratives, but further engages continued storytelling for the sake of preserving history under a native gaze (Vizenor, 1999). In that vision, Social Surthrival is a reclaiming of the Black American spirit; a means of reconditioning so that we may navigate the world with a strong sense of our Black selves.

*Intentional Lowercasing of white-Identifying Terms:* Similar to Assata Shakur’s spelling of “Amerika” in her autobiography (Shakur et al., 1987), the lowercasing of white-identifying terms is intentional and is done as a form of protest. Doing so is a metaphorical method of centering whiteness that oversees and overwhelms the structuring and execution of the US education system.

Significance of the Study

This study aimed to contribute to the existing research on the Black fugitive space in education. It provided an illustration of the ways in which BLES spaces are created and experienced by Black students within predominantly white institutions. Additionally, this study added to the scholarship on Black education research that draws connections between the liberatory practices of Black educators in the past towards the practices of Black educators today. The research presented herein demonstrated what is possible for the futurity of Black education despite the antiblack foundation of schooling.
Chapter II: Literature Review | A Legacy of Fugitivity

This literature review is a chronological exploration of the ways in which Black educators have created fugitive space in an effort to subvert systemic antiblackness. This chapter includes scholarship that centered three critical time periods in Black education in the United States. First, I explored the subversive tactics of the first Black educators in the United States; the enslaved men, women, and children who found clandestine methods to gain literacy and passed it on, despite the risks. Second, I unpacked literature that focused on the continued legacy of fugitivity in Black education during the era of segregation and Jim Crow law. While some of the scholarship that centers this time period discussed the efforts of Black educators in the north, I focused mainly on the southern efforts, since these provided the most extreme depictions of the challenges set by systemic antiblackness. Next, I explored scholarship that unpacked the unintended consequences of the Brown v. Board of Education decision. This review of literature closes with scholarship that focuses on the contemporary impacts of the Brown decision, and the imposition of interest convergence as a utility in Black educational and social advancement. Connecting this scholarship creates and highlights a timeline that reveals the true legacy of Black people’s pursuit of safe spaces to educate their communities.

Part I: Black Education During Enslavement

Slave Codes & Anti-Literacy Laws

In her article, “Reading for the enslaved, writing for the free: Reflections on liberty and literacy,” Jennifer Monaghan (1998) contextualized literacy during enslavement in the United States through the acquisition of power. Her scholarship drew linkages between literacy and power and illustrated how the definition of literacy evolved
in order to uphold white power structures through the eras of colonialism and enslavement. In the 18th century, Black literacy was not only acceptable, it was used as a tool to ensure docility among the enslaved African Americans through the adoption of Christianity. Literacy and Christian indoctrination went hand-in-hand; enslaved African Americans were taught to read and transcribe literature from the Bible (Cornelius, 1983; Monaghan, 1998). Back then, having enslaved people who were literate was considered valuable. Literacy by way of Christian indoctrination ensured that enslaved folk were in moral accord with their enslavers, thus ensuring physical and mental control over enslaved Black people while absolving white enslavers from moral guilt. However, what was not bargained for was that through scripture reading, enslaved African Americans would eventually come to associate religious salvation with personal freedom. In the eyes of European enslavers, literacy acquisition would then shift the balance of power, turning an enslaved literate from an asset to a severe liability. This sparked the initial rendering of literacy as illegal for Black bodies: “When slaveholders objected that their slaves [sic] believed that baptism conferred freedom, Christians [sic] were among those who were most eager to get legislation passed that explicitly denied any relationship between the two” (Monaghan, 1998, p. 326).

The imposition of literacy laws and the eventual outlawing of literacy during the colonial and antebellum periods against Black people—both free and enslaved—was done out of white enslaver’s fear of the evolving conceptions of freedom amongst the enslaved. Several researchers offered scholarship around what motivated this shift in the perceived acceptability of literacy. Heather Williams (2009) emphasized the link between literacy and rebellion, describing the construction and revision of anti-literacy laws that
were used to keep Black people from learning of abolitionist efforts that would jeopardize enslavement as an institution. Williams reminded us that anti-literacy and education against Black people existed in the North as well, as evidenced by the shutting down of a proposal for the construction of the first Black university in Connecticut (Cropper, 2022) and the subsequent mob destruction of an all-girls school for Black children (Williams, 2009). Monaghan’s work echoed the fear invoked in white enslavers over the passing word of mouth about rebellions, most notably the Stono Rebellion and the feats of Nat Turner (Gray & Turner, 1831; Greenberg, 2004; French, 2004; Smith, 2001; Smith, 2019/2005; Thornton, 1991), and the mounting distribution of abolitionist texts. As a result, anti-literacy laws restricted Black mobility; for example, laws were created around “illegal assembly” of Black bodies unless such assemblies were overseen by white custodians (Monaghan, 1998).

Mitchell’s 2008 work corroborated the legal manifestation of the surmounting fears of white enslavers. Utilizing archived narratives of the formerly enslaved, she unpacked the brutalities of slavery and the evolution of laws that supported the practice:

[An] 1804 [law] prohibited all nighttime religious meetings; all blacks, free or slaves [sic], denied the right to hear colored preachers or ministers. [By] 1819 [a law] prohibited slaves [sic] and freedmen from meeting for educational purposes. [And in] 1831 [laws] prohibited unlawful assembly at any school, house, church meetinghouse or other places for the purposes of reading, writing, in the day or night. (p. 85)

Mitchell’s work also unpacked the brutal consequences of breaching any of the laws put in place to discourage Black literacy. In her piece, “Self-emancipation and Slavery: An
Examination of the African American’s Quest for Literacy and Freedom,” Mitchell outlined the range of punishments that breach of anti-literacy laws inspired. Enslaved African Americans who were caught engaging in reading or writing would be subject to mild consequences, such as loss of privileges, to more violent punishments that included whippings, bodily mutilation—most commonly, the removal of hands and fingers—and death (Mitchell, 2008). However, so much policing over the right to literacy had the opposite effect on enslaved Black people than what enslavers intended; it actually stoked a flame to double down on their attempts at becoming literate, despite the deadly risks.

The next section highlights scholarship that unpacked the clandestine methods enslaved African Americans developed to attain literacy under the threat of Black anti-literacy laws.

**Fugitive Literacy & Resistance**

Despite the threat of brutality, enslaved Black people developed multiple fugitive attempts at literacy. Williams (2009) documented the concealed spirit of Black resistance in the effort to attain literacy during enslavement. In the introductory chapter of Self Taught, Williams traced the development of Black education from enslavement to emancipation, utilizing both known and lesser-known narratives of enslaved African Americans’ fight for literacy and the opposition white enslavers held against it. Her work discussed the ways in which the enslaved acquired literacy through clandestine activities; these methods included eavesdropping, taking advantage of the ignorance of their young white charges’ for reading lessons, attending secret schools taught by literate slaves after hours, and taking advantage of the absence of white people on the plantation on the Sabbath (Williams, 2009). Similar to Monaghan, Williams emphasized the link between
literacy and rebellion, describing the construction and revision of anti-literacy laws. Additionally, Williams’ work illuminated the work and spirit of Black abolitionists, a subgroup who are often left out of history’s retelling. In fact, Williams opened her book with a review of literature that pointed to the ways in which historians have written Black abolitionists out of their own story, owing all—or most—progress to the “good white folk” who helped, but were not sole agitators, in the fight to end slavery.

Gundaker (2007) illustrated the hidden nature of Black literacy during enslavement to comparatively highlight the ways in which it differed from western education. Her work used excerpts from the narratives of enslaved Black people to discuss the hidden nature of Black education during enslavement. In doing so, she pointed to three practices in particular: (1) invisible modes of schooling and efforts to orchestrate school-like activities during the normal course of slave work; (2) not so hidden literacy acquisition; and (3) expressive practices that included educational demonstrations that remained largely invisible to outsiders (Gundaker, 2007). Like Monaghan and Williams, Gundaker posited fear of Black resistance as the basis for outlawing Black education, but also explored white entitlement and the refusal to see enslaved African Americans as intellectual beings as an unintended aid to the advancement of Black literacy. Gundaker (2007) explained,

Even when whites barred blacks from religious instruction, schooling or literacy, they encouraged dancing, singing and storytelling during the enslaved’s time off, fallaciously assuming that these supposedly childlike people would not be able to entertain and resist at the same time. They also left much of the care of white children to [B]lack caretakers and companions who in turn carefully gathered
snippets of school knowledge from their charges. (p. 1594)

By describing practices such as Black children’s recitation of the alphabet at funerals and the use of drums and other methods of learning that were not easily identifiable as modes of education, Gundaker’s work illustrated how education was acquired via the quotidian activities of enslaved Black people’s lives. Additionally, by discussing the hidden literacy practices of enslaved folk, Gundaker relied on narratives and research that linked clandestine education tactics to several African tribal communities, particularly those located in West Africa. Most interestingly, Gundaker’s research suggested a form of Double Consciousness (Du Bois, 2018/1903; Gilroy, 1993) that was being employed by enslaved Africans; they constructed a method of literacy acquisition that was accomplished in plain sight, yet indistinguishable to their enslavers who lacked the contextual lens of the oppressed. Since enslaved Black people were taxed with theorizing their own way of life within the power constructs that dictated their everyday lives, they were able to fugitively carve a secret loophole towards their own literacy (Gundaker, 2007). Through this framing of Black education, Gundaker suggested that the pedagogy employed by enslaved African Americans—a fugitive pedagogy—was far more complex than the two-dimensional, white-centered education system that had often been adhered to into the present day.

Givens (2020) connected the fugitive literacy practices of the enslaved to the pedagogical persona of Black education. He posited that many of the liberatory practices of Black educators can be traced to the resistance of our enslaved ancestors. His work positioned Black teachers and school leaders who subvert systemic antiblackness as outsiders who utilize a pedagogy of flight and resistance to escape the hegemonic
pressures of the school environment. Givens’ work differed slightly in his focus on contemporary models of Black education in the context of our ancestral models in order to:

Suggest that there continues to be an under theorization of [B]lack teacher pedagogies, their ideological orientations to educating black students, and especially what happened (in a quotidian sense) in the private spaces of their classrooms. In clarifying the subversive demands of black education and the liminal space black teachers were relegated to, we gain more nuance regarding their interior lives as stoker's of black Freedom dreams even while operating in the confinement of the American School. (Givens, 2020, p. 26)

Givens situated Fugitive Pedagogy as a right of legacy for Black educators. Like our fugitive ancestors, we too utilize a Double Consciousness that informs the ways in which we utilize curriculum and pedagogy to accommodate for the racialized experiences of Black communities. The next section centers Black literacy resistance through the tool of Critical Literacy.

**Resistance via Critical Literacy**

A nuanced approach to resisting not only the prohibition of literacy, but the daily brutalities of enslaved life was through the development of what Cutter (1996) referred to as Critical Literacy. As Cutter described, Critical Literacy involves an understanding of how language practices have functioned to keep the oppressed disempowered, imprisoned in a "culture of silence." As it relates to enslavement, Critical Literacy reflects the enslaved person’s understanding of the ways in which literacy has been used to disenfranchise their right to humanity, while also utilizing the language of enslavers to
craft a way out of their oppressed states (Cutter, 1996). However, “Critical Literacy also involves an attempt to transform the structures of oppression: not simply to replicate the master's house, but to dismantle it” (Cutter, 1996, p. 210). By “reading the world,” the oppressed challenge and transform oppressive systems (Freire & Macedo, 2005).

Cutter centered the narrative of formerly enslaved Harriet Jacobs to illustrate how Critical Literacy is required to dismantle systems of oppression. Through Jacob’s narrative, Cutter engaged us in the concept of literacy as a double-edged sword; the literacy that enslaved Black people acquired to access freedom was the same language that was used to enslave them. As an enslaved Black woman who gained literacy, Jacobs learned that acquiring the ability to read and write did not change her condition as an enslaved woman. In actuality, her literacy caused her to be hyper aware of her position. While she credited her white mistress for teaching her literacy skills through bible readings, Jacobs was critical of the hypocrisy behind the written word in the bible and the events that were played out in her everyday life as a slave. Paradoxically, Jacobs named her literacy as a catalyst for receiving even harsher and insidious punishment. For example, when the owner of the plantation where she was enslaved began to make sexual advances on Jacobs, he took advantage of her literacy as a means to further abuse her, sending her crude letters that described his sexual fantasies about her. Jacobs’ literacy did not save her from the tortures of slavery; in some cases, it only intensified it. However, her grasp of Critical Literacy gave her the ability to “read the word and read the world” (Freire, 1995) in a way that challenged her to seek a new way to self emancipate.

Cutter contrasted the narrative experiences expressed by Harriet Jacobs with those expressed with the more widely known narrative experiences of Frederick Douglass to
further illuminate the difference between literacy and Critical Literacy. She analyzed their narrative styles to suggest their relationship with white authoritarianism. In Douglass’ case, Cutter (1996) posited that his narrative reflected an adherence and desire to attain white authoritarianism. She wrote:

Douglass' own voice is sacrificed in his search for mastery, in his appropriation of the master's discourse. The text ends, in fact, in a babel of heteroglossia-in an eruption of contradictory voices. Douglass does maintain his authority over the text, but he does not find a way to use his literacy as a means of resistance to the dominant discourse and the dominant social order around him. (p. 212)

In other words, Douglass’ emulation of the white form and function of language suggests his wish to covet the power that white men of means assume. Therefore, even when his freedom was achieved, the limitation of Douglass’ newfound freedom rested in his adoption of—and apparent subscription to—the language of white male patriarchy. In contrast, Jacobs’ narrative refused white authoritarianism in its form and function; Cutter (1996) wrote:

Jacobs understands that to use the master's discourse is to remain trapped within it; in Freire's and Macedo's terms, she understands that "to continue to use the language of the colonizer is to continue to provide manipulative strategies that support the maintenance of cultural domination". Rather than trying to control the duplicitous and coercive qualities of language, as Douglass does (to manipulate the manipulative quality of language, we might say), Jacobs rejects the authoritative, abusive, and misleading functioning of language. (p. 213)
Through a bold comparative view of Harriet Jacob’s texts alongside Frederick Douglass’, Cutter illustrated how being literate did not necessarily free Black people from systems of oppression, even in the occasions where they achieved emancipation.

Cutter also suggested a difference in the gendered lifeworld experiences of enslaved women and men. She pointed to the gender-specific burdens placed on enslaved Black women as a key contributor towards the development of Critical Literacies. Enslaved women carried the general weight of servitude—be it in the field or within the master’s home—in addition to the sexual objectification they were forced to endure. “No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death…” (Jacobs, 1987/1861, p. 27). Because of her gendered experience, Jacobs came to realize that while gaining access to the master’s tools would provide her with the ability to mimic his ways of being and doing, it would never provide what she needed to burn his house down completely, only maintain it (Cutter, 1996). For example, when she tactically feigned her own escape and penned a letter for her white master to read out loud to her relatives, Jacobs assumed that she had successfully seized a moment to have her voice heard. However, she soon realized that as an enslaved Black woman, having access to the written word would not guarantee free reign over her own voice. In a tactical move of his own, her master discarded her letter, swapping it for a fraudulent version he penned that illustrated her as apologetic for having escaped (Cutter, 1996).

Ultimately, Jacobs decided on moving beyond the “language game,” determined to figure out “how to use language as a way of achieving liberation, when language itself was a large part of her oppression” (Cutter, 1996, p. 209). She finally achieved this after
successfully making fugitive trails of her own and escaping to the North. In an article posted to the *New York Tribune* entitled, “Letter From A Fugitive Slave”, Jacobs challenged Julia Tyler’s (wife of former President, John Tyler) sanitary depiction of slavery, by sharing a first-person account of her own (Jacobs, 1853). She would later go on to write and publish an autobiography that fully detailed her experience as an enslaved Black woman, turned fugitive (Jacobs, 1857; Jacobs et al., 2009). In her pursuit, Jacobs engaged in “emancipatory literacy” (Freire & Macedo, 2005); by understanding and then refusing the power dynamics in the enslavement of African American women— in both word and world— she was able to discard the master’s tools and create instruments of her own (Cutter, 1996). Cutter (1996) explained this brilliantly:

> Jacobs undercuts the master’s language by showing that it is grounded in a distorted and selective interpretation of facts. Jacobs uses her own truthful and full text to demythologize the master’s false and partial texts. Jacobs is also adept at using reading and writing to reclaim texts the master has usurped; in so doing she forces these texts back to a true (or truer) meaning. (p. 220)

Essentially, Jacobs hit them with the uno-reverse of Critical Literacy. She took a tool that was intended for her subjugation and stripped it of the power it once held against her.

There are many hidden figures along the lineage of Black education that have engaged in Critical Literacy. Schiller’s (2008) work corroborates Cutter’s analysis of Critical Literacy by illustrating the ways in which literate enslaved African Americans who were trusted by their white enslavers used what Schiller referred to as “double voicedness” as a mode of coded resistance in the letters to their masters. Schiller (2008) unpacked three letters—one to Thomas Jefferson from his enslaved housekeeper,
Hannah; one to a white mistress from an enslaved hireling, Alfred Steele; and one from an anonymous enslaved man directed to a white clergymen—to highlight the ways in which the enslaved utilized Critical Literacy. In each letter, the enslaved authors were able to slyly impart their moral convictions and make requests of their enslavers for their own benefit. Schiller declared these letters as acts of resistance. However, Cutter’s (1996) analysis is a sobering reminder of the permanence of antiblackness and white supremacy:

[A]lthough Jacobs and other slaves [sic] resist this linguistic oppression, their efforts are often futile because they find themselves caught within a system of discourse which defines them as inferior and subhuman …The slaves [sic] are unable to conceive of a different use of language and of a different world, and because of this they remained trapped within the "master's" house. (p. 215)

The Critical Literacy that enslaved Black people utilized to subvert “linguistic oppression” may not have been powerful enough to dismantle the entire system of enslavement; however, within the microcosms of their enslaved lifeworlds, they were able to make a shift in the atmosphere. Through the expression of their socio-political consciousness, they boldly put their enslavers on notice that despite the existing power structures, they were hell-bent on refusing the language game.

The following section examines the ways in which Black educators during segregation continued the legacy of employing Critical Literacy and Double Consciousness, and Fugitivity to educate Black youth, despite the systemic oppression that governed the time period of segregation and Jim Crow.
Part II: Black Education During Jim Crow Segregation

The best equipment may be across the way [at the white high school], but the best minds are right here in this school. (Siddle Walker, 1993b, p. 179)

Black education took on a new manifestation after the Civil War; the freeing of enslaved African Americans also meant the ending of the Slave Codes that prohibited Black literacy. And because no amount of freedom would grant them entrance to white institutions of learning, state and privately-sanctioned segregated schools for Black students were created (Williams, 2009). Comparatively, the quality of resources between Black schools and white schools were riddled with inequalities. Black schooling often took place in one-room dilapidated school houses that served upwards to sixty students at a time; schools were provided with a limited supply of second-hand textbooks and course materials that were worn by use from the children in the white schools. This is the history that is often taught in schools. While this defeated view of Black education during segregation is critical in conceptualizing systemic antiblackness, it is equally important to highlight the scholarship of researchers who have contributed seminal work around the assets that segregated schools provided Black students, educators, and communities (Anderson, 1988; Cecelski, 1994; Dempsey & Noblit, 1993; Foster, 1998; Siddle Walker, 1996). Their work does not minimize the adverse conditions that Black educators taught in under segregated schooling, but rather posed these conditions as what necessitated the pedagogical tactics employed by Black educators and the communities in which they taught (Walker, 2001). Black teachers developed pedagogies to account for the dearth in resources they were provided by white-led school districts (Shircliffe, 2001) and
contended with a school board that imposed an inferiorly limited curriculum on Black schools (Walker, 2000).

Black teachers were never the “passive victims of inequality” that dominant stock stories made of them (Walker, 2001). Moving in ways similar to their enslaved ancestors—and true to the nature of Black resilience—Black educators found ways to navigate around systemic oppression in order to provide a rich education experience for Black children, despite the lack of resources. One way they did this was by standing in acknowledgment of the clear and common enemy that white supremacy posed, “Indeed, the difficulties in the external circumstances had the unintended consequence of providing a focal, easily identifiable point of opposition that served to unify professional purpose” (Walker, 2001, p. 757). Black educators transmitted this unified purpose towards curriculum and pedagogies that promoted a sense of pride and racial uplift for their students; “all the training and modeling by teachers and principals were aimed at helping themselves and their students overcome that enemy” (Walker, 2000, p. 276).

This section of the literature review explores the perceived richness of segregated Black schools, despite the lack of state funding. Centering the praxis of Black teachers, this richness can be explored in four themes: (1) the pedagogy of care Black teachers provided for Black students, (2) the refusal of school board sanctioned curriculum, (3) Black teachers’ commitment to the community at large, and (4) their challenges to unjust policies. I finish with a discussion on W.E.B. DuBois’ (1935) piece, Does the Negro Need Separate Schools and its premonition about what may be on the other side of integration.
A Pedagogy of Care

In her article, “‘We Got the Best of That World’: A Case for Study of Nostalgia in the Oral History of School Segregation”, Barbara Shircliffe (2001) centered the remembrances of those who worked and were schooled in segregated learning institutions to argue the importance of nostalgia in qualitative research. Shircliffe analyzed the interviews of former students from two segregated Black high schools in Tampa, Florida, to gauge their perception of their segregated school experience. Her study revealed that while participants acknowledged the disadvantages of segregation, they remembered their segregated school sites as places of care and holistic support for Black children. Vanessa Siddle Walker (2000) corroborated these remembrances in her piece, “Valued Segregated Schools for African American Children in the South, 1935-1969: A Review of Common Themes and Characteristics”:

Teachers assumed the responsibility of interacting with students beyond the confined class periods and interceding when external difficulties could prohibit the objectives they held for a particular child. Teachers held extracurricular tutoring sessions, visited homes and churches in the community where they taught, even when they did not live in the community, and provided guidance about "life" responsibilities. They talked with students before and after class, carried a student home if it meant that the child would be able to participate in some extracurricular activity he or she could not otherwise participate in, purchased school supplies for their classrooms, and helped to supply clothing for students whose parents had fewer financial resources and scholarship money for those who needed help to go to college. (p. 265)
The narratives in both bodies of work reflected a holistic sense of care for Black youth, beyond the parameters of the classroom. Black teachers understood that there was a connection between their students' lives as oppressed people in the broader context of the country and their success in the classroom. This was most likely due to the mutual investment that lay in the success of their students; an academic win for a Black student was perceived as a win for the entire race. As one of the narrators in Shircliffe’s 2001 study put it, “For some reason, we belong to our community, to our teachers... They were dependent on our improving the situation. This was in our minds ever since slavery, everybody sending everybody to do what you can do to improve” (p. 68). The proceeding section unpacked the ways in which Black teachers utilized curriculum as a tool for uplifting the spirits of Black students in segregated schools.

**A Curated Curriculum**

In discussing the pedagogical decisions of Black teachers in segregated schools, I returned to Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s theory on Politically Relevant Teaching (PRT). To review, Beauboeuf-Lafontant (1999) posited the importance of PRT over Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRT) (Ladson-Billings, 1995), placing segregated schools as the breeding ground of the former. In defense of centering politics instead of culture, Beauboeuf-Lafontant listed three reasons. Here, I focused on the first two as they related to Black teachers in segregated schools:

First, discussions of “culture” as a reference for teaching can gloss over the complexity of class, gender, and ethnic diversity that exists within any “cultural” group. However, centering on the political draws attention to the active decision making and commitments of an educator to uphold certain viewpoints (e.g.,
hegemonic or oppositional; oppressive or democratic) that transcend culture.

Second, the term “political relevance” compels us to see beyond what is sometimes presented as an essentialist quality of social groupings. The concept of political relevance maintains that there is a political history of striving to bring the practice of democracy in line with our founding ideals, and that this “positive struggle” has included people of various cultural and social backgrounds. (p. 718)

According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant, one hallmark of PRT is an insistence on making schooling an equitable experience for students—especially students from historically oppressed backgrounds—despite the inability to dismantle hegemonic school policies (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). In the context of Black education during Jim Crow, the social implications of segregated life necessitated a political understanding amongst Black teachers. These teachers understood their positionality as perceived inferiors in the broader context of American life; however, they also understood their positionalities in the eyes of their students and used that to leverage a spirit of community uplift. As they saw it,

If black students could be convinced that they were as capable as whites, then they would be less likely to believe what the dominant society had maintained as truth: that black people had not and would not accomplish anything of value, apart from menial service to whites. (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999, p. 711)

Historian Adam Fairclough’s (2000) work highlighted the work of Black teachers through Reconstruction and Jim Crow segregation. In discussing the fugitive measures Black teachers took and the socio-political climate that necessitated their praxis, Faireclough illustrated the roles Black teachers played as policy drivers and how the
impact of the lessons they taught went well beyond the confines of the classroom. Much of this was made possible due to the surprising amount of autonomy Black teachers had to run their classrooms as they saw fit; this gave them the freedom to subvert the antiblack messaging they received on the outside from within. As Fairclough (2000) described,

> Inside the classroom, teachers enjoyed greater freedom of speech and action than one might expect. For one thing, it was rare to see a white person in a black public school. The teaching force was entirely black, and white superintendents, especially in the rural South, rarely visited black schools. (p. 80)

As one Black woman teacher featured in Fairclough’s work explained, a number of Black teachers were free to do whatever they wanted as long as it did not require district funding (Fairclough, 2000). Another explanation for the amount of autonomy Black teachers received rested in gender norms. In the case of Black women teachers, it was falsely assumed that their gender made them subservient; therefore, they were considered less likely to dare to teach outside the confines of the district-mandated curriculum (Fairclough, 2000).

As the concealed history revealed, Black teachers, both women and men, utilized a combination of PRT (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999) and Double Consciousness (Du Bois, 2018/1903) to subvert the academic status quo. The proliferation of Carter G. Woodson’s Negro History Week, which later became Black History Month, is an example of the strength of their work (Fairclough, 2000; Givens, 2020). Black educators went all out, sowing messages of racial uplift and subversion to their students:

> [Black students] read poems by black authors, heard stories about black heroes,
learned about Louisiana's free people of color, and considered the current economic status of Negroes. Even in its most diluted form, Negro History Week encouraged children to celebrate black achievements and promoted racial consciousness (Fairclough, 2000, p. 83).

In addition to Negro History Week, segregated Black schools implemented other observances such as Emancipation Proclamation Day, and commemorated these gatherings with celebrations of Black figures who resisted white racist regimes (Walker, 2000).

Vanessa Siddle Walker’s extensive research on Black schooling during segregation also reflected the political consciousness of Black educators of the time. Her seminal (1993a, 1993b) study of the Caswell County Training School in Yanceyville, North Carolina, provided a supporting example of Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s description of Political Relevance among Black teachers during segregation. The Caswell County Training School exemplified the fruit of Black teacher subversion and refusal of white gaze in the operation of Black schools. As explained by Siddle Walker, in an attempt to undermine the academic promise of the few existing Black high schools, institutions serving Black teenagers were named training schools. Training signified that unlike the white high schools that were free to provide academic, college-preparatory courses, Black high schools were relegated to course offerings that prepared Black youth for service jobs intended to pigeonhole them into a subservient status (Siddle Walker, 1996).

Despite this, many segregated Black high schools offered courses that stood toe-to-toe and, in some cases, bested the course offerings in the white schools. “Thus, in Caswell County, as in many other Negro high schools, the word ‘training’ was placed in the
school title, but a so-called training school curriculum was only partially embraced.” (Siddle Walker, 1996, p. 35). The commitment to racial uplift extended to extracurricular activities as well. For example, the Caswell County Training school offered dozens of extracurricular activities from Debate Club to Future Farmers of America and brought programming to the school that students were not likely to experience elsewhere in their communities. By providing an expansive offering of extracurricular activities, Black educators exposed Black students to the extent of their potential, despite living in a world that otherwise obscured them from a positive sense of self (Siddle Walker, 1996). Next, I highlight literature that spoke to the ways in which the duties of Black teachers extended beyond the schoolhouse and into the community.

**Community Involvement**

Siddle Walker’s research on the Caswell County Training School offered insight into the myriad ways Black educators were involved in the communities in which they taught. Teachers were venerated amongst their communities; since teaching was on a slim list of career options for Black academics, teachers were often the most educated people in the communities where they lived and taught (Siddle Walker, 1996). However, their elevated status in the community did not create a boundary between themselves and the rest of the community; rather, Black teachers worked to include parents and families as partners in education. One vehicle through which this coalition was fostered was through Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings. In Siddle Walker’s 1996 account of the Caswell County Training School, PTA meetings were described as the main social hub of the community. These meetings were more than an opportunity for parents and teachers to discuss the academic needs of their students; the meetings also existed to provide
community members an opportunity to engage in leisure activities that they were legally barred from participating in outside of church functions (Siddle Walker, 1996). The teachers and principal of the Caswell County Training School went all out, providing entertainment via school choirs and other sources of family-oriented entertainment.

Black teachers went above and beyond their job descriptions to help students attain the kind of education that white segregationists were hell-bent on denying them. As active members of the community, they invested in the futurities of the youth under their care. They could be counted on to make home visits, take students in need of transportation to and from school events, provide extra tutoring after school, and attend the extracurricular and social events in which their students were engaged (Siddle Walker, 1996). The following section outlines the organizational tactics Black educators employed to take the fight of educational equality out of the schoolhouse and straight to the board of education.

**Challenging Unjust District Policies**

Through their scholarship, Fairclough and Siddle Walker reminded us that Black educators were not merely passive receivers of white oppression and benevolence; a lot of gains were hard won through the work of Black educators who directly challenged unsupportive and antagonist white school boards (Fairclough, 2000; Walker, 2000; Walker, 2001). However, the methods Black educators used to apply pressure to the school districts had to be strategically covert, given the very real threats that a Jim Crow society posed over Black bodies, no matter how educated they were. Fairclough (2000) explained:

>[T]he basic dilemma that confronted all black southerners during the Jim Crow
era [was] the need to appease whites while still maintaining personal dignity and racial loyalty. Teachers experienced that pressure in a particularly acute manner, because, unlike black ministers, they depended upon white support, both political and financial, in order to do their job. School improvements had to be achieved through supplication and persuasion rather than negotiation and pressure. (p. 70)

Black educators reflected on the applied science of appearing to cater to white superiority complexes and adhere to Black stereotypes in order to secure the provisions needed to support the academic advancement of Black children (Fairclough, 2000). Siddle Walker’s 1996 study of the Caswell County Training School also highlighted some specific examples of the tactics Black educators employed against school boards. In one account, Siddle Walker described a back and forth over the granting of additional acres of land and provisions to build an addendum to the school to accommodate the growing number of student attendees. After years of empty promises to look into the issue with no specified timeline or guarantee that the request would be considered, school leaders from the Caswell County Training School went over the rank of school board officials and sought redress from a supervising state representative who in turn directed the board to get plans moving for the addendum, to the reluctance of the board members (Siddle Walker, 1996).

Black educators’ will and skill to fight for the needs of their students was undoubtedly fueled by their participation in Black teacher organizations that were established throughout the country. Created because Black teachers were denied membership into white teacher associations, Black teachers’ associations played a critical role in the furtherance of Black education initiatives. These organizations provided an insulated space for Black educators to safely identify the root causes of their oppression
and apply Black gaze to develop solutions despite the permanence of their oppressive state (Fairclough, 2000; Walker, 2001). Black teacher organizations were nationwide networks for Black educators to share information and develop a unified approach to educating Black children and themselves (Walker, 2001). The final subsection unpacks W.E.B Du Bois’ position on the type of schooling he believed was crucial to securing the academic promise and futurity of Black people.

**Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?**

In Du Bois’ 1935 piece, “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?”, he posited that Black children are best educated in schools with Black teachers who know their cultural struggles and teach from a place of care. He was adamant that this quality of education for Black students would never be achieved in a white school system that was tolerant at best and adversarial at worst to the existence of Black people. In his essay, Du Bois also addressed internalized racism as a consequence of white schooling and its potential to impede the furtherance of Black educational institutions. As a remedy, he called for a Black education system that taught history and current affairs through a Black lens from the mouths and minds of Black teachers who refused the whitewashed histories that had been handed down to them. Well ahead of the *Brown* decision, Du Bois called out the NAACP and their efforts to integrate schools as misguided, imploring that they push the emphasis to an equitable distribution of educational funding rather than having Black students schooled in environments where they were unwanted (Du Bois, 1935). The essay ends with Du Bois’ declaration that any schooling system—integrated or not—that neglected the holistic care of Black students was not ideal. He urged:

We must give greater value and greater emphasis to the rights of the child's own
soul. We shall get a finer, better balance of spirit; an infinitely more capable and rounded personality by putting children in schools where they are wanted, and where they are happy and inspired, than in thrusting them into hells where they are ridiculed and hated. (p. 331)

Du Bois’ harbinger is reflected in the narrative offerings of Shircliffe and Siddle Walker’s scholarship. As one community member in Shircliffe’s 2001 article reflected on the generational cost of school integration,

Integration cost black people a whole generation of kids and that's the kids that you see now. You see the offspring of kids that were lost through integration in juvenile problems now. You're seeing how lost their children are because they don't have that family bondage to bridge that gap. Because you don't just take a kid out of a neighborhood, the classroom with a bunch of strangers that are probably two or three reading levels ahead of him, and say, ‘Okay, here’s your brand new book, you’re sitting in this nice air conditioned class, now you should be able to keep up.’ That is why the concept of getting back to the neighborhood school is great because it worked and because integration is not working. (p. 82)

Walker (2001) echoed the impracticality of integration for the advancement of Black students; she stated,

In effect, African American children were moved from a system in which teachers and organizational structures were focused on their educational uplift to a system in which African American student success was little more central in the discussions of formerly all-white teacher Associations. (p. 774)

In summary, Black teachers— informs by their positionality and the positionality of their
ancestors—subverted the oppressive implications of segregation in order to provide Black students—and themselves—with a humanizing education experience. The next section of this literature review is centered on scholarship that unpacked the unintended consequences of the Brown v. Board of Education decision and its implications on Black education, the futures of Black teachers’ and students’ lives in schools, and the stability of Black communities at-large.

**Part III: The Trouble With The Brown v. Board Decision**

The desegregation of public schooling in the United States marked a shift in the trajectory for Black K-12 education. Over the years, several scholars have returned to the Brown decision to critically reflect on the degree to which this shift has been of benefit and harm to Black communities. A major linchpin in the decision to integrate schools rested in the inferiority complex that state-sanctioned segregation was claimed to have imposed on the intellectual promise of Black children. The court document stated:

> To separate [Black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone. (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954).

In retrospect, this statement did not age well. While legal drafters may have made this declaration with good intention, several education researchers have put for scholarship suggesting that desegregating public schooling has actually deepened the inferior status of Black youth (Dumas, 2014; Dumas, 2016; Epstein et al., 2017; Marie & Watson, 2020; Skiba, 2000). The collective treatment of Black students in K-12 schools is, in fact, inconsistent with the promise of the Brown decision. This final section of the literature
review discussed scholarship that explored the unintended consequences of the *Brown* decision. First, I unpacked research on the erasure of Black educators post *Brown*; next, I explored the impact integration had on the school lives of Black youth and the implication it imposed on Black parents and families. I concluded with an analysis of the evolution of interest convergence from the passing of *Brown* to the current passing of neoliberal school reform.

**An Attack on Black Educators**

One of the most detrimental consequences of the *Brown* decision was the erasure of Black teachers and administrators. Ethridge’s 1979 study explained how Black educators became the primary casualties of *Brown v. Board*. He described the outcome of *Brown* as flawed based on five factors: (1) it suggested that Black teachers were inferior and thus ill-equipped to teach in white institutions, (2) it left white school boards with state-sanctioned autonomy to maintain de facto segregation, (3) it overlooked the court’s inexperience in adjudicating discrimination cases in K-12 institutions, (4) it failed to provide for judicial direction post *Brown*, and (5) it was overshadowed as a Civil Rights milestone with minute deference paid to the educational aspect of its implementation (Ethridge, 1979). The landmark decision did not take into account the effect desegregation would have on the landscape of Black education as a profession, and in turn, on the academic experiences of Black students and families.

In his article, “The Effects of the Brown Decision on Black Educators”, James E. Haney (1978) outlined the harm that the *Brown* decision perpetuated against Black educators. His scholarship specifically addressed the non-monolithic stance taken by Black educators in response to imminent job loss. Black teachers understood that the
a consequence of integration would be the closure of Black schools and subsequent
decrease in available teaching positions. Some welcomed the perceived advancement
with an air of martyrdom. However others resisted and openly opposed desegregation,
concerned about the economic and cultural harm integrated schooling posed to Black
communities. Their concerns were soon validated, as school districts began a mass
stamping out of Black educators; the majority of teachers and administrators were
dismissed from their positions upon school closings, while a small number were retained
and sent to white schools to serve in demoted positions (Haney, 1978).

Tillman’s 2004 literature review on the history of Black teachers pre and post
Brown provided a more holistic view of the plight of Black teachers and suggested that
the consequences of the Brown decision were not as unintended as they appeared. His
scholarship discussed the specific ways Black teachers and principals were regarded
when integrated into white schools and the uncertainty of job security they faced while
within. In integrated schools, Black educators were often relegated to a second-class
citizen status; principals were demoted to teaching positions, and Black teachers were
relegated to teach lower grades or assumed support positions. The literature review
concluded with a discussion on the contemporary ramifications of the Brown decision
and how it has affected the quality of education for African American students (Tillman,
2004).

Hudson and Holmes’ review of literature examined what was lost in school
desegregation not only in terms of Black teacher employment, but the losses the Black
community suffered as a whole. Their work traced the negative consequences of the
Brown v. Board decision by naming three major consequences: (1) the miseducation of
Black children by white teachers, (2) the initial and ongoing systemic erasure of Black teachers, and (3) white nonadherence to Black authority. While the authors acknowledged that we will never return to a time where Black students are exclusively taught by Black educators, they proposed policy recommendations to help close the opportunity gap, which included the recruitment and hiring of more Black educators (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). The next subsection explores the cost of school integration for Black students and their families.

**Black Student and Family Experience in Newly Integrated Institutions**

In her article, “Landing on the Wrong Note: The Price We Paid for Brown”, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2004) remarked that the perceived success of the *Brown* decision was wholly dependent upon one’s positionality:

> The plaintiffs, litigators, Supreme Court Justices, and civil rights advocates all expressed good intentions regarding *Brown*, and although playing one wrong note does not destroy or invalidate an entire performance, it does create a kind of dissonance that is more or less evident depending on one’s vantage point. (p. 3)

Ladson-Billings (2004) posited that while Civil Rights leaders and their supporters fought hard to win access to the human rights that were denied during Jim Crow, it was Black children who ultimately lost. Gaining access to school resources that were originally intended for white students did not make up for the ostracization and further inferiorization that Black students would come to experience at the hands of white educators. According to Ladson-Billings,
There [was] no provision in Brown for equality of outcomes. As long as Blacks and other children of color were given the opportunity to attend the same schools that Whites did, the state had met its legal and civic obligations. (p. 9)

Wells et al. (2005) scholarship not only unpacked school district’s lackadaisical responses to integration absent judicial enforcement, it extended this lack of federal oversight to the apartheid state that persisted as a result. Even when ultimately pressured to integrate, schools employed methods to maintain their segregated practices through the implementation of course tracking (Wells et al., 2005). Placing white students in advanced tracks and relegating Black students to remedial courses—a practice that is still employed today—helped white segregationists to maintain racial distinction under a single roof. As a result, the intellectual inferiority that desegregation proponents claimed would be eradicated was only deepened. The authors also pointed to the development of colorblind ideologies as a manifestation of integrated spaces. While in many cases the indoctrination of racelessness was often done with the intention of leveling the field for all students, it was accomplished at the expense of erasure of Black student’s identity. *Colorblind* ultimately became synonymous with white normativity (Wells et al., 2005).

In a qualitative study conducted by the authors, participants reflected on how their integrated school experience was crucial in helping them understand how to navigate what they referred to as *mixed spaces*. However, as the authors note, learning how to coexist in *mixed spaces* often meant being conditioned to navigate in a world where whiteness ruled (Wells et al., 2005).

Another way Black students were negatively affected by school integration was through the disappearance of their parents and families in school communities. In Cheryl
Fields-Smith’s article, “African American parents before and after Brown”, she challenged the myth of the disinterested Black parent. She posited that much of the discourse on parent involvement in schools tends to be white normative, dismissing the needs and concerns of Black parents. According to Fields-Smith, the failure to center the needs of Black parents created a relationship of distrust between Black parents and the school system. No longer recognized as equal partners in the education of their children, Black parents became less involved in integrated schools as they had been in segregated institutions (Fields-Smith, 2005). Patricia Edwards’ work further emphasized the distrust Black parents had for white integrated schools. Her study centered Black parent voices and the fight for adherence to the Brown verdict three decades after its ruling. Through counter-story narrative, her work illustrated the extreme unwelcomeness Black parents felt in integrated schools, a phenomenon that they had not encountered in segregated schools. She contrasts remembrances of her own mother’s involvement in segregated schools versus her diminished presence post integration, imploring contemporary teachers to consider the extent to which they make Black parents feel welcomed (Edwards, 1993).

ArCasia James-Gallaway’s scholarship focused on the lesser-explored narratives of those who pursued community uplift in the face of dehumanizing integrated schools. In “What Got Them Through: Community Cultural Wealth, Black Students, and Texas School Desegregation”, James-Gallaway (2022) used the oral histories of former students in desegregated schools in Waco, Texas, to illustrate how one community leaned into Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) in order to refuse the messages of inferiority their children received in schools. Her scholarship not only emphasized the power of
self-determination as a way to challenge hegemonic systems, but also warned about the potential to replicate hegemony within our own communities if we are not vigilant in refusing white racist epistemologies.

The final section of this literature review explores the exploitative characteristics of interest convergence and how its use in the *Brown* decision created a pathway for its implementation in the contemporary.

**Part IV: Contemporary Impacts of Brown**

Nearly 70 years since the passing of *Brown*, Black education research scholars have outlined the socio-academic ramifications of school integration for Black youth (Bryan, 2020; Dumas, 2014, 2016; Love, 2023; Morris, 2018). The counterstories brought forth in the scholarship suggest that the goals of the *Brown* decision remain unmet, as Black youth are still being relegated to a second-class citizenship within integrated schools. These racialized realities bring into question the earnestness and true concern of the lawmakers in regard to the education of Black children.

In unpacking the rationale for why it often feels as though Black communities are constantly held back, despite the obvious presence of social advancements, this final section of the literature review explores the utility of interest convergence. First, I explored literature that defined the theory through the context of the *Brown* decision (Bell, 1980). Next, I went backwards into the timeline to highlight the insidious ways that white northerners used interest convergence to deceive newly-freed African Americans after the Civil War and how Black leaders would come to adopt the tactic during Reconstruction (James-Gallaway, 2019). Then, I move forward in time, addressing scholarship that discusses the use of interest convergence in neoliberal school reform,
diversity and inclusion at institutions of higher education, and teacher education programs (Henry & Dixson, 2016; Milner et al., 2013; Starck et al., 2024). This literature review closes with a brief discussion that questions the purposefulness of the Brown decision and school integration.

**The Continued Legacy of Interest Convergence**

Derrick Bell introduced the concept of interest convergence, the idea that, “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (Bell, 1980, p. 523), to explain the shortcomings of the Brown v. Board decision. He contended that white Americans were the biggest beneficiaries of the landmark decision. Amidst the Cold War, the United States was desperate to shed itself of the international perception of hostility due to the treatment of Black citizens; in passing Brown, the country was able to restore its reputation as a leading nation and stave off domestic uprisings in Black communities. Absent this advantage, Brown v. Board would not have made it to the Supreme Court, leaving the separate but equal doctrine of Plessy v. Ferguson in place (James-Gallaway, 2019).

Bell (1980) proposed that through interest convergence, it became easier to understand the passing of Brown as a mutually advantageous endeavor rather than an indication of national moral consciousness. He used Professor Herber Wechsler’s unpopular criticism of the Brown decision to explain (1) why the transient nature of interest convergence slowly rendered the underpinnings of the Brown verdict obsolete and (2) how the promise of the Brown decision failed, as it related to the current condition and treatment of Black students and teachers. According to Bell, unpacking Brown’s fallacies allows for the possibility to create schooling that specifically addresses
the needs of Black people. Paradoxically, his work illuminated that in the long run, when it came to Black communities and integrated institutions, the interests have actually failed to converge. In fact, Bell’s work boldly suggests that our interests were better served outside of desegregated spaces (1980). The next subsection will unpack early models of interest convergence in Black education; many proved to be manipulatively antithetical to the actual interests of Black communities.

**Interest Convergence Post Civil War & Reconstruction.** An unpacking of scholarship around interest convergence revealed a pattern of oppression that has historically been utilized well before the passing of *Brown*. Several researchers discussed the ways in which northern capitalists exploited the interests of newly freed Black people after the Civil War in an effort to take control of the south and rebuild the economy. This was achieved through the seemingly philanthropic provision of education, a highly-coveted endeavor for Black people. As ArCasia D. James-Gallaway (2019) described in her article, “All Money Ain’t Good Money: The Interest Convergence Principle, white Philanthropy, and Black Education of the Past and Present”:

Wanting to reunite the country after the Civil War, white northern philanthropists saw great opportunity in controlling the material newly free groups learned and thus the jobs for which they received training. This action also disclosed their motivating interest as maintaining an antebellum social order and solving the race problem with under-education. Hence, these individuals and their business interests often relied on an efficient, stratified economic system contingent upon African Americans continuing to serve many of the same roles they did during enslavement. (p. 358)
By dangling the prospect of education over the heads of Black Americans, white capitalists were able to implement a curriculum and pedagogy that relegated Black people back to their pre-emancipation status.

Over time, African Americans—utilizing a Double Consciousness lens—found crafty ways to engage in interest convergence themselves by appealing to the sensibilities of white people. Starck et al. (2024) discussed tensions in the Black community, most notably between W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, over the direction of Black education. As part of the infamous disagreement, Du Bois and supporters accused Washington of pandering to white perceptions of Black inferiority. For example, the language in Washington’s *Atlanta Compromise* speech was held in high speculation for playing into the docile, non-threatening perception of Black temperament for the sake of white benefice. The following is an excerpt from Washington’s address:

> In our humble way, [Black Americans] shall stand by [White Americans] with a devotion that no foreigner can approach ... interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one.... The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing (Washington, 1895, as cited in Harlan et al., 1974, pp. 580–581)

On one end, Washington’s address could be perceived as pandering to Black stereotypes. However, this could also be considered a tactical measure to ensure Black communities secure footing on which to build a foundation (Starck et al., 2024). What’s certain is the
understanding that in order for Black people to achieve any social advancements, there would have to be something in it for white people, too. The next subsection traces scholarship that further unpacks the continued legacy of duplicity in the misrepresentation of white philanthropic endeavors.

**Interest Convergence & Neoliberal School Reform.** Post *Brown* and present day, interest convergence still rules the roost when it comes to the education policy decisions made on behalf of Black and other historically marginalized communities. Scholarship on K-12 education discussed the predatory practices of white philanthropists. For example, in the early 20th century, white capitalists took advantage of the Black teacher shortage; by creating a school for Black students to be taught by a majority-Black faculty, philanthropists appeared to be providing a much-needed service to Black communities. However, by executing complete control over the curriculum and teacher training, these capitalists were not only able to ensure that Black people received a service-oriented education, but also that the curriculum was taught by teachers who had been indoctrinated into docility. In fact, teachers that showed any sign of subversion were immediately removed from their positions (James-Gallaway, 2019).

Today, white philanthropists continue predatory practices on vulnerable school districts in the name of goodwill (Love, 2023). Most commonly, researchers turn to the imposition of charter school networks throughout the United States as an example of how billionaire corporations utilized the perceived interest of underserved communities for their own financial gain. James-Gallaway (2019), compared the practices of today’s white capitalists to capitalist of the past:

Accepting financial support from white philanthropists continues to place many
Black and underserved schools in precarious situations where their curriculum and personnel reflect the interests of their donors, as was the case during Reconstruction. Eager for capital, many of these schools comply with market-based reforms that privilege the interests of white philanthropists, interests that seem to converge on the surface, but work against the long-term well-being of marginalized communities. (p. 362)

James-Gallaway criticized philanthropists for refusing to work in collaboration with community members to determine what is truly needed for their neighborhoods to thrive, acknowledging that to do so would be antithetical to white advancement and is therefore bereft of white interest. Henry and Dixson (2016) referenced Black educators who attempted to have Black-owned-and-run charter schools incorporated, but were ironically denied because of the racialized focus on Black youth (Henry & Dixson, 2016). The proceeding subsection shifts to scholarship that focuses on the utility of interest convergence in institutions of higher education, specifically as it relates to diversity initiatives.

**Interest Convergence & Diversity in Higher Education.** Starck et al. (2024) highlighted what interest convergence looks like in higher education. Centering a critique of diversity initiatives, researchers posited that, “the widespread instrumental embrace of diversity works to preserve and advance White Americans’ interests through the way it governs—and even while facilitating—the inclusion of Black Americans.” (p. 24) In other words, while campus-wide diversity efforts appear to be in support of Black and non-Black students of color on face-value, it is the white student population who benefit most from diversity initiatives. The researchers breakdown the benefit and the cost of
intergroup contact: 

Though intergroup contact has long been championed as a means to reduce prejudice, and consequently, benefit racial minorities, instrumental diversity rationales pitch intergroup contact and exposure as a benefit to nonminorities. This shifting purpose of intergroup contact may have a significant impact for racial minorities during interracial interactions. Creating environments that predicate minority students’ inclusion on the potential benefit to others not only enhances the pressure minority students feel to conform to expectations to represent the entirety of their racial group (i.e., minority spotlighting) but also may increase the sense to which they feel obligated to pay the cost of their inclusion by making the racialized aspects of themselves available as an educational resource for the larger community (Starck et al., 2019, p. 10).

In order for interest convergence to operate, mutual interests must exist. That said, when institutions execute initiatives that center belonging for students from historically marginalized groups, it is not motivated by morality. Rather, institutions are motivated by the returned benefit that showcasing such initiatives can produce. In this case, the university protects its image as inclusive and white students benefit from the objectification of minority students, whom they often treat as resources, rather than humans. The final subsection highlights scholarship that discusses the perceived promise of interest convergence in teacher education programs.

**Interest Convergence & Teacher Education.** Milner et al. (2013) centered their discussion on interest convergence in teacher education programs. Their stance differs from the previously mentioned scholars in that they highlight ways in which the mutual
interests of white teachers and teachers of color can converge for the benefit of diverse student populations. In this way, they contended, teachers of color benefit from increased recruitment into teacher education programs, while white teachers benefit from learning about the racialized experiences of non-white educators. Their scholarship further explains the benefit of POC representation in teacher education programs:

Using interest convergence we further suggest that it would be in the best interest and benefit of both parties involved (teacher educators and the students they serve) to be in programs that provide adequate settings for teacher development and culturally sensible training. Through interest convergence, White teachers in these programs can stand up with teachers of color and demand proper preparation and training, to become teachers who would aid in advancing the nation’s teaching quality. (p. 349)

While this statement was optimistic, Milner’s contention exemplified what Bell, James-Gallaway, and Starck et al. mean when they talk about the ways in which interest convergence ultimately works towards the benefit of white people. There is no talk in this article about the ways in which extracting the racialized experiences of POC peers may have on their schooling experiences. Instead, minority groups are once again considered as utilities, rather than students. The concluding section reviews the expansive history of Black education in the United States and critically questions the benefits of the Brown v. Board decision.

**In Hindsight, Was It Worth It?**

In their study, “Fifty Years after Brown: The Benefits and Tradeoffs for African American Educators and Students”, Lyons and Chesley (2004) unpacked the perspectives
of current and former Black educators regarding the benefits and shortcomings of the Brown v. Board of Education decision. Educators were asked whether or not they believed that desegregation benefited Black students 50 years after the Brown decision and more specifically, whether or not they believed Black high school students have benefitted from the landmark decision. While overall, educators regarded the Brown decision as being beneficial in terms of access to resources and opportunities, what was lost was access to Black teachers and the infrastructure of many Black communities. As a consequence of this loss, educators found that Black students today were less likely to take on leadership roles in extracurricular and school activities and that their engagement in school activities were relegated to only a few spaces (Lyons & Chelsey, 2004).

Black Americans hail from a hidden legacy of educators intent on gaining access to literacy and an education that insured the health and stability of Black communities. Through the clandestine methods we employed during enslavement, the subversive pedagogies we developed during segregation, and the divestment projects we create in present day, Black teachers have a proven track record that demonstrates their intellectual will and capacity to undermine systemic antiblackness. Rather than pointing to gaps in the research, the goal of this literature review was to provide a chronological view of exactly who we are and what has been hidden from us, as Black educators in particular, but as a Black community at-large. I do, however, posit the necessity for more collections within the canon of Black education research, so that our histories become normalized and accessible beyond university walls.
Chapter III: Methodology

Overview

To review, the purpose of this qualitative study was to determine how the provision of racial affinity spaces would impact the schooling experiences of Black students attending high school in the suburbs. More specifically, this study highlighted the work of Black educators who utilized a pedagogy of care and humanization to subvert the antiblack messaging students received from interactions with overwhelmingly white faculties and non-Black peers. Through my role as Program Director of a Black woman-founded-and-run education non-profit in Northern California, I unpacked the deleterious effects that suburban schooling can have on Black student identity development and juxtaposed this with the establishment of a positive sense of self that is attained when Black youth participate in Black affinity spaces. This study illustrated a (re)doing of the Black student spirit through the external work of Black teachers who operate outside the carceral, antiblack mechanisms of systemic schooling (Sojoyner, 2017). Ultimately, this study revealed the perceived and observed impact that consistent access to Politically Relevant (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999) curriculum and community programming can have on Black students' self and community perception.

Research Questions

This qualitative study was guided by the following research questions:

(1) What school conditions necessitate the presence of BLES spaces in suburban K-12 schools?

(2) What are the characteristics of BLES spaces?
(3) What are the challenges to creating and maintaining BLES spaces in suburban school settings?

(4) What is the perceived impact of BLES spaces in suburban schools?

**Research Design**

*Black Emancipatory Action Research*

Black Emancipatory Action Research (BEAR) challenges traditional research designs that attempt to explain the lifeworld experiences of Black people through a deficit lens. Instead, BEAR utilizes an asset approach to center research inquiries that come directly from within Black communities so that we are in control of our own narratives (Akom, 2009, 2016). As a form of Action Research (AR)—research that investigates an issue through action-based problem-solving—BEAR critically examines and challenges structural and systemic antiblack racism. An extension of Critical Race Methodology (CRM) (Solórzano & Yosso, 2016)—an academic framework that posits systemic racism as embedded in the fabric of society—BEAR centers racism and intersectionality, challenges traditional research designs that attempt to explain the lifeworld experiences of Black people, relies on an asset approach as opposed to a deficit-based approach, and draws from social sciences and humanities (Akom, 2009). BEAR’s origins are rooted in the southern tradition of Participatory Research (PR)—Action Research that engages community members as partners in research—and the northern methodological practices of African Centered (AC) research—Action Research that centers issues of concern in Black communities (Akom, 2016). However, what might be the dopest piece of BEAR’s origin story rests in the concealed story behind Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR). If we unstick the pages in
PAR’s history book, we will find that it was African American education researchers who were at the forefront of this methodological movement. As Akom (2009) describes,

In America, long before Lewin, the Chicago school of ethnography and critical ethnographers, scholar/activists such as Carter G. Woodson, St. Clair Drake, W.E.B. Du Bois, Mary McLeod Bethune and others provided critical grounding for the development of community based participatory research (CBPR) precisely because of their determination to give primacy to “community issues,” apply alternative conceptual frameworks and research methodologies to explain racialised opportunity gaps and unfair working conditions, and a determination to use scholarship for the purpose of “community uplift” embedded in the research process. (p. 119)

As a form of Emancipatory Action Research (EAR), BEAR shares a grounding in structuralism, a practice that unpacks social injustice at its root cause rather than focusing on its symptoms. EAR challenges dominant ways of knowing and being by centering counter-narratives with the express goal of creating a collaborative space that encourages inter-community collective action (Ledwith, 2007). What sets BEAR apart is its specificity to Blackness. Where EAR is centered on structuralism, BEAR is rooted in structural racialization which focuses on systemic antiblack racism, rather than the deeds of individual racist actors. BEAR also expands what it means to experience Blackness by incorporating pigmentocracy—an acknowledgement of how across geographies, darker-completed people are vulnerable to systemic oppression—into the framework. In this way, BEAR acknowledges the lived experiences of our Asian, Pacific Islander,
Indigenous, Arab, and Latine cousins whose lives are made socially impossible because of their pigmentation (Akom, 2016).

BEAR operates on four core principles: (1) structural racialization, (2) intersectionality and the social construction of knowledge, (3) the development of critical consciousness, and (4) love, healing, and a commitment to social justice (Akom, 2016, p. 122). As a humanizing methodology, BEAR urges the researcher to ask the following questions when working with Black communities:

Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interest does it serve? Who will benefit from it? Who has designed its questions and framed its scope? Who will carry it out? Who will write it up? How will its results be disseminated? What are the barriers to participation? How meaningful will participation be at each stage? What are the limitations to this project? How flexible is this project? What are the possible negative impacts of this project? Is the researcher’s Spirit clear? Does she or he have a good heart? What baggage is she or he carrying? Is the research useful to our community? Can it get the environmental pollution out of our community? Can it actually do anything right here right now that can help us grow? (Akom, 2009, p. 200)

BEAR is a tool of empowerment that engages Black researchers and community members in dialogues that are of critical importance to the people, and provides the possibility for us to put these dialogues into the kind of action that feels most appropriate for the people it is intended to serve.

In the context of this study, a BEAR research design allowed our team of educators to co-construct a Black fugitive space whose development was informed by our
lived and observed experiences as Black folks in schools. Together, we investigated the manifestations of systemic antiblackness in a Northern California school district. Throughout the school year, students and educator-researchers engaged in dialogue about our individual and collective school experiences. Through these dialogues, we were able to determine what liberatory practices were necessary to provide students with a space of refuge from the racialized pressures they endured in their suburban high schools.

**Research Setting**

This research took place in dual settings. Organizationally speaking, this work is centered within a Black women-founded-and-run education non-profit in Northern California. The scope of work and outcomes described took place within the daily mechanisms of the organization. Locally speaking, the on-site portions of the work took place in a suburban school district. While these spaces overlap, there were stark foundational differences in how the non-profit and the school district operated and regarded Black life. This study illustrated a fusing of both spaces. For the sake of anonymity, names of all students, educators, schools, and school districts have been replaced by pseudonyms.

**Black Scholars Project**

The Black Scholars Project (BSP), a Black-women-founded education nonprofit in Northern California, was founded in 2016. The program first launched in response to the critical needs of Black high school students in school districts where there was limited—if any—access to Black faculty, staff, and administration. The overall goal of the program was to create fugitive spaces for Black students and families who experience the racialized pressures of schooling and living in suburban neighborhoods. To achieve this, the founders employed a team of community members to create on- and off-site
student programming and a series of family-centered events. As a fugitive space, BSP resisted the systemic underpinnings of antiblackness and created environments where Black students were safe and free to engage in Black joy and demonstrate all their ways of knowing.

**Black& Workshops.** The centerpiece of BSP programming was the Black& series. These were student-centered workshops, taught by an all-Black BSP faculty, that took place biweekly on school campuses. Workshops were rooted in three major objectives: (1) improve feelings of belonging for Black students in suburban high school settings, (2) improve Black students’ self-esteem through identity development, and (3) illuminate the intersectional experiences of Black people across the diaspora. Titled, “Black&”, the series provided the possibility for Black educators and students to address a multitude of topics of interest and concern in Black communities. Black& celebrated the fluid and multifaceted nature of Blackness, while also navigating conversations around intersectionality and antiblackness as it related to the daily and future lives of our scholars. Past workshops included Black& Hair, Black& College, and Black& Social Media.

**BSP College Field Trips.** As part of their commitment to college readiness, BSP offered multiple field trips to different colleges and universities across Northern California. The college readiness component addressed issues of disparity and college preparedness as it pertains to African American student populations. Students were taught how to research institutions of higher education based on Black college student experiences and were encouraged to ask questions of university representatives that centered their racialized college experiences. During the 2022-2023 school year, BSP
took students on three field trips; students visited two four-year institutions and one college expo.

**BSP Family Programming.** In addition to student services, BSP organized community events for parents, caretakers, and families. These events were a time for the families of Black students to connect and discuss issues that are specific to growing up Black in the suburbs. BSP hosted three Family Day events during the 2022-2023 school year: BSP College Readiness, which connected families with university representatives; BSP Womens’ History Month Celebration, which celebrated the love and legacy of Black women; and Black& Cookout, an end of the year celebration where the program recognized graduating seniors and the exemplary work of organization members.

**Black& Podcast.** One special component of the BSP program was the creation of the Black& Podcast series. Through a partnership with Spotify, BSP produced Black& Podcast, a co-constructed platform by students and educators. Co-hosted alongside BSP co-founder, Geneva McCloud, student participants discussed topics related to the experiences of Black youth growing up in suburban neighborhoods. The Black& Podcast featured episodes titled, *The Future is Black, Black Joy!, and The Good, The Bad, The Suburbs.*

**Suburban Unified School District**

In 2022, Suburban Unified School District (SUSD) served a population of 30,726 students spread across 36 schools (23 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, and six high schools). Out of the student population, 1.7% of SUSD students identified as Black or African American; 8.5% of the student population identified as two or more races.

While there is no data on the specific ethnic breakdown of bi/multi racial students, it is

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1 Black College Expo, presented by the [National College Resources Foundation](https://www.nationalcollegeresourcesfoundation.org)
reasonable to assume that at least a small number of those students represent Black/African ethnicity. As for the roughly 1,533 faculty members employed by SUSD, there were only 16 Black teachers across the district; the remaining faculty demographic was 6 Indigenous educators, 26 teachers of two or more races, 65 Latine educators, 148 Asian educators, and 1,272 white educators.

**Mount Vernon High School**

Mount Vernon High School (Mount Vernon) is one of six high schools under SUSD and home to roughly 2,500 students, of which 16 identified as African American (.7%) and 239 identified as representing two or more races (9.8%). As it relates to Black teacher representation, Mount Vernon had one Black teacher among the faculty; there were a number of Black people in classified positions such as coaches, substitute teachers, and cafeteria workers. Regarding school climate, Mount Vernon was not unfamiliar with reported instances of racism on its campus that have been part of local news headlines. Some instances included graffitied “whites” and “colored only" signs above water fountains and urinals, a circulated video of a white student using racial slurs, and other acts of vandalism across the school campus.

**South Hampton High School**

South Hampton High School (South Hampton), also part of SUSD, has a student body of 2,112 students. Of this population, 25 identified as African American (1.2%) and 158 identified as two or more races (7.5%). There were no certified Black faculty on campus. Of the four schools that BSP operated in, South Hampton produced the smallest number of student participants in the program during the 2022-2023 school year and is the only school not represented in the findings. While there are no headlines attaching
South Hampton to any overt acts of racism, a local Northern California school district came under fire for hiring a former South Hampton principal due to his lack of vigilance when handling instances of racism and hate speech on campus.

**Davis High School**

Davis High school (Davis), also part of SUSD, has a student population of 3,384. Of that population, 91 students identified as African American (2.7%), while 162 reported being two or more races (4.8%). Davis had one Black teacher on its faculty with a small number of classified staff in support roles. Davis had the highest number of Black students of the four partnering schools; consequently, they represented the largest number of BSP attendees.

**Kensington High School**

Kensington High School (Kensington) had an enrollment of 2,942 students. From this number, 55 students identified as African American (1.9%) and 225 identified as belonging to two or more races (7.6%). With two credentialed Black faculty members on campus, Kensington had the highest number of Black teachers of the four partner schools. Kensington’s campus was also among the schools that struggled with racial climate. During the 2021-2022 school year, Kensington was in the local news for creating *whites only* and *Blacks only* signs on school water fountains, mocking the death of George Floyd via bathroom graffiti, and sporting a Black mannequin head named Karine as the mascot for the school’s cheerleading team.

**Research Participants**

True to a BEAR methodological approach, this study was a collaborative affair. The work produced in this space was not researcher-centered, but rather a community
effort that included the input of educators, students, and parents. As products of the suburban environments they choose to serve, BSP’s co-founders used their experiences to inform the specific gaps the organization would need to fill in defense of Black youth. The all-Black team of educators—credentialed and not—drew from their own experiences to curate curriculum and develop fictive kinships with students (Brown et al., 2018). However, equally important was the input provided by students and families, which was invaluable to the direction that BSP educators took throughout the course of the school year. This was a hella Black research initiative, created “for us, by us, to us, and thru us” (Black Scholars Project).

**Black Student Project Founders**

Co-founders, Dr. Geneva McCloud and Mrs. Ila Grace, are the architects behind BSP. After receiving her doctorate, Geneva felt called to return back to her suburban neighborhood. She wanted to provide the kind of space and programming for Black high school students in predominantly white schools that she wished were available to her when she was in high school. Ila, a former student of Geneva’s, was similarly motivated, having grown up in a suburban neighborhood. What started as a grassroots initiative that entailed the volunteering of their brothers and other family members to serve in facilitator and administrative roles, turned into a multi-branch operation that serves Black student communities in both Northern and Southern California school districts. With paid employees in place, Geneva and Ila’s roles have shifted towards funding initiatives, community partnerships, and further expansion of the organization.
Black Student Project Facilitators

The BSP 2022-2023 Facilitation Team consisted of three dope Black educators. Selah, our youngest member, was a recent college graduate who came from a family of community activists; she was drawn to the work due to her aspirations for a career in education or social work. Darryl, the only male facilitator in the cohort, was the only facilitator on the team who had prior experience working with BSP before the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic threw a wrench in his college plans, he participated in a social justice initiative during quarantine that garnered over $250,000 in donations—with one major contribution from award-winning recording artist, Lizzo—for school supplies for children in low socio-economic communities. Last, but certainly not least, April rounded out the group as the most seasoned facilitator among the four. A mother of two and administrative assistant in her late thirties, April chose the non-traditional route through academia; in addition to her work as a BSP facilitator, she was also completing an Associate’s degree with sights set on becoming a teacher.

Black Student Project Program Director

Through my role as Program Director, I worked closely with the facilitation team to design student and family programming throughout the academic year. I provided training and ongoing coaching to assist facilitators in developing humanizing pedagogies that were informed by their own schooling experiences. Given the heavy nature of our work, I also utilized my role to center healing; routinely, I gathered and guided facilitators through reflective activities as a means of unpacking the stressors that this work often produced. Lastly, in my role, I acted as a liaison between the organization and
school leaders; in addition to monthly meetings, I worked with administrators during instances of antiblack racism to encourage resolutions that were non-performative.

**Black Scholars Project Student Cohorts Scholars**

The 2022-2023 Black Scholars Projects student cohort was made up of 119 Black students across four high schools in the Suburban Unified School District in Northern California. The numeric distribution of students was consistent with the number of Black student enrollees at each of the participating schools; schools with a lower number of Black students often had fewer BSP registrants. Culturally, the 2022-2023 BSP student cohort consisted of students from multiple backgrounds. Ethnically, students represented African American, African, Afro-Caribbean, and bi/multi racial households and families. Additionally, a small number of students were African American adoptees growing up in white households.

**Mount Vernon BSP Scholars.** During the 2022-2023 school year, there were 23 registered students in BSP’s Mount Vernon cohort. Demographically, this cohort included nine female-identified students, 14 male-identified students, two 9th grade students, eight 10th grade students, eight 11th grade students, and five 12th grade students.

**South Hampton BSP Scholars.** During the 2022-2023 school year, there were nine registered students in BSP’s South Hampton cohort, making it the lowest-enrolled cohort across participating schools. Demographically, this cohort included three female-identified students, six male-identified students, two 9th grade students, two 10th grade students, eleven 11th grade students, and one 12th grade student.

**Davis BSP Scholars.** During the 2022-2023 school year, there were 60 registered students in BSP’s Davis cohort, making it the highest-enrolled cohort across participating
schools. Demographically, this cohort included 42 female-identified students, 18
male-identified students, 14 ninth grade students, 15 tenth grade students, 17 eleventh
grade students, and 14 twelfth grade students.

Kensington BSP Scholars. During the 2022-2023 school year, there were 27
registered students in BSP’s Kensington cohort. Demographically, this cohort included 15
female-identified students, 11 male-identified students, one non-binary student, six 9th
grade students, 10 tenth grade students, six 11th grade students, and five 12th grade
students.

Data Collection Plan

Student experiences were documented throughout the Spring 2023 semester of the
academic year. In order to accurately and humanistically represent the phenomenological
experiences of program attendees, I centered the following data: student surveys, student
community circle sessions (focus groups), and educator-researcher field observations.

End-of-Year Community Circle Sessions

In May of 2023, with the assistance of Selah from the facilitation team and
co-founder Ila, I held a series of in-person focus groups, which we referred to as
community circle sessions (circles). Circle participation was on a volunteer basis; all 119
BSP scholars were given the option to opt out of circle participation. In order to recruit
students for the circle, I held a series of three information sessions (two virtually, one
in-person) that described for families the nature of the study and extent of student
participation. In the end, we hosted a total of four circles: one at Mount Vernon, one at
Kensington, and two at Davis to accommodate for the higher number of student
volunteers. In total, there were six student circle members at Kensington, seven students
at Mount Vernon, and eight in each of the Davis groups. Because of the low number of BSP participating students within their cohort, South Hampton students did not participate in community reflection circles. Within circle space, students answered questions that encouraged them to reflect on their suburban school experiences as well as different aspects of their participation in the BSP program (See Appendix A).

**Data Analysis**

The data for this study was analyzed in three tiers: open coding, thematic analysis, and community-engaged processing. I started with open-coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to determine any initial thematic patterns amongst student responses. After coding, I used thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Creswell, 2003) to tighten connections across student narratives. However, after this stage, I felt that more input was necessary to ensure that the most prominent themes were highlighted. Because of my proximity to the study, I did not want the findings to be solely representative of the themes that only I felt were important. As a result, I developed a community-engaged analysis method that I called Black Womyn Be Knowin’ (BWBK). The BWBK analysis session consisted of four Black women educators; one high school principal, one high school English teacher, Geneva McCloud (co-founder of BSP), and me (program director of BSP). Utilizing our Cultural Intuition (Bernal, 2016; Rocha et al., 2016) and Theoretical Sensitivity (Solórzano & Yosso, 2016) to the condition of being schooled while Black in suburban space, we homed in on the themes that best illustrated the socialization of Black students in suburban space, while also highlighting the uplift they experienced in the BSP space.
**Researcher Background**

My favorite cinematic moment of all time is the final Easter dinner scene in Spielberg’s 1985 film adaptation of *The Color Purple*. It was a scene full of Black women revelations; centering mainly on Celie, a Black woman who had been treated like a mule her entire life, and Sofia, who was no man’s mule, but had the tenacity beat out of her by a systemically racist society. While Celie’s evolution was most central to the scene, it was Sofia’s uprising that I resonated with. Beaten down and weary, she drew strength from Celie’s display of resistance and channeled that energy to (re)discover the sound of her own voice; the deep laugh she belted out at the table was a release of the pain and oppression she endured. At the table, we watched her reconnect to her former brazen, unapologetic self. I liken my professional journey to Sofia’s odyssey. Like her, I too have demonstrated a history of not taking shit from anyone; however, also like Sofia, I know what it feels like to have the fire nearly beaten out of me. We both chose the fugitive trail, taking flight from table to table when love was no longer being served. Over the span of 15 years, I have taught in three states and four schools. Leaving each institution felt more like being squeezed out; despite my firm Sofia-like sense of refusal, after a while, the air would eventually get too thick to breathe, leaving me with no other perceived option than to journey on. I offer the following autoethnographic account to illustrate my own fugitive journey as a Black woman educator.

*Not Even In That Florida Water*

I love Harpo, Lord knows I do. But I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me.

—Sofia, *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985)
I taught in Florida the longest; she was my first love. I was housed at a predominantly Black high school that employed a majority POC faculty and administration. But ultimately there was not enough love—not even the love I had for the students—to allow myself to be controlled by the regime that slowly took over our school and changed the landscape of the community. During my tenure, I exchanged the state-mandated standardized curriculum that I was required to teach for a curriculum that was relevant and far more engaging for my students. When a principal who had constantly made life difficult for me complained about my visible tattoos, I got two more. When that same principal decided I was not a good fit with the faculty and used that as the basis for denying me tenure and job security for the following year—despite my literally flawless evaluation record—I took him head-on, with the help of the union, and won. Like Sofia and her husband, Harpo, the school district and I exchanged some nasty beatings throughout the years. But Sofia had a limit for how deeply she would allow her love to destroy her peace of mind and challenge her positive sense of self, and so did I. After a vice principal snatched away my AP Language and Composition position as retaliation for subverting a mandate that I had argued was a performative distraction from the actual work, I knew I had enough. Erasing all my hard work and effort in building up the AP Language course and achieving record-breaking AP exam scores for the school, just to replace me with a far less experienced white woman who would—and did—tank all the progress my students and I had made, was my final straw. I packed my buggy and headed up to Georgia.
Along The Fugitive Trail

I know what it like wanna go somewhere and cain't. I know what it like to wanna sing... and have it beat out 'ya.

—Sofia, *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985)

I experienced much of the same squeezing in Georgia. I entered my new high school position with a full plate: I advised the Student Government Association (SGA), coordinated the Talented And Gifted (TAG) program, and taught two sections of AP Language and Composition. It did not take me long to understand that many of my white colleagues had a problem with a Black woman having that much control on campus. Despite me being responsible for the majority of the student programming on campus, some of the faculty members openly questioned why the principal would build the SGA advisory into my day and not make it an ancillary after-school duty. I received massive pushback for implementing a culturally responsive assessment model that ensured that all students, but specifically Black and Latine students were not overlooked for gifted services. My competency to teach AP Language and Composition—something I had already excelled at for years—was challenged by white parents and students who reported everything I assigned to white teachers in my department who had less experience teaching the course, if any at all. I was getting hit from every angle, constantly. I did my best to stay insulated in the love of my students and the classroom space I created, but, by year three, the pressure began eating away at me. I knew it was over when I was suspended for sitting in solidarity with students during an on-campus Black Lives Matter protest. I really knew it was over a year later when I was followed
home by a police officer for three consecutive days after accosting a student from a well-connected family over an act of antiblack racism.

Escaping the antiblack trenches of Georgia, I moved on to California in 2018; I was soon disappointed to find much of the same energy in a place that I had idealized as being ultra progressive. I was the only Black faculty member—for the first time in my career—at a Northern California charter school that served a majority Hispanic student community. Between the inexperienced young white teachers—fresh out of Teach For America—and the direct, antiblack racism that I experienced and witnessed from some of the teachers and students, I questioned what I was even doing there. This experience was my turning point; I had finally reached my threshold for what I would accept in any setting. My graduate school experience had lit a fire in me; for the first time in my education I read, wrote, and engaged in discussions on topics that were often hushed, unexplored, and discouraged throughout my career. For the first time, I was favored for saying all the things that had made me unpopular—or detested, depending on who you asked—throughout the course of my career. In that, I felt vindicated. Being in an academic space where I could deeply unpack the history of hegemony and systemic antiblackness in schools made life at the charter school stifling; nothing could quell the rage that was slowly brewing inside me.

**Making Us Matter, Amidst a Pandemic**

Oh… Sofia home, now. Sofia home.

—Sofia, *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985)

Just before I was about to implode, the pandemic came to deliver me. In saying this, I do not mean to minimize the seriousness of the time period; many
families—including my own—were tragically affected by the COVID-19 virus. However, going into quarantine allowed me a professional peace that I had not known was possible. For a year and a half, I did not have to engage in workplace microaggressions; and when I felt one brewing over the screen, I could close my laptop and blame it on connectivity issues later. Being in control of the amount of white noise I took in on a weekly basis was freeing. Before that, I had not realized just how much entering institutionalized spaces was an affront to my mental and spiritual wellbeing. Despite being home on lockdown, I felt energized in a way that I had not been in quite some time.

Newly energized, I co-founded Making Us Matter (MUM) not long after the start of quarantine. Launched in April of 2020, MUM was a joint endeavor between two Black women teacher/graduate students who wanted to provide interim schooling for secondary students whose schools had not yet implemented a virtual platform. Along with an all-Black team of community volunteers, we built courses that centered topics that were specific to the racialized experiences of Black people. In the midst of our work, George Floyd was murdered. Instinctively, we began building curriculum into our courses that was responsive to the racial pandemic that was erupting around us. If we were back at work, we likely would have been asked not to speak about it at all. Creating MUM gave us freedom from an overwhelmingly white gaze and freedom to spiritually nourish (Obaizamomwan-Hamilton & Jenkins, 2021) Black children and other non-Black children of color in ways that do not often take place in schools.

Towards a Homeplace

Hell, no.

2 https://www.democracynow.org/topics/george_floyd/16
—Sofia, *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985)

My second favorite scene in Spielberg’s (1985) *The Color Purple* was Sofia’s confrontation with Celie after Sofia’s first physical altercation with Harpo. Celie, whose spirit had been long-broken, attempted to offer Sofia an emotional salve to a life of misogynoir. She says to her, “This life is temporary; heaven lasts always” (Spielberg, 1985). However, Sofia quickly returns, “You better bash Mister in the head and think about heaven later” (Spielberg, 1985). I loved this exchange because of Sofia’s commitment to refusal; she was unwilling to stand in the oppression she had been handed. Unable to abolish the hegemonic systems that dictated where she moved, she chose to take control over how she moved. This is the mindset that drives my pedagogy. I am not interested in patiently waiting for the right reform to change the sociopolitical landscape of schooling; that will never happen. Rather, I have—and will continue to—construct *homeplaces* that subvert systemic oppression in real time, right here.

Throughout my graduate school experience, I have listened to and read about Black teachers who described their evolutions as a journey that led them to their voices. While I empathize with and take pride in these narratives, I never felt like that was my story. From year one, I was insistent on openly subverting all dehumanizing school practices; it never occurred to me that I could not. Upon reflection, I would have to say that this is likely because my teaching journey began in a *homeplace* (hooks, 2014/1994). For the first five years of my career, I was professionally raised by a village of Black women—like Mrs. Leonard, like Mrs. Williams, like Ms. Coney, like Ms. Austin, like Ms. Jarvis, like Ms. Risper—who went out their way to hold me up and help me grow confident in my craft. Just like Sofia, I drew my strength from a community of Black
women who keenly understood that a life of fugitivity meant a life where you are just within arm’s reach of recapture, so you better be sharp. Having been insulated in the love and wisdom of Black women—a privilege I do not take for granted—gave me the strength and confidence to come in hot, move on when it was time, and love myself enough to know that when whiteness comes for me, I have it within me to (re)member who I am, throw my head back, and laugh like hell.
Chapter IV: FINDINGS—Black Student Identity Development in Suburban Space

To understand the ways in which Black high school students benefit from education spaces that exclusively focus on the holistic uplift of Black youth, it is first important to examine the school climates that necessitate the presence of these spaces. Overall, the findings reflect that the totality of Black students’ interactions with educators and peers in suburban schools had profound effects on Black student identity development. As a result of these interactions, Black students developed social survival skills to help them navigate the blatant and systemic antiblackness they observed and experienced. The following chapter unpacked student testimony about their encounters with majority-white faculties, school administrations, district leaders, and their white and other non-Black peers. Student testimonials also described the mechanisms Black youth developed to socially survive in their suburban school district.

Impact of Educators

This section of the findings represents student testimony that reflected the perceived impact of teacher interactions at their respective suburban high schools. Overall, students reported feeling simultaneously ignored and under the microscope, constantly stereotyped, expected to participate in school climate initiatives, and accepted only when their talents converged with the interests of the school. The following sections present student testimony on the politics of visibility, mischaracterization, racialized labor, and acceptance upon condition.

A Politics of Visibility

When describing their daily interactions with their teachers, students reported feeling as though they were in a paradoxical state of invisibility and hypervisibility all at
once. Students shared testimonies that described the myriad ways their opinions and efforts had been overlooked by their teachers, while simultaneously feeling centered and under the microscope because of their race. Rather than feeling holistically seen, many students shared that they felt that their teachers sought them out—sometimes superficially, sometimes genuinely—to make conversation about their racialized experiences. Some students described these interactions as weird and off-putting. However, the overall perception of these interactions varied. Steph, a student at Davis, endearingly shared her experience with an AP English teacher who openly made special accommodations for her as the first Black student she had ever taught in an advanced class. As Steph explained:

I’m the first Black kid that she’s ever had in an AP class that she’s taught, so she makes sure that I’m doing well in her class. She goes out of her way to give me all the best opportunities that she finds and all the resources that she has to make sure that I do well in that class. Because in my class I’m the only—everybody in my class is Asian—I’m the only non-Asian and I happen to be Black… She’s not really singling me out, just making sure that I’m doing better than everyone else because she knows—of course she’s not Black—but she knows how it works, how Black students aren’t really expected to do well in school, but she makes sure I’m not fitting into that standard.

Despite what were likely her best intentions, by centering Steph’s race as the motivation for providing supplemental academic support, this teacher had effectively communicated her perception of the limited academic capacities of Black students. The student’s warm telling of this narrative suggested that she too had adopted the teacher’s marginalizing
view of Black student performance in Advanced Placement courses.

Students also reported feeling uncharacteristically hypervisible during cultural celebrations, especially during Black History Month. Not only were Black students put on the spot in classes where they were often the only Black bodies in the room, but many of their interactions revealed that their teachers had no real concept of Black culture and were in fact relying on their Black students to provide context. Jordan, a student at Kensington, referenced a classroom experience where her teacher celebrated recording artist Bruno Mars during Black History Month without even realizing that Bruno Mars is not Black:

When they do talk about Black History, it’s only during February and it’s only for their lesson. My Spanish teacher [did a lesson where we] talked about famous Black people and one of them was Bruno Mars, but if you know Bruno Mars, he isn’t Black. So when I saw that, I just eye-rolled.

Black History Month is a national celebration of the legacy of strength, perseverance, and genius of Black Americans. However, in suburban space the month becomes a dreaded affair that signals to Black students the insincerity of their school’s reverence for Black culture and their teacher’s willingness to objectify them for the sake of performative cultural recognition.

More extreme student testimony revealed stories of how invisibilization had led to perceived emotional neglect. Overall, students identified their teachers’ lack of personal care as the standard for student-teacher interactions; there was no expectation that teachers would check in on them when they experienced extended absences or when students appeared to be having a bad day. Another Kensington student, Karla, shared a
heartbreaking account of how she felt willfully overlooked by her teachers and school counselors when her friend—a beloved student in the school community—died by suicide:

A friend of mine committed suicide. My teacher told the whole class and we just sat there. My reaction to it [was to] stare at the wall for like forty five minutes. Then a counselor came up behind me and she was talking to me about the music that my teacher was playing in the background—and I don’t want to talk about music right now. That counselor never came back to talk to me because there was a group of kids full-blown sobbing. And I wasn’t sobbing, but I was still hurt by the situation and she only decided to talk to me one time. And because I wasn’t crying, she thought I wasn’t sad enough, so I just never got help with it.

In this scenario, invisibilization was clearly at play. How Karla chose to emote her grief should not matter. However, the social worker’s inability (or lack of care) in looking beyond the stoic Black girl and instead flocking to crying white students who publicly displayed a recognizable and relatable display of grief was an indication of her disregard.

**Racialized Labor on Black Students**

Student narratives also uncovered the extent to which Black students had been taking up the burden to systematically improve their school experiences on adversarial campuses. Across community circles, students at each school site referenced the Black Student Union (BSU) Symposium, in particular. The symposium was a district-sponsored event wherein students associated with their high school’s BSU could come and address concerns with the superintendent and other district leaders. This event was catalyzed by a string of incidents—some of which made local headlines—involving acts of antiblack
racism. Students shared narratives about going head-to-head with district leaders, voicing their grievances over not only how their schools responded to acts of racism, but their school experiences as Black students in general. The perceived response to their concerns was adversarial. Many students spoke at length about the ways district leaders would deflect, often placing the onus on Black students to tell the district what measures they believe should be taken. Mya, a senior at Davis High School, recalled a back-and-forth she engaged in with the superintendent over proposed changes to the school’s curriculum:

I asked [the superintendent] if he was willing to take out certain parts of the curriculum that made us feel uncomfortable as Black students, because [the district leaders] haven’t done anything. And he goes, “You’re wrong! And let me tell you why you’re wrong.” I said, “I’m not wrong. So what have you done?” I told him how I wasn’t wrong, [how I knew] that I wasn’t wrong, and what [the district] don’t do. Every time that he would try to cut me off, I’d be like, “No; I’m not done, thank you.” And he would try to answer my question with a question or be really condescending towards me. And then he told the Black girl next to me, “You won’t be silenced.” and then looked at me and smirked and did a little giggle. I cut him off in his tracks because I see what [he was] doing and [he’s] not gonna do that; and [he’s] making not just me, but my entire group of people feel some type of way. [He’s] trying to belittle us and it’s not right. So I felt super empowered, I was like, “I’m talking back to a white man, y’all!”

This unapologetic refusal to accept low brow responses to critical concerns was consistent among all symposium attendees in the community circle. They kicked the onus of developing welcoming school environments back over to district leaders, accosting
leadership for not putting the same effort into improving racial climates as they
themselves had done as teen-aged students. Within the communal confines of our circle, Eric, a junior at Davis, connected the outcome of the symposium to the life cycle of sociopolitical consciousness he believed Black suburban youth experience in high school:

It feels like [the district leaders] are just here to say, “Oh we were here, oh we listened to them, oh we’re gonna do something,” but they really don’t do anything. We’re here for four years and then we’re gonna leave. When you’re a freshman, you damn-near—hardly—know what’s going on about yourself, so how are you gonna do anything? Sophomore year, you’re just coming into your own. And then junior and senior year are really the only two years where you have anything to do. And by the time you become a senior they don’t give a fuck about anything you’re saying because you’re about to leave in five months. They don’t care! It’s a constant cycle! How is it that people who I know, who went to this school experienced the same things I have, and they went here eight years ago? Nothing is being done!

In addition to the exceptional—and rare—opportunities for them to directly engage with district leadership, student testimonials revealed the day-to-day labors Black students were expected to take on during moments of racial tension. Students shared instances of being asked to sit on panels about race and racism during school wide assemblies, sought out by school administrators to brainstorm restorative programming and solutions, and leaned on by their teachers to act as ambassadors for the Black community when the occasion called. On this subject, Eric also talked about a community healing circle organized by school leaders in response to an act of antiblack
racism that was committed on campus. He felt that the circle did not “go deep enough” and did not attract the students who needed the message most. He brought this concern to his English teacher (one of the teachers responsible for the community circle) who agreed to center a lesson on the \textit{N\textregistered} word in each of her English classes. Unfortunately, Eric found the teacher’s presentation to be lackluster and asked if he could do the lesson himself. After he delivered the lesson to the class, the teacher asked Eric if he could do the presentation in all the other English classes, to which he agreed.

While told in a positive light, Eric's testimony reflects his teacher’s unpreparedness to work in racially heterogeneous classrooms. Furthermore, her willingness to hand over the task to a Black student indicates the thoughtlessness Eric’s teacher was operating with when it came to further taxing the racialized experience of a Black student. In this moment, the teacher was demonstrating her lack of foresight by assuming that an adolescent who was navigating his own intersectional identity was prepared to teach antiracist principles to his peers, no matter how willing he may have been to take up the task.

\textit{Mischaracterization by Teachers}

Another factor that had marked impacts on Black student identity development was the extent to which students felt they were stereotyped and mischaracterized by their teachers. Their experiences indicated incidents where students felt they had been criminalized, tone policed, forced into racial archetypes, and presumed incompetent. For example, Zhane, a student at Kensington High, talked about a verbal altercation that ensued between her and a teacher who she said had been giving her trouble all school year. As she explained it, she was having an allergy attack and needed to flush her eye;
she alerted the teacher and immediately left the room. In response, the teacher sent a picture of Zhane through the school’s security, stating that Zhane had not properly asked for permission to leave the room and could be up to suspicious activity. On another occasion, this same teacher sent Zhane to the principal’s office for being tardy. However, as Zhane put it, “If students got sent to the principal’s office for being tardy, there would be a line out the door; everyone is tardy.”

One of the most compelling narratives came from Mya at Davis High who shared a story about an interaction she had with a white male teacher who suggested that she was not Black enough to set her sights on attending a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). As Mya tells it,

I was saying to [the teacher] how I wanted to go to an HBCU because I wanted the community; whenever I’m around Black people I just feel so loved and so liberated and happy. And it’s beautiful; it’s honestly just beautiful and something I want to [be a part of]. And so I was talking about it, and he goes, “Just the type of Black girl you are, I don’t think an HBCU would really fit you… because you’re so pro-Black but at the same time you’re very [bubbly] and they’re gonna have a problem with that. You need to stop trying to fit so much into the Black community.” Basically, [he was saying] that’s what my problem was. And I’m like, “Okay.”

As displayed by his commentary, this teacher had no concept of Black youth identity development and even less of a concept about who attends HBCUs. What he also likely did not understand was that as a Black student growing up in overwhelmingly white space, Mya felt detached from her cultural roots and was seeking a connection
through an HBCU experience. However, as a voice of authority and influence, this teacher not only dashed Mya’s hope of attending an HBCU, he also exacerbated the insecurities she was already experiencing around her place within her own community.

**Acceptance Upon Condition by Teachers**

The first question I posed in the community reflection circle was: Tell us about a time where you felt seen, heard, and cared for at your high school (outside of BSP programming). Across all four circles, the immediate consensus was crickets. However, when the testimony began to slowly surface, student responses reflected a conditioned acceptance of their positionality. Jameel, a sophomore at Mount Vernon High School, described the acceptance he received from teachers and school leaders as being “transactional,” feeling as though he was only seen because of his athletic ability. Even though he was not completely impervious to being perceived negatively by some of his teachers, he attributed his status on the football team to the overall positive perception he enjoyed on campus.

Other students have found favor with teachers to whose temperaments they have learned to cater to. These students attributed their positive relationships with teachers who otherwise maintain no-nonsense stances to their ability to act right and not give the teacher any problems. Mary, a junior at Davis, talked about a teacher she became close to who she initially felt was going to give her a hard time. However, according to Mary, “[the teacher] just matches energy with students; if you act up in class, she’s not going to care about you.” While Mary’s critique of her teacher was positive and described her as simply “matching energy,” the limitations of her age and positionality obscured her from understanding that her teacher should absolutely not have been “matching energy” with
youth. Openly disregarding the academic potential for students who do not follow the rules not only sent the message that people can be thrown away, but also reinforced the idea for Mary that in order to be acknowledged and accepted, one must demonstrate compliance.

**Impact of Peer Interactions**

The proceeding section centers student testimony on the perceived impact of their peer interactions within the confines of their suburban high schools. Across circle sessions, students shared testimony that reflected tenuous peer relationships that featured overt racism that felt more direct than the microaggressions they experienced from teachers, similar bouts of mischaracterization, and acceptance predicated on their willingness to be stereotyped within their friend groups. The following findings sections unpack the blatant acts of racism, mischaracterization, and conditioned acceptance student participants reported encountering at their schools.

**Blatant Acts of Racism**

The biggest difference between how students perceived the racism they experienced from their peers and the racism they experienced from their teachers was the intensity. While students reported feeling racially othered by their teachers’ display of microaggressions, when it came to interactions with their peers, the racism was more direct. Reflecting on things they had witnessed and their own personal experiences, students shared stories about the ways they felt racially antagonized. Many referenced the day-to-day interactions that included requests from white and other non-Black friends for *N word Passes*, antiblack slurs, and witnessed acts of racism against non-Black students of color. As Toni from Davis testified:
It’s not even just about Black people, [white students] say things like, Mexicans only know how to mow lawns. There was literally a fight in my [biology] class because this Asian guy scored higher than this white kid on a test. [The white student] said, “You only scored higher because you’re Asian.” This [other] kid was making fun of Nigerian people and was saying, “Oh, you guys are just a bunch of monkeys.” I was so gagged that I didn’t know what to say.

Several students also reflected on more extreme incidents that had made local headlines. For example, students unpacked two incidents that occurred at athletic events. During a varsity basketball game, white students began to shout out racial epithets at Black players on the opposing team whenever they went to the free-throw line. Another often-referenced incident took place during a football game wherein a group of white male students ganged up on two BIPOC students — a Latino male and a Black female—in the stadium’s parking lot.

Students also shared testimony that talked about the shock and pain of experiencing antiblackness from non-Black students of color. A huge part of the community circles were spent reflecting on how whiteness can operate without white people being present. Lara, another senior at Davis shared her shock at experiencing racial antagonism at her predominantly Asian high school. Like many of her Black peers at Davis, she believed that the common relationship with racism and historical exclusion Black and Asian people shared would have bonded them; they were stung to discover that many of the Asian students treated them in the same way as their white peers. Students talked about feeling invisibilized during moments where the word nigga would be blurted out or used casually by their non-Black POC peers with no care or discretion about them
being present. Even more sobering were accounts where students talked about the antiblackness they experienced within their own BIPOC friend groups. Onika talked about a recurring experience she endured with two friends of Indian descent:

I have these friends in one of my classes who I’ve been talking to for a really long time. They both happen to be Indian and they made jokes about it—I never made a joke surrounding their race because I didn’t think it was my place to—we’ve just had casual jokes. But my friends call me random things like, “Oh my gosh, you’re like a dog” or call me animal names. And I’d be like, “That’s so rude; why would you say that?” And he was like, “Well, it was just a joke,” and I didn’t know how to take it.

When asked to consider whether she was afraid of losing these friends or afraid of being left alone, Onika began to cry. These are the kinds of negotiations Black children are positioned to make in suburban school settings. I told her—along with the other students in the circle—that when they find themselves offended or feel called to self-advocate—regardless of whether or not they can muster the courage to actually do so—that this is the part of them that is refusing disrespect and engaging in self-love.

Despite the confirmation, Onika’s disposition told the story of a Black girl who reluctantly accepted dehumanization over the perceived terror of ostracization and loneliness.

Student testimonies also revealed their conditioned understanding of how racist peer encounters are handled by the administration and school community. Several of the community circles reported instances of antiblack racism that were performatively addressed or not addressed at all. In Mount Vernon’s circle, students shared an incident
involving a white male student who had committed an act of antiblack racism on campus. As a restorative measure, the school made the offending student enroll in the social justice class, a class that had been primarily composed of Black students. Students in the class complained that they no longer felt safe to emote around course topics in the offending student’s presence, describing the administration’s decision as having the opposite of its intended effect; everyone was silenced.

The school and district’s inadequate response also surfaced familiar tropes related to tone policing and the reverse punishment of Black students who reacted to being targets of antiblack racism. Ahmad shared his experience with school administration after having been called a racial slur by a white student on campus:

Last year something happened to me; I got called a nigger. And when it got brought up to the school, all they did was give [the offending student] a suspension. [The school administrators] were more worried about me going to do something to the dude than him actually calling me a nigger, when he has a reputation for being belligerent and just, (shakes his head) WILD! They were still more worried about me doing something; that makes me feel really bad. I feel like what [admin] did wasn’t enough; all they did was give him a vacation. He didn’t change in any type of way; he came back the same dude.

Again, the incident that Ahmad described is consistent with the calculated mental self-checking Black people are often called to do when we are the targets of blatant antiblack racism. The experience Ahmad described is one wherein Black people have commonly understood that the cost of reacting to racism is often criminalization.
Mischaracterization by Fellow Students

Several students discussed the discomfort they experienced upon discovering that some of their closest friends were more committed to assigning them to Black stereotypes than acknowledging their capacities for individuality. One student talked about a disagreement she had with another Black student in her predominantly white friend group; amidst their verbal altercation, the white students in the group began to film the ordeal, egging the Black girls on from the sidelines. Karla from Kensington shared a sobering reality she had come to grips with when her predominantly white friend group responded coldly to some trauma she had endured one morning:

One time last year, I had witnessed some stuff in my house and I tried to go to school a couple hours after. And I was shaken by what I saw so my friends were asking me what’s up because I didn’t want to talk. And then when I tell them, they didn’t even give it a second thought. I told them what happened and they just went back to being themselves. I guess they were worried that it was something about them, but once they found out it wasn’t they just didn’t care anymore.

When asked how this interaction with her friends made her feel, Karla responded:

It makes me feel there’s no point in telling people how I feel, so I don’t. I guess since I’m the Black friend I’m expected to be happy and joking and giggling. And when I’m not, it’s like I’m subtracted from the group. Once I don’t serve my purpose, I’m gone.

Karla had made the choice to emotionally disengage, but not physically disengage with her friend group. In doing so, she was negotiating ways to still belong despite having received the message that she was not regarded as a human being with feelings. Through
this incident, she learned that in order to be a part of the group, she had to numb the part of herself that she felt was deserving of understanding, care, and compassion. If she was not the comic relief for the group, she ran the risk of being invisibilized.

**Acceptance Upon Condition by Students**

As I mentioned earlier, each community circle began with the prompt: Think about a time where you felt seen, heard, and cared for on campus and tell us about it. When students answered this question within the context of their peers, again, it was the student athletes who had the most to say. They attributed the favorable treatment they received from their friends to their performances on the field, track, and courts. In unpacking this phenomenon, students attributed their favorable treatment to societal intrigue of Black athletes. In their opinion, their white and non-Black peers of color befriended them because of what they represented, not because of who they were. This status kept Black student athletes in the favor of their peers in a way that was ironically unconditional. As Naomi from Mount Vernon put it,

I’m good at [basketball], so even when I’m wrong [on the court], [my teammates] will still hear me out and be like, “Oh yea, yea, yea.” But then the coach will be like, “No that’s wrong.” But [my teammates] still agree with me because I’m good at sports and have a leadership role [on the team].

**Methods of Social Survival**

The perceived sum of the Black suburban student experience is marked with conditioned acceptance, mischaracterization, racialized labor, concurrent hypervisibility and invisibility, and blatant acts of antiblack racism, to boot. Each of these factors have contributed to how the Black students in this study navigated and negotiated their sense
of self amidst a school environment that was systemically antagonistic to their development. What came up collectively in the student testimonies was the survival tactics students developed to weather suburban school climates. Two specific factors were recurrent throughout the circle sessions; each of them were rooted in the suppression of Black student identity.

**Self Muting**

Students shared testimony that described situations wherein they felt it necessary to waterdown aspects of their personalities as a mental safeguard from potential racism. One of the most common examples shared centered the perceived incompetence that was projected onto them from their teachers and peers. Students who were tired of raising their hands in class, just to be ignored, stopped raising their hands altogether to avoid feeling rejection. Mary, from Davis, provided an example of what it felt like being silenced in an Advanced Placement math class with majority Asian peers:

> When I’m in a weighted class, AP or Honors, [the class demographic] is typically Indian or Asian; I’m the only Black kid there. And [I’m often confronted with] the stereotype of I don’t know anything, I’m stupid, I can’t do anything right. Anytime I’m in a group, I feel like they look past me or over me. I can be like, “Hey guys, I think this is the wrong answer; we need to review that,” and they act like they don’t hear me; like I didn’t say anything. And then once it gets checked out by the teacher, and it comes out wrong, I’m like, “Oh, that’s crazy.” That happens a lot. And since this has happened most of my academic life, I don’t say anything anymore. I’m just gonna act stupid because it’s easier than wasting my breath.
As a teacher who has gotten a chance to build a rapport with Mary, I was surprised by her testimony. The Mary I know is super opinionated and very talkative; her cup overflows often during workshops. As a politically relevant Black teacher, it angers me to know that she has been conditioned to self-invisibilize and surrender to a stereotype in suburban spaces.

Students reported other ways in which they engaged with intentional self muting. One of the most captivating testimonies came from Zhane, who described the ways in which she navigated colorism in her school community. According to Zhane, she constantly interacted with people who mistook her for being mean; she attributed these experiences to the broader perceptions of dark skinned Black women. Comparatively, she observed the social privileges allotted to light skinned Black girls on campus; she specifically mentioned a light skinned student at school who publicly passes gas and gets told that that is not “light skin behavior.” Although Zhane was resentful of the negative archetypes that get applied to dark skinned Black women, she still remained present in how she presented herself out of fear of being labeled. Thus, she tried not to come across too passionately or argumentative, even when she wanted to. In effect, she engaged in an imposed self-mischaracterization. Nonetheless, in space with us, Zhane declared, “I’m an angry Black woman and so what if I’m mad sometimes.”

The second way self muting manifested itself as a social survival mechanism came by way of a conditioned defeat. Student testimony revealed that as early as high school, these Black students were coming to grips with the permanence of their racialized positionality. Mount Vernon student, Jameel, connected how he is treated at school to how broader society perceives Black men. He expressed feeling unfree to display any
emotion in any situation for fear of being labeled “either aggressive or too sensitive.” As a means of self-protection, Jameel maintained a neutral disposition while on campus; rather than emoting at school, he preferred holding it all in until he got home.

Nzinga, another Mount Vernon student, shared a story about a forensic teacher who displayed antiblack content during a class lesson. Apparently, the teacher played a documentary for the class that characterized Black people as having dense heads as a justification for why Black people don’t swim. The same video purported that Black people’s heads were better suited for basketball. Nzinga advocated for the removal of the film for the course and appealed to school administration for support. In the end, the forensic teacher remained installed in her position after a brief suspension, and it was Nzinga who ended up dropping the class in the fourth quarter of her senior year due to the teacher’s continued antagonism post suspension. Before the incident, Nzinga said she was very trusting of the institution, but she realized that at the end of the day, the adults around her were only talking; none of them were actually doing anything to support her. She felt like all the advocating was for naught; what seemed like a promising outcome ended up not working out and only got worse the more she tried to fight it. Moving forward, Nzinga planned to “save [her]self the anxiety” and remain silent in the future. She elaborates,

I feel like for me moving forward has meant getting rid of the expectation that people should care. And even in my friendships [when racist incidents] happen, I’ve just kind of been like ‘okay, I can still be friends with you, I still love you, I’ve been friends with you my whole childhood; but I can separate that and not expect you to actually have my back.
At age 17, this Black girl has already accepted defeat. She has chosen silence as a survival method both socially and academically. In other words, she planned to utilize her Double Consciousness to develop a sort of dissonance along her trajectory. Even when I attempted to convince her that she did not have to settle for this, she was not in a space where she could receive the truth in the affirmation.

*Admitted, But Not Welcome*

The weight of the testimony revealed that having access to well-resourced schools did not necessarily guarantee a quality educational experience for Black suburban youth. The education they did receive, however, was on the politics of movement. At a young age, their schooling has conditioned them for a life where they will often be least likely acknowledged for their humanity and intellect, willfully misunderstood, and powerless against any direct or indirect acts of racism charged against them. They were also learning that surviving this social death means negotiating which elements of their identity are up for auction. In the next findings chapter, I unpack student testimony that centers the perceived impact that the BSP program had on student participants.
Chapter V: FINDINGS—Black Student Identity Development in BLES Space

If suburban school spaces are where Black student identities become diminished, then BLES spaces are where those identities are given a chance to bloom. Through workshops and extracurricular programming, BSP provided Black students with a curriculum that centered the intersections of Black life, access to Black politically relevant teaching, and a space to conceptualize what it means to be in Black community. In this space, students were able to make organic connections with other Black students and further unpack the phenomenological experience of being Black and schooled in suburbia. From these interactions emerged varying methods of what I call social surthrival, where messages of racial uplift began to take root and presented themselves in the ways in which students began to advocate and create student-led spaces and initiatives influenced by BSP.

Impact of Educators

When discussing the impact of the all-Black facilitation team, students talked less about direct interactions with facilitators and more about the atmosphere the BSP educators were able to create on behalf of the students. Student testimony communicated an appreciation for facilitators for broadening their scopes of cultural reference. The following sections detail student perceptions on the BSP curriculum, educator facilitation styles, and the facilitators’ assistance in helping students navigate the complexities of Black community.

A Reflective Curriculum

According to the students, one of the biggest impacts of BSP participation was their engagement with the Black& workshops. Students described their workshop
experience as one wherein they were able to engage in self-reflection and discovery and the praxis of love. An overwhelming amount of testimony was specifically centered around the Black& Hair and Black& Love workshops. For many students, Black& Hair gave them the opportunity to self-reflect on how they saw themselves and discover how their positionality in suburban schools had affected their self-perceptions. Ella from Davis named the Black& Hair workshop as one of her favorites because it allowed her the opportunity to reflect on her own hair journey. She shared:

For me it was Black& Hair because growing up, my hair has been a big part of my life. I don’t have a lot of it now, but there’s a reason for that. Growing up I really wanted my hair to be really really long because I saw all the white girls; they had shoulder bangs and it was enviable because I thought that was the beauty standard. Mind you, I had an afro so [my hair] wasn’t going to [look like that], but I was trying so hard. I was combing out my hair so hard, I was losing my edges. I just didn’t understand that there was beauty within myself until over the pandemic. I was like, “Maybe that’s not the goal to look like a white girl; maybe [the goal] is to embrace what I look like.” So I cut off all my hair. It was doing the complete opposite of what I was trying to do all my childhood. I’ve never been happier. It seems like a surface-level thing but for me it represented a bigger thing because society tells us that Black hair isn’t the standard. And just growing up and finally learning that it’s a part of my Blackness that I’m allowed to embrace and allowed to be proud of and think that it’s beautiful; that meant a lot to me. I really enjoyed that workshop.

Hair journeys are significant aspects of Black life. For Black women and girls in
particular, our hair is socially scrutinized, shamed, and appropriated all at once. We saw this in Ella’s testimony when she literally destroyed her hair in pursuit of European beauty standards. However, where else would she have an opportunity to reflect on this journey in community with other Black students, in a school setting, no less? The way her suburban high school is structured left little to no access to Black teachers, Black-centered curriculum, and even Black students.

What was remarkable to witness both in the student circles and during the presentation of the Black&Hair workshop were the connections our Black boys discovered they had to the topic. Eric from Davis mentioned Black&Hair as a stand out for him, namely because he did not expect to participate in the workshop as much as he had. The conversations during the workshop made him reflect on his own hair consciousness in ways that he had not before. This was specifically significant because topics related to Black hair are so often centered around Black women and girls. But, in workshop space, he was able to unpack the ways in which Black men and boys are also impacted by their hair stories.

Students appreciated the provision of space to trade testimonies and draw connections between what otherwise felt like isolated incidents, no matter the topic. Students took a particular interest in Black&Hair because of the uplift they experienced in witnessing other people’s hair stories; many believed that it added to the sense of community within the group, especially considering the imposed Eurocentric beauty standards that dominated their school communities. However, even students who did not have testimony to share found value in what the testimonies of others revealed about their own lives. During the community circle session, Nzinga from Mount Vernon described
what it felt like to listen to the hair stories of students who had learned to love and embrace their hair when she herself had not yet reached that part of her hair journey:

I think it was just cool to see how many different experiences people have had, how different their experience was based on the kind of hair that they have. Like how my experience was very different from Jameel’s experience with his hair. Mine has always been a negative thing and for others it’s been more of a positive. [Listening to the positive experiences] kinda made me feel sad because my experience is just different from other people’s. I feel like I need to figure out my personal issues with my hair before I can move forward.

As unresolved as Nzinga was on the subject of her hair, her engagement in the Black&Hair workshop planted a seed for deeper self-discovery, hopefully towards a more positive sense of self. The ability to engage in communal self-reflection was a practice that students described as inaccessible to them in their suburban classrooms and extracurricular spaces. However, in the BLES space provided by BSP, Black students were given room to explore their identities.

**Politically Relevant Educators**

Beyond what BSP facilitators provided students by way of workshop curriculum, students found value in simply witnessing Black educators’ portrayals of Blackness. The majority of community circle students talked about the limited access they had to Black adults in academic settings. Beyond their home lives, many students had limited interactions with Black people in positions of authority. For Black students who are biracial and living with their non-Black parents or family members, and Black students who were transracial adoptees, the interactions with BSP facilitators were often the only
interaction students had with Black adults. As student testimony revealed, having consistent access to Black educators was invaluable to helping students navigate antiblackness. Karla from Kensington referenced the testimonies shared by some of the BSP facilitators during the Black & Microaggressions workshop:

   Every time there’s a [workshop] you supply us with videos like the one about microaggressions or the one about hair texture and I get to watch people discuss their experiences. And since I’m at such a young age and the population of Black people isn’t really high around here, I don’t usually get to hear these experiences about microaggressions or people being attacked for their skin color. [Being] able to listen to people’s experiences [across age groups] is eye-opening to me because if something like that were to happen to me, maybe I’d think it’s nothing; but since other people are telling what happened to them and it’s a serious problem, I’m like, “You’re right, and we should do something about that.”

   It is one thing to experience a microaggression. However, being able to name and navigate that microaggression in a way that does not complicate your self perception is something different altogether. Like many student participants, Karla assumed that her experiences were happening in a vacuum or at the very least, part of an adolescent experience. Taking in the testimony of the Black adults in the space broadened their understanding of how antiblackness operates in the lifeworld of Black people across ages. BSP facilitators were honest about their encounters with racial microaggressions, sharing incidents that left them feeling both defeated and triumphant; these narratives served as models for how students might process and navigate future microaggressions.

   Zhane from Kensington shared the impact of watching me handle a white woman
teacher who had interrupted our workshop to center an announcement she attempted to make. She reflected on the entitlement of some of her teachers who engaged in the practice of bursting into classrooms unannounced—regardless of whose class it was—to deliver information on upcoming events related to their class or club. According to students, this practice went on uncontested, despite its disruptiveness. However, Zhane described watching me dismiss the teacher the moment she entered the workshop space as a pleasant surprise. Even when the white teacher attempted to resist my dismissal, my persistence in simply repeating “thank you; goodbye” over the white teacher’s talking was something that Zhane—or any of the other students—had never seen before in their suburban school setting. In Zhane’s testimony, this moment in particular provided vindication for the white teacher who, in her words, “disrupted our space.”

**Conceptualizing Black Community**

One unintended finding surfaced in how participation in the Black Students’ Program challenged students’ definition of *Black community*. Throughout the school year, students demonstrated how being schooled in a predominantly white space and by an overwhelmingly white faculty complicated their beliefs on what Black community meant and how it existed. Across community circle sessions at each of the school sites—and many times throughout the school year—I heard students declare statements like “There’s no community in the Black community.” Even as they participated in a community-based program created for and by Black people, many of the students’ perceptions of Black community was highly conditioned by the antiblack messaging they received from their school and surrounding environments. BSP workshops provided a space for students to discuss their sometimes competing ideas on the state of Black
communities. During one of the circle sessions at Davis High, Ella and Sabrina respectfully shared contrary views on the complexity of Black relationships. Ella’s stance on the Black standard of community accountability was as follows:

I feel like we don’t hold other communities to the same standard that I think we’re holding the Black community to. I think that there’s a lot of pressure put on us to agree and get together on every single thing and not have issues. But you don’t see that with any other community. I get that these are valid concerns and things that every community needs to work on, but I don’t think that it means that our community isn’t strong. Because even when I disagree with someone or there are issues in the community, I know that when push comes to shove, the girls here, the guys out there have my back. Even if it’s not perfect, I know that it’s there. And that’s all it needs to be.

In response, Sabrina acknowledged the implication of a higher standard, but provided justification for its perceived necessity:

I hold higher expectations for the Black community because I know it’s something we can do. I’ve never been another race; I’ve never been from another community, so I hold that standard for us because I know it’s something we can do. We sit here and have conversations like this even when we’re not agreeing with each other; it’s something we can do. If we really wanted every Black kid at this school to hang out and have fun, we could really do that. It’s like we’re choosing not to. And that’s why I hold us to a higher standard.

For Ella’s part, spaces like these allowed for students like her to shine. Ella is short, quiet, and describes herself as often overlooked in the broader school environment. But in BSP
space, she had access to an environment where she could become outspoken in her ability to deliver a very mature analysis of Black community. There is also something to be said for Sabrina’s perception of Black community. While she was confident in her response to Ella, Sabrina’s response overlooks the historical and systemic barriers that contribute to the complexity of relationships within Black communities. However, to her credit, Sabrina is engaging in deep freedom dreaming and afrofuturist thought towards the type of Black community she would like to see. Even though they may disagree on theory, the conversation between Ella and Sabrina planted a seed—not just for them, but the students witnessing as well—that could potentially take root, leaving students open to an alternative view of Black community that will be shaped by their future experiences.

Inherited skepticism around the strength of Black community also manifested itself in the gendered relationships between students. For Black girl-identified students, many credited BSP involvement to helping them unpack the complexity of Black student relationships, both within their own gender collective and also their relationships with Black males. After breaking much ice during Black&Love, Black girl students at Davis commented on how the workshop helped them to interact with each other in ways that previously felt impossible. At Kensington, Black girls appreciated the Black&Love workshop because in addition to addressing love of community, the workshop also centered on self-love. Jordan candidly shared her own self perceptions, admitting that as a Black girl, self-love was often hard to come by. She reflected on an experience where she was out with another BSP student and encountered a boy who found her attractive. At first, she was confused by the interaction, believing that being Black barred her from being perceived as beautiful. Because Jordan is being schooled in an environment where
Blackness is undervalued, she had begun to internalize the messages she received and questioned her own self-worth. In BSP workshop space, she was able to pause, reflect, and ultimately challenge the ways she saw herself.

For Black boy-identified students, the effects of the Black& Love workshop paralleled much of what our girls experienced. Like the girls, BSP boys appreciated the opportunity to speak separately as a gendered community. BSP boys attending school at Mount Vernon especially appreciated the presence of a male volunteer—a mathematics professor from a Northern California university—who led the group of boys in conversation that not only centered expressions of love and Black male masculinity, but also talked about the ways in which Black men can show up on behalf of Black women.

Lawrence described his Black& Love experience at Mount Vernon:

I just felt like that was a really dope moment because it wasn’t all about pain; it was all love, laughing, and talking. We were serious but also having fun. I learned a lot from him and I learned a lot from my friends as well. It was a very impactful workshop for me.

How these students continue to conceptualize Black community in all its complexities will be an ongoing event throughout their lives. Throughout the year, their viewpoints never absolutely aligned, not even during the culminating community circle sessions. However, monolithic was not the goal. Rather, BSP acted as a vehicle within which students could safely negotiate the meaning of Black community in ways that were previously unavailable to them on their high school campuses.
**Impact of Peer Interactions**

Students overwhelmingly described the BSP space as one wherein they felt able to connect with one another in ways that they believed were inaccessible to them throughout the normal course of the school day. Through these connections, scholars reflected on being able to discover commonalities amongst their Black suburban experiences. However, part of being in community also meant engaging in difficult conversations when their experiences diverged. The following subsections revealed student testimony on establishing organic student relationships, navigating subcultural differences, and discovering commonalities amongst Black student experiences.

*Establishing Organic Connections*

During the student circle session at Mount Vernon, Jameel shared some advice that his father had given him before dropping him off on the first day of school. As Jameel stepped out of his dad’s vehicle, he said his father looked him in the eye and offered the following directive: “Smile at all the Black girls.” Jameel was sad to report to the circle that by the end of the day, he had not smiled at a single Black girl. However, his inaction was rooted in fear, not will. As he put it, “Smile at all the Black girls, and then what?” While he very much wanted to “smile at all the Black girls,” because of his limited interaction with other Black students in suburban space, he had no real practice on how to cultivate—let alone, approach—Black girl friendships. Jameel’s rationale is representative of how most BSP students—one the circle session and throughout the year—expressed their lack of confidence in building Black student relationships. On their suburban campuses, Black students had limited access to each other. Outside of BSU—which at most of the schools comprised more non-Black students than Black
students and was often led by white faculty advisors—the school offered no pathways for Black students to connect. Even at school sites that housed nearly one hundred Black-identified students, it was likely that in individual classes, especially in advanced courses, only one or two Black students were enrolled in a single section. In effect, BSP workshops were the only time Black students could exist in a room where they made up the numerical majority.

As a result of having a consistent, intentional space for Black students to engage, BSP students got to develop and maintain relationships with students whom they would previously sheepishly, if at all, interact with in the hallways. Student participants in the circle session credited BSP space for giving them an environment where they could get to know one another beyond the surface. One way this was accomplished was through participation in collective testimony or “trauma bonding,” as many students described it. Workshops gave room for students to talk about the interactions that affected their racialized school experiences. Once one student would share an incident, more would open up, causing a ripple effect of shared testimony around the room. This allowed students to see just how common many of their experiences were. Many students across circle sessions commented on how reassuring it was to learn that the incidents were not happening in a vacuum; it was a comfort to know that they were not alone in these experiences. In that way, students established a common ground and phenomenological understanding on which to develop deeper relationships.

Students talked about how the installation of BSP workshops gave them an excuse to make connections they had longed for, but didn’t know how to initiate. Toni at Davis High talked about having wanted to befriend the school’s BSU vice president for a long
time, but was intimidated to strike up a conversation. However, sharing BSP space together made it easier to strike up an organic conversation that ultimately led to a close friendship between the two. Toni expressed BSP workshops as a space where she could have a good “keke” in a way she felt unable in the broader spaces of the school. Nzinga at Mount Vernon shared that she felt a comfort in sharing space with people who look like her and share similar narratives. She reflected on the development of her relationship with Naomi and Mikayla, whom she had been in school with for years, yet had not established a relationship with until their senior year of high school:

I think it’s nice to know that there’s someone else who’s been through something similar to you and can share those experiences. I’ve known of Naomi and Mikayla since middle school, but I have never been close with them until this year. This is literally the first year that we’ve all had a class together and we’ve literally never talked before this year but we've all known about each other. Like we literally didn’t talk. I’m sure if we just had [more] classes together we would still talk, but it definitely wouldn’t have been on this level. We had space in BSP to actually get to know each other and know each other’s experiences, which is cool.

One of the most promising findings came from students who expressed the ways in which BSP participation changed their social trajectory completely. Throughout the year it was not uncommon to encounter students who would walk gingerly into workshop space and choose a seat at a table alone by themselves. It was a brave walk of faith for them, entering a room where they clearly knew no one, but yet knew that they were in need of a cultural connection. Karla at Kensington shared one of the most sobering
examples of the social shift she underwent by comparing her in-class experience to her BSP experience:

When I’m in class, I’m not in a good mood, and that’s just me. I don’t mess with any of my teachers like that; I don’t mess with any of my courses for real until I’m in college. If I’m in class, I’m not gonna be a happy camper. But when I’m here it’s like I’m here to… (takes a deep breath and smiles). I’m just like, let’s keep these good vibes goin’! I have a different energy when I’m with these people who get to see a different side of me. And seeing them in class gives me that positive energy that I don’t [typically] have in class.

This was a beautiful testimony to bear witness to. What the transcripts are unable to capture from this moment was the vibe of the tribe. When answering what made her prefer BSP space, Karla did not use words to articulate her feelings. Through the gesture of open palms alone, she transmitted what she meant and we received her message clearly. Even more beautiful was the laugh we all let out as she gestured. That moment exemplified the point she was getting across. In that moment, we did not need words to communicate how we felt about being in this space together; the gesture and the returned laughter was an acknowledgement of the truth.

The overall sentiment of what the program did for Black student interaction was best summed up by Jameel himself:

[This program] was the last piece in bringing the Black people together in a not-forced way because we’re coming here out of wanting to understand other Black people. It brought us all together in a way that was organic and wasn’t artificial and weird. It became, “I'm not just talking to you because you’re Black;
I’m talking to you because you’re Black AND.”

Navigating Subcultural Differences

Another unintended finding that surfaced consistently throughout the school year and came up in the majority of the community circle sessions was the presence of unspoken—and sometimes spoken—subcultural tensions amongst the students. One of the greatest tensions was rooted in the divide between Black students who had grown up in the suburbs and Black students who had moved to the suburbs late into their school years. This subcultural divide was central to many of the restorative circles we held to assist students in bridging the gaps between them. Students reflected on the rationale for the division amongst them, while others shared ways they attempted to rely on one another to navigate the divide. During the student circle at Davis, Sabrina and Shakira—two students who moved into the suburbs after ninth grade—voiced their concern over feeling ostracized by some of the suburban-raised BSP students outside of workshop space, feeling as though some students were turning their noses up at them.

Eric stood in acknowledgment and accountability for the girls’ perceived experience. He attempted to offer an explanation to his reaction:

When you live out here there’s no community. The only people who you know are your family and the Black people who you grew up with. So it’s hard to learn the culture when the only way that you’re learning the culture is from family and your family isn’t going to act like everybody else. [For example], when you go to parties you expect people to be dancing and having fun. But then when you’re at school you don’t expect people to be doing that. So when you see [other Black kids dancing in school] it’s like, “Oh they’re this and they’re that.” It’s hard to
fathom it because you’re not used to it. That was me, I guess; I wasn’t used to it because I didn’t know other Black people besides the people who [already] lived out here. When you grow up here, you act like the community that you grow up in. It’s like that’s who you are.

Eric was not the only one who attempted to rationalize the complexity of urban and suburban Black student relationships. Jaquan at Kensington rationalized suburban Black students’ tendency to behave like their white and non-Black suburban counterparts as a result of not being schooled around Black students. He offered:

I feel like a lot of [Suburban Black kids] don’t know what it’s like to go to a school where white people are rare. But I come from [city omitted] and grew up around a lot of different cultures so my mindset is different from someone who grew up in white space. [Black kids from the suburbs] are going against their natural instincts; they grew to fit into the crowd they were raised in. Because if you were raised in [city omitted] for example, you would embrace your inner-Blackness and your culture and be open and outspoken. But you see a lot of the kids from here, their whole lives they’ve been whitewashed.

Circle participants at Kensington agreed voraciously with Jaquan. Jordan supported his theory, stating that as a suburban Black girl herself, she acknowledged the potential for uninformed “slip ups.” In order to keep herself in check, she relied on her relationship with Zhane, who moved to the suburbs in the 11th grade and guided her when she needed help with “social situations.”

The subcultural divide sometimes manifested itself in explosive ways throughout the school year. One less mentioned, but notable incident involved a disagreement
between households, one African American, the other interracial (African American and Asian). An Asian mother was offended that her daughter was given a t-shirt by the school’s BSU vice president that read, “Hella light skin, still hella Black.” The mother of the vice president, who is African American, felt that the Asian mother was making a big deal of it and spoke out in defense of her daughter. While the details of the incident occurred outside of BSP space, it created tension during workshops; for a short period, both groups involved in the altercation stopped attending workshops in an attempt to avoid each other. As unpleasant as things initially were, through gradual restorative efforts—both in and outside of workshop space—BSP educators were instrumental in assisting affected students in (re)building bridges and considering perspective when experiencing subcultural conflict.

Methods of Social Survivial

In the previous chapter I discussed findings that highlighted how Black suburban students developed social survival skills in order to cope with the antiblackness they experienced in their suburban schools. This section explores what was gained in the BLES space the BSP program provided. Through what I call Social Survivial, BSP students demonstrated the process of deconditioning from the negative self and community perceptions they had adopted in the outer reaches of their suburban high schools. Students demonstrated a change in the tide by beginning to challenge the microaggressions and outright racist incidents they experienced and witnessed, and also used BSP space as a model for how to conduct themselves in Black student-led spaces.

Challenging Antiblackness

Many students credited their time in BSP workshops to their newfound ability to
advocate. Through the BSP program, students stated that they received the confidence to speak up against any antiblackness they witnessed or experienced directly. According to students, the ability to share testimony during Black workshops helped them to realize that once people began to speak their truths, it encouraged others to add to the conversation with truths of their own. Even when the outcome of their advocacy was unfavorable, they learned the value in speaking out not so much as a tool for receiving the justice they deserved, but rather as a practice in self-worth. Ella at Davis High shared that through her participation in BSP, she learned that anger was a justifiable response to dehumanization. She reflected on an incident wherein her teacher made her and other students pretend to be slaves during a history lesson:

Listening to people talk about experiences and learning that it’s okay to be mad about the things that go on, [made me think about] an experience I had in a classroom where a teacher made us pretend to be slaves. I realized that I’m allowed to report it. So I finally went and I told the Vice Principal and I felt really empowered to do that and I felt like I deserve to advocate so I can feel safe in my classroom. The teacher could get the idea that it’s okay to do in years to come; so I feel like I was also speaking out for the Black kids that will be in his class in the future.

When asked how the program was instrumental in helping her to advocate, she said that collective sharing of student experience was helpful, specifically because no one told each other not to react or made excuses about overreacting. She felt it was self affirming and validating to her own experiences.

Even though Ahmad attends school at Mount Vernon, he shared how the incident
Mya endured at the football game at Davis became the centerpiece of a verbal altercation he had with a white boy on his school’s football team.

I had class with one of the dudes who was involved in the fight. When he was telling us about the fight he was talking about the girl who tried to break it up and kept calling her “this ghetto girl.” I had to check him. In the past, before BSP, I wouldn’t have said nothing; I probably would have just let him keep talking. But in that moment, I was empowered to say, “Hey, watch your mouth. What you know about ‘ghetto’? You don’t know nothin about ‘ghetto’; you live out here. You callin’ her that just because she’s Black? Don’t don’t that.”

Prior to participating in the program, Ahmad said he likely would not have said anything to his team mate because he did not know Mya like that. However, he felt empowered and a duty to speak up on Mya’s behalf, despite being outnumbered during the verbal exchange.

Across schools, students shared narratives that corroborated the perception that participation in the program had been instrumental in how they navigated antiblackness, not just at school, but also in their personal lives. They marked their involvement in the BSP program as the guiding model for handling racist encounters when the BSP facilitation team was not on campus.

**BLESSing Student-led Spaces**

A fascinating finding, and something beautiful to witness as a politically relevant Black educator, was how BSP influence manifested itself in the ways students conducted their own curated spaces. Students credited the BSP program with making them more comfortable to engage with other Black students outside of the workshops. Ella talked
about the community she found within BSP spaces and appreciated how the spirit of the program continued to exist amongst students beyond the workshops:

The friendships I’ve made here are so valuable to me because we talk a lot about the things that happen and all these concepts. But [eventually] we have to leave BSP and go back outside, back to the school. During the workshop you think you got it all out, but before you know it, something else has happened. It feels good that even when I’m not in this space, even when I’m back out in the world, I know I have a group of people who are willing to listen. I was in [the school community] and someone said, “Slavery is a choice” and I felt like I was going crazy defending myself [against this person and their comment]. But within five minutes I could find a Black girl who listened to me and validated me and it felt good to know that the connections we make in here transition to outside into the school.

Denise, also from Davis, specifically mentioned how the Black& Love workshop—which was modeled after a community circle session—was instrumental in helping her, as the president of the BSU, understand the hesitance Black students had with joining the Black student-led organization:

That workshop really stood out to me as well because during that circle we were also talking about how BSU is contributing to the divided community. We really took that heavily because we wanted to make sure that everybody in that circle knew that there was a space they could go to and talk about certain things. After that I also noticed that a lot more people started coming to BSP and BSU; people who hadn’t shown up to BSU in a long time started showing up. And it was just
really nice to see that it was literally after the circle talk; because we all kinda just aired out everything, aired out how divided we are based on our friend groups, based on ourselves and how we see other Black people. It was really heartwarming to see that people after that started going out of their way to help resolve other issues within our community.

Denise reflected on that particular circle as “the one that changed things.” It allowed them to be honest about how the subgroups among them had been falsely perceiving one another. Using the skills they developed in BSP, they were able to create a bridge to replace the social gap.

The Black Scholars Project is where students came to heal the “undoing” (Marie & Watson, 2020) of their social identities and find pathways towards becoming whole. Through participation in the BSP program, Black students got to enjoy a fugitive space where they were able to see themselves and each other, unobstructed by a societal lens that systemically and directly labeled them as inferior. As a result, these students began moving in ways that indicated a sense of self-importance, self-determination, and despite their struggles, community care.
Chapter VI: Discussion and Implications

This qualitative study took place over the course of a single school year. In that span of time, I received the opportunity to work with brilliant Black youth in suburban high schools and cover them in curriculum and pedagogy that sought to nourish their spirits. Within our insulated space, we made room for testimony that centered the pain associated with being Black in suburban space and testimony that highlighted the joy of what it means and feels like to be our Black selves. In the span of one year, I witnessed the seeds of self-importance begin to bud and grow in these Black suburban youth; students who walked in sheepishly at the start of the year became lead discussants in group conversations by the end of the year. I also witnessed students struggle—and often, succeed—to reach common ground and better understand what it means to be in Black community. Overall, the findings of this study revealed that for Black youth, suburban high schools can be a hostile place and can have tremendous influence over how students conceptualize themselves and how they think, see, and feel about Blackness. However, the findings also revealed that through an insulated intervention, a positive sense of self and community can take root and change the trajectory for how these students navigate their suburban school experiences.

Discussion

Research Question 1: What school conditions necessitate the presence of BLES spaces in K-12 suburban schools?

The student testimonies in the initial findings chapter illustrates the extent to which Black students in suburban institutions can benefit from the presence of BLES spaces. As the findings dictate, overwhelming white faculties coupled with comparatively
low Black student representation contribute to a socio-academic environment where Black students are othered and susceptible to overt acts of racism. Systemically, these instances of antiblack racism are given space to thrive due to performative responses, and in some cases, no responses at all. This is consistent with scholarship that speaks to the pervasiveness of antiblackness in schools (Chapman, 2014; Dumas, 2014, 2016; Jones, 2018). These schooling conditions can present an impediment to healthy identity development amongst Black students (Tatum, 2006).

Research Question 2: What are the characteristics of BLES spaces?

A review of the findings suggests that characteristically, the BSP program embodied a BLES space. The educators—myself included—employed a Politically Relevant Pedagogy (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1997, 1999); this was demonstrated by student testimony that spoke to the curated curriculum that allowed students to unpack their positionality as Black youth living in America. Facilitators modeled what it meant to operate within a network of Black resources, as was depicted in student narratives that highlighted the participation of community volunteers. Lastly, the fluid function of BSP’s operating model allowed for facilitators to switch gears when the pressures of antiblack incidents on campus made scheduled programming impossible; this was shown in student reflections that spoke to the restorative discussions facilitated by the BSP team.

Research Question 3: What are the challenges to creating and maintaining BLES spaces in suburban school settings?

As reflected in student testimony, the subcultural differences amongst students created tensions around how students interacted with each other both in and outside of BSP programming. Some students were more resistant than others in their ability to
self-reflect and reach common ground; BSP facilitators worked overtime to construct activities and promote discussions that would reach every student in the space. However, the most devastating challenge was witnessing students internalize racialized defeat. Testimonies from students like Nzinga ripped a hole in my heart; it was challenging to listen to someone so young accept the futility of being fully loved and accepted within her white friend groups and know that there was nothing more I could do in the moment to change her mind. The emotional toll that we took on as Black educators presented challenges that were unavoidable.

**Research Question 4: What is the perceived impact of BLES spaces in suburban schools?**

Based on the findings, the strongest impact of BLES spaces rested in the development of relationships. Being able to build authentic Black student relationships amongst each other appeared to be the biggest perceived benefit of participating in BLES spaces. Additionally, The facilitation team’s ability to develop fictive kinships (Brown et al., 2018) with students allowed for intergenerational bonding. Lastly, a tremendous impact associated with BLES spaces was the development of tools of empowerment; the students’ growth towards self and community advocacy in the span of just one year is nothing short of remarkable.

**Implications**

**The School Lives of Black Suburban Youth**

The nature of what students in this study shared about their teacher and peer interactions indicates a need for more qualitative projects centered on the school lives of Black suburban youth. It is not enough to look at test scores and college acceptance data
as indicators for Black student success in suburban spaces; qualitative studies that center student counterstories are invaluable to how we understand what’s really going down in suburban institutions. The implementation of longitudinal and regional studies can help Black education researchers to codify student experience. For example, a study that tracked students from elementary through high school would shed light on how early Black students are meeting challenges to their Black identities and the specific ways these challenges manifest at each level of schooling. Future research should also expand towards a series of regional studies that identify the nuances of Black suburban schooling across states and other geographic regions.

**Black Affinity Spaces in K-12 Education**

This study puts forth serious implications for the implementation of racial affinity spaces for K-12 students. As illustrated in the testimony shared in the community circles, racially exclusive student spaces are instrumental in helping students to reflect on and articulate their racialized experiences (Pour-Khorshid, 2018b). A focus on Black affinity spaces can shed more light on the socioemotional fairing of Black students in suburban school districts. Additionally, increased scholarship on K-12 racial affinity spaces can assist educators and school leaders who are interested in building racial affinity models in their institutions, further expanding knowledge pools on benefits and best practices.

**Preparing for Racialized Experiences**

This study illustrated several instances wherein white teachers—whether through ignorance or will—engaged in behavior that undermined Black student intellect, imposed racialized labor onto Black students, dissuaded Black students from participation in cultural institutions and events, and labeled Black students as hostile. As gobsmacked as
any of us might be over their actions, these teachers are not being produced in a vacuum; they are graduating out of someone’s teacher education program. This study calls to light the need to rebuild teacher education courses that allow white teachers to negotiate and heal from their whiteness so that they are prepared to cultivate classrooms that do not center a culture of white supremacy.

Something that was glaringly obvious in this study was the near absence of Black teachers in the Suburban Unified School District. This is likely due to the hostile places suburban faculties tend to be and their potential for contributing to intense Racial Battle Fatigue (Smith, et al., 2011). In my own experience, suburban schools can be cold and isolating places for Black teachers to work; I spent four years on an island at the North Atlanta suburban high school where I once worked. I have heard many Black teachers share that the teacher education programs they matriculated from did not prepare them for the racialized experiences they had on the school sites where they worked. Some of those teachers ultimately left the profession entirely; despite the promise they displayed, they grew tired of the microaggressions and racialized stressors that often come with the job.

Teacher education programs can work to alleviate these stressors—and potentially solve the Black teacher retention problem—by providing pathways to course tracks, classes, and workshops that center the racialized experiences of Black teachers, instead of one-off courses. These courses should not only assist Black teachers in preparing for the racially-specific encounters they are likely to engage in, but they should also uplift Black student-teachers in the legacy of Black education, a legacy they are often locked out of through the course of traditional schooling.
K-12 Institutional Pathways

As revealed in the findings, district leaders are at odds with the vocalized needs of Black students. Partnering with BSP was an individual choice of the four participating high schools. However, I posit that community cultural partnerships should happen at the district level and made available to all schools; the choice to provide culturally specific programming for Black students should not be dependent on the perception of individual school leaders. Additionally, there needs to be a district-wide commitment to ongoing antiblackness training for non-Black educators. Black teachers can benefit from engaging in their own training wherein they receive an education on the histories of Black education, while unpacking the ways in which they have been conditioned by white supremacy culture.

Individually, schools can employ earnest initiatives towards curating a culture of belonging for Black students. Many schools determine the success of their diversity initiatives based on the number of Black-identified students on their enrollment report. However, instead of relying on numbers, school leaders can use the numerical data to make determinations on how to best accommodate for the socioemotional needs of incoming Black student populations. How this is achieved should be totally dependent on the voiced needs of the surrounding community.

Considerations for Non-Profit Funding

When I taught under the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, I used to dread preparing for the annual conference. Each year in the spring, our AVID coordinator would select students who she felt represented the most desperate of cases and showcase them in front of a large audience of teachers and school leaders,
where they would then share their traumas with strangers. It was the highlight of the conference; the students even looked forward to being picked. I cringed every time. They filmed these student testimonials and used them in commercials to attract donors; one year, our school site had even created a video of our own for the same effect. I mention this anecdote to signal that there is something particularly wicked about putting vulnerable student populations in a position where they have to usher out their traumas in exchange for funding. However, this is typically how it goes.

As it relates to the program in this study, one of the major issues the co-founders of BSP faced was sustained funding. After the donor pool dried up and social consciousness wavered away from the racial pandemic ignited in 2020, Geneva and Ila had a difficult time attracting donors and being accepted for substantial grants. Each rejection had the same bottom line; because the funding was for suburban Black youth, donors found no value in supporting the organization’s initiative. This was likely down to the perceived image of wealth that is associated with suburban neighborhoods. Because Geneva and Ila have no sad story to sell, they are often passed over by donors. There is a clear gap, not in the acknowledgment of these deficit-based, predatory practices, but in scholarship that investigates how to eliminate such practices that center interest convergence over a moral commitment to care.

**Expanding the BLESSing - A Conclusion**

While I firmly believe that the implications outlined above would be instrumental in systemically changing the landscape of Black education, I am an afropessimist at heart and hold little to no faith in the current system gaining a collective moral conscious. Rather, I intend to put my efforts towards building and highlighting homegrown,
Black-owned initiatives. This current study is local, involving four high schools in one Northern California school district. In future iterations of this research, I’d like to expand this study so that it unpacks the phenomenological experiences of Black high school students in the suburbs across a national scale. I’m interested in determining which regional factors produced nuanced experiences across state lines and how the geographical landscapes shape the social experiences of Black suburban youth.

I’m equally interested in expanding this study overseas, namely in Brazil, the United Kingdom, and Botswana. My immersive experience in each of these countries exposed me to the racialized inequities that are present within school systems. While the disparities in Brazil and the UK were race-based, I found parallels in how students from marginalized tribal communities were treated in Botswana. In each of these countries, I met Black teachers who were committed to holding BLES spaces in response to the systemic antiblackness—or xenophobia—they experience. My goal is to work in community with these teacher groups to learn and share narrative experience on how we navigate BLES spaces on hostile lands. In this way, we learn where we are, no matter where we are.
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Appendix A

Community Reflection Circle Questions

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<tr>
<th>Black Scholars Project</th>
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<tr>
<td>Community Reflection Circle Discussion Questions</td>
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<tr>
<th>Community Reflection Circle Protocol</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welcome</td>
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<tr>
<td>Re-introduce ourselves + our roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What we’ll be doing with this info</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why we’ve asked you to participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation of the Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Circles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We learn from you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not about consensus; it’s about gathering information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The difference between focus groups + questionnaires</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Circle Time: 1 hour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feel free to move around</td>
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<tr>
<td>Take bathroom breaks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Help yourself to refreshments</td>
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<tr>
<td>You are free to leave at any time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Establishment of Ground Rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Suggestions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Everyone should participate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keep it Confidential</td>
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<tr>
<td>No specific names if you’re giving examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Don’t share info you hear today with others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Notes taken will not include names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay present w/the group. No side convos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Turn off phones if possible, no use during convo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have fun; be yourself</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mandated Reporter Statement</td>
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<tr>
<td>While the information in this focus group session will remain confidential, I am required by the state to report any reports shared regarding physical harm of self or someone else</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Think about a time when you felt seen, heard, or cared for at your high school. Tell us about that and what you think made it possible for you to be heard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Think about a time where you felt like you were unseen, unheard, or uncared for at your high school. Tell us about that and what it felt like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Think about a Black &amp; Series workshop that was particularly meaningful to you. Tell us about your experience and what made it meaningful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Think about a Community Circle moment that you felt was insightful. Tell us about what you learned about yourself and/or your peers during this moment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Think about a relationship that you developed due to your involvement in AASP. Tell us about it and the impact this relationship has had on you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Share a time you felt empowered to advocate for yourself or another Black student. Tell us about how your participation in AASP influenced this empowerment.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>