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### **"I want them to see me as a complete person": Sustaining people of color in predominantly white institutions through counter-hegemony**

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RUNNING HEAD: SUSTAINING PEOPLE OF COLOR IN A PWI

University of San Francisco

**“I Want Them to See Me as a Complete Person”:  
Sustaining People of Color in Predominantly White Institutions  
Through Counter-Hegemony**

A Research-Based Field Project Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Human Rights Education

By  
Jessica Albavera  
May 202

**“I Want Them to See Me as a Complete Person”:  
Sustaining People of Color in Predominantly White Institutions  
Through Counter-Hegemony**

In Partial Fulfillment for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

By  
Jessica Albavera  
May 2022

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this field project (or thesis) has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved:

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Instructor/chairperson

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Date

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### ABSTRACT

Education in the United States is inequitable. Independent schools in particular add to this inequity because of limited access and affordability. This creates a situation in which educators who are fighting for more diversity, equity, and inclusion have to reconcile working in an institution that is part of an inequitable system. This research-based field project, through the method of focus groups, sought to examine the ways in which educators in an independent school in San Francisco are utilizing counter-hegemonic strategies in their classrooms to support the diverse and intersecting identities of their students. The focus group also provided a space in which participants could express their feedback and recommendations for the institution to better support their students and faculty of color in a predominantly white and wealthy space. The findings of this research-based field project indicate that more needs to be done in order to retain and sustain students and faculty of color in independent schools. Working in collective collaboration, participants provided recommendations that could be valuable to similar institutions seeking to create a more humanizing and liberatory environment for the people within their community.

**Keywords:** counter-hegemony, decolonial pedagogy, liberatory pedagogy, critical pedagogy, independent schools, people of color

## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Growing up, I refused the idea of becoming an educator. Then, it was because my dad is an educator and I wanted to forge my own career path. Now, six years into my teaching experience, I still feel a resistance toward the profession despite my love of the children and my role in their learning. As I've started to interrogate those feelings, I have realized that my resistance is rooted more deeply into the structures of inequality that are maintained and reinforced by the education system through curriculum, student-teacher power dynamics, and high stakes standardized testing. Too often, education is transformed into a commodity, a capitalist and elitist tool to uphold the status quo built by capitalism and White supremacy. For those educators who are aware of this dissonance, it can be disheartening to uphold standards that don't serve and honor their students. However, without educators challenging the system, there would be no way for it to evolve into something transformative.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Education in the United States is inequitable. According to the 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) survey (2016), Black and Latinx students are more likely to attend schools that do not offer rigorous math and science courses. For example, 33% of schools with high Black and Latinx enrollment offer calculus compared to the 56% of schools with low Black and Latinx enrollment (2013-14 CRDC, 2016, p. 6). Students of color are also more likely to have novice teachers who, early in their careers, are undertrained, underfunded and unable to meet the needs of their students. The CRDC (2016) found that 7% of Black students, 6% of Latinx students, and 6% of Indigenous American or Indigenous Alaskan students attend schools where 20% of teachers are in their first year compared to the 3% of both white and Asian students (p. 9).

In the independent school realm, Flanagan (2021) details the inequity between public and private institutions, which has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While public school students were attending school virtually, independent schools were rushing to re-open to get kids back to school in person, resulting in unequal access to education within a system that is already rife with inequality (Flanagan, 2021). A school with a public purpose and even the most progressive intentions, can never be equitable with tuition running upwards of \$40,000/year (Flanagan, 2021). This inequality extends beyond grade school as attending an independent school gives students access to prestigious colleges and universities (Flanagan, 2021). As a result, independent schools cater to the families that can afford to attend them and, albeit unintentionally, they create a culture of high achievement and competition that impacts the self-worth of all students, but more importantly impacts the students that don't fit into the predetermined idea of success that prioritizes wealthy, mostly white, students (Flanagan, 2021).

Furthermore, there is the negative impact that assimilationist curriculum has on students of color and their perceptions of success. Paris and Alim (2017) implore educators to resist the standardized national curriculum which has been used as a tool of the "white imperial project" to convey the message that students must reject their culture, traditions, and languages in order to achieve success (p. 1). Education is important to human growth and development, but due to capitalism and other colonizing ideologies, it has transformed into yet another tool for racial inequity due to unequal access to resources, unevenly trained faculty, and racially biased standardized testing. Education is also a space of further oppression, whether directly, to students of historically oppressed identities, or indirectly, by upholding the dominant narrative and perpetuating the capitalist machine. Despite the efforts of many schools, often independent schools, to become more equitable, like service learning programs, outreach efforts to



communities of color, and progressive pedagogies, these schools still serve and cater to the wealthy (Bartels, 2012). With this in mind, it is important to recognize that while independent school students achieve more, public school students lose access to resources and opportunities to learn, deepening the inequities they will face as they go into adulthood (Bartels, 2012).

### **Background and Need**

In Eurocentric, capitalistic and high stakes schooling, opportunities for students to have choice and see themselves in their education are highly motivating. Cuban (2020) related education to a business and demonstrates how education has transformed from a community-based practice to an individualist race to achievement. This shift has made economic-based success the goal of education rather than genuine learning. Au (2008) illustrates that the paradigm of success set by the education system is systematically racist because it was created within a system that idealizes Western, imperial, and colonial thought. Because of this, in many schools, education has become homogenized to accept only one way of knowing and being which disproportionately impacts students of color and other historically oppressed identities (Nieto, 2005).

Counter-hegemonic pedagogies, like those based in Indigenous epistemologies and Black liberation, offer alternatives to the traditional classroom through fostering respect, responsibility, relationships and honoring resistance. These pedagogies resist hegemony by supporting Black and Indigenous educational autonomy as means toward their futurity (Warren & Coles, 2020). In order to honor the lives and experience of students of color, Sumida Huaman (2019) suggests the forging of bonds between students and teachers through mutual respect and responsibility to the wellbeing of each other and the entire community. Racial inequity and violence against students of color in education is standard practice; however, the strategies and practices to humanize their

learning experiences are not unfamiliar. Warren (2020) demonstrates the responsibility of educators to center possibility in students. He offers a reframing of education that honors the whole student and recognizes what they contribute to the community. By placing value on respect, responsibility, relationships and resistance, educators humanize their students and create a learning environment in which they can achieve their own perception of success.

The implementation of counter-hegemonic pedagogies positively impacts the well-being, relationships, and critical consciousness of both students and teachers. Acton, Lenoy, Salter and Stevenson (2017) emphasize the importance of identifying individual positionality in determining how to critically engage with the world. In an effort to mask racism and inequality, many people, particularly white people in the United States, have been conditioned to “not see color” and homogenize what society believes to be true. Educational hegemony is a disservice to all students because it fails to recognize the multiple truths of the human experience to the detriment of the humanity of students of color and other historically oppressed communities, just as it limits white students’ understanding of diverse ways of knowing. Hanson, Louie, Ottmann and Pratt (2017) demonstrate how university educators decentralizing Western thought have raised the critical consciousness of their students by centering multiple epistemologies and human experiences. It is only through pluralism and the rejection of a singular school of thought that the education system will evolve to be truly transformative (Acton et al., 2017). By recognizing and honoring students for who they are, educators build strong relationships that foster community and collaboration (Dzamesi & van Heerden, 2020). Deconstructing colonial power structures in education has a positive impact on student-teacher relationships and allows for the co-creation of knowledge that resists the status quo.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Grounded in the understanding that capitalism negatively impacts education and understanding that critical pedagogy, Indigenous epistemologies, and Black liberation can offer tools to decolonize and resist hegemony, this study examined how teachers at one independent school conceptualize the collective action and transformative collaboration they have taken and could take to resist coloniality and hegemony at their school. This research-based field project aims to shift the colonial paradigm in education to use learning as a tool for liberation through decolonizing thought and practices informed by Indigenous epistemologies and Black liberation that have positive impacts on the lives of both students and teachers. Specifically, the purpose of this research-based field project is to understand the ways in which teachers within the lower school of an independent all girls school in Northern California are promoting Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) in order to best honor and support their students of color. This project will be of interest to teachers who are eager to reimagine the culture of the school under study - and similar schools - to bring in new perspectives and support the DEIB initiatives at such institutions.

### **Research Questions**

- What narratives does the curriculum at the school under study convey about BIPOC history, culture, and community?
- How, if at all, does the curriculum honor the identities and experiences of students of color?
- How, if at all, are educators upholding policies and practices that play into oppressive structures of power?
- How do participants envision decolonization and liberation at the school under study?

### **Theoretical Framework: Critical, Decolonizing, and Abolitionist Pedagogies**

Critical pedagogy, decolonial methodologies, and abolitionist teaching provide counter-hegemonic models for pedagogy that promote a more holistic and democratic approach to education where knowledge is co-constructed and transformative. This section includes a brief history of critical pedagogy, decolonial methodologies, and abolitionist teaching which includes (a) Paolo Freire's (2000) original scholarship theorizing the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor and how those dynamics are replicated in education, (b) the work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) emphasizing the validity of Indigenous thought, storytelling, and ways of life, which have been systematically erased over the last five centuries by settler colonialism, and (c) the liberatory teachings of Bettina Love (2019), pushing beyond decolonization to abolition of the education system in order to gain genuine justice and dream of a future where there is true freedom. This progression of thought is important because it demonstrates how critical perspectives challenge the current education system and describes a need for change that liberates and transforms the lives of students, educators, and humanity as a whole.

The seminal work that articulates Critical Pedagogy is Paolo Freire's (2000) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire claims that critical consciousness in education is a means toward liberation for the oppressed. Freire developed his ideas in resistance to the oppressive structures that prioritize white, Eurocentrism. His theory responds to dehumanization perpetuated through the oppressive education system and challenges the individualistic ideals that exacerbate oppression and Western exceptionalism. His original scholarship is important because it demonstrates the need to divorce from oppressive structures entirely in order to achieve liberation.

Building on Freire's ideas, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) proposes possibilities for education that lie outside of the limits of and actively rejects the current system. Smith (2012)

contributes to the understanding of decolonial education because she claims that forms of oral tradition, like debate and storytelling, are valid forms of research that have been discredited by colonialism and White Supremacy. Like Freire, Smith criticizes structures of oppression upheld by the education system. Unlike Freire, she directly addresses the structures of coloniality as the source of violence on colonized people. Her insights and contributions to the field of critical and decolonial pedagogy are important because they emphasize how this work and colonial oppression cannot be separated from Indigenous Sovereignty and futurity.

Another dimension in this field of thought is represented by Bettina Love (2019) who articulates that freedom will come from the abolition of the education system. Love (2019) asserts that resistance, dreaming, and rebuilding a new system are just as important to abolition as the dismantling of oppressive systems. Like Freire (2000) and Tuhiwai Smith (2012), Love recognizes that the education system continues to harm students of color and students of historically oppressed communities. Love puts responsibility on educators to be abolitionists in their way of life as well as their pedagogy. This addition to the field of critical and decolonial pedagogy is important because it clearly states the need to abolish the education system to create something that will honor, affirm, and support students of all identities.

In summary, critical, decolonial, and abolitionist pedagogies describe ways in which educators can disrupt oppressive structures in their pedagogy in the work toward liberation through education. This research-based field project takes inspiration from Freire's (2000) critique of structures of power within society and schooling to examine the ways in which relationships with students and teachers of color, at all levels, are perpetuating oppressive structures of power regardless of their intent. There is an inherent tension being a person of color in an independent school and operating within a predominantly white institution. In order to

humanize and reduce harm toward students and teachers of color, institutions must reimagine their systems, policies, and interactions with historically oppressed groups. Furthermore, Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) rejection of Western thought informs the work of the present research-based field project because Western knowledge systems negate the existence of all other knowledge systems. Counter-hegemonic epistemologies and pedagogies recognize and honor the plurality of human beliefs and experiences. Responsible and responsive educators should consider non-dominant epistemologies and ways in which they can be incorporated into their pedagogies transformatively to encourage different ways of thinking, learning, and being. Lastly, Love's (2019) urgent call to action to dismantle the system in the name of freedom challenges educators to imagine education beyond the system that was built on inequality and oppression. Justice and equity in education will not be gained through the current system. Love's work implores educators to resist the structures, norms and standards from within by courageously dismantling its structures of oppression and radically recreating the education system. Scholarship suggests that the current education system fuels inequity by continuously harming students that don't fit into the hegemonic mold that coloniality built. Further research highlights alternatives to the current system that work in tandem to promote a system that honors and respects the experiences and humanity of all students. This body of research suggests that these pedagogies are healing and have positive impacts on the lives of both students and teachers. In chapter 2, I review a body of research that justifies the claim that counter-hegemonic pedagogies may be a tool for teacher resistance of hegemony by fostering collectivism and coexistence in the classroom.

### Methods

I addressed the research questions by holding a two-part focus group of selected Lower School employees of the school under study that work across grade levels and subject areas. I chose to utilize the collective nature of a focus group in order to facilitate a collaborative environment where educators can feel inspired to co-create and reimagine the school's approach to DEIB. Too often, teachers end up working in isolation from other grades and subjects; Through a focus group, I sought to provide a space for faculty to share the work they've been doing as well as a space to be collaborative and build a sense of community and solidarity with each other. By working as a collective, my hope was to inspire future collaboration and recognition for the wisdom and expertise that each teacher brings to the community.

The school under study is a K-8 single-sex non-sectarian independent school situated in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in San Francisco, California. In 2022, the yearly tuition was \$39,450 which is inclusive of food service, books, materials, technology and all field trips. That same year, the financial assistance budget was \$2,766,000 with 23% of students receiving aid. Students come to the school under study from all over the Bay Area, spanning across 40 zip codes. Approximately 435 students are enrolled at the school, with 51% of families identifying as non-white. Of the 70 faculty members, 33% identify as a person of color.

Upon notifying my administration of this project, they asked me to include our lower school counselor/anti-bias curriculum coordinator in my focus group to speak for the work that the administration has in progress. A week prior to the first focus group session, I sent out an open invitation to lower school teachers to participate. By the end of the week, I had three community members interested and then sent out personalized invitations to five teachers that I already had a relationship with that I thought may be interested in this collaboration. After

personalized invitations, I received three more confirmations for a total of seven participants. I followed up with the form giving consent to participate and collected those the day of the first meeting. I had extra copies on hand in the case that someone forgot or misplaced theirs.

We met in my classroom during after-school hours on two consecutive days for one hour and fifteen minutes each. In the first part, I asked teachers to share, if any, the ways in which they are incorporating Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) practices into their classrooms. This provided information on what folks were already doing and allowed for them to receive recognition for their DEIB work, which is language I intentionally used as it mirrors the language used by the school in its efforts to mitigate the effects of its oppressive structures. Then I asked participants to share where they think there is room for growth in DEIB at the school under study. In the following session, I asked teachers to reimagine the curriculum at the school to create something cohesive and intentional in Kindergarten through 4th grade that will support the DEIB goals of the school and honor our students of all backgrounds. In reimagining the curriculum, I asked teachers to consider what support would be needed to bring this curriculum to fruition as well as what challenges, if any, they anticipate. To thank my colleagues for participating, and taking into consideration the COVID 19 pandemic, I provided individually packaged treats that they could enjoy after our session.

Once audio processing was completed, I revisited the conversation in order to further develop the ideas discussed amongst participants. I then determined the priorities of the teachers, recognizing the work that they are already doing and addressing the needs that they find most pressing. I wrote up my findings and recommendations to bring together the collective wisdom of my colleagues and fill in the gaps that the participants noted in the DEIB work taking place at the school under study. A summary of these findings were shared with the participants and



administrators at the school under study to support and deepen their ongoing DEIB work. I advised that this document be revisited yearly to be innovative, adaptive, and ever-evolving.

Participants in this focus group were five faculty members and one staff member who work directly with the curriculum. An additional staff member, with a long history with the school, was also present. Of the seven participants, two were head teachers and three were associate teachers, teachers-in-training who are gaining experience in the classroom before becoming head teachers themselves. The participating teachers came from a range of grade levels and subjects: 1st, 2nd, and 4th grades, art, music, and science. One staff member has dual roles as the lower school counselor and the anti-bias curriculum coordinator (80% and 20% respectively) and the other has worked as a teacher, admissions director, and is currently the school's receptionist. All but one teacher and one staff member have been at the school under study for less than five years. Out of the seven participants, five identify as people of color. Six participants identify as female and one identifies as non-binary.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This research-based field project has several limitations including: (a) the timeframe of the study; (b) the sampling procedure and sample size; and (c) researcher subjectivity. The timeframe of this study is a limitation because it impacts the depth of data collection and reenvisioning the school under study through a decolonial and liberatory lens. Another limitation can be found in the sample used for this study because it examines only the curriculum of one independent school in San Francisco. This limits the generalizability of the findings because it does not reflect the curriculum and pedagogies of other independent schools, public schools, or schools in other parts of the country. Related to this, the small size of the sample means that the results of this study can not be used to illustrate Kindergarten through 4th grade education in the

United States as a whole. Finally, my positionality toward the school under study may limit the data collection and the interpretation process because I have a deep connection to the school, the faculty, and the students, having worked at the institution for several years. Additionally, as a teacher of color in this predominantly white institution, I recognize that I have started to think critically about the inequity that is upheld and exacerbated by the independent school system.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research-based field project may be of interest to teachers, administrators, and families, particularly at the school under study and similar schools. It may hold significance for teachers because it will allow them the opportunity and space to reimagine their role as educators and the lens through which they teach. In addition, this field project may also interest administrators because reimagining education will put them in the position to lead in long-lasting institutional evolution. It may also hold significance for families because this work could deeply impact the lives and futures of their children through humanizing their schooling experience and preparing them to engage in the collective community.

## CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Education Perpetuates Capitalism, Social Reproduction, and Inequity Not Democracy**

Research demonstrates that education has strayed from its democratic beginnings. This includes research that illustrates that through capitalism, the student has become a commodity, research that articulates the implications of success in the education system and society as a result of capitalism, and research that claims that standardization and the testing industry have homogenized education and perpetuated social reproduction. This scholarship is important because education in the capitalist system has turned schools into sites of violence for students of color. Standards and expectations in education, and society as a whole, are Eurocentric and have redefined the meaning of and access to success. Without the recognition that the system functions to promote inequity, there will never be justice.

To begin, research illustrates that the student has been trained to be an actor in the economy. Evidence of this can be found in Ford (2020) who questions what happens when capitalism interferes with the democratic intentions of education. Similarly, Casey (2011) demonstrates that capitalism influences schooling and that the needs of students are constructed in a way that sets them up to be a commodity in our capitalistic society. Cuban (2020) adds that public schooling, along with sports and business, perpetuate competitive individualism and uphold the hegemonic values of American society. The hegemony of the education system deeply impacts students of color, particularly Black and Indigenous students through the erasure of their histories and knowledge systems in standardized curriculum that prioritizes test scores and fast-paced, high stakes learning. These authors highlight how the democratic beginnings of education have transformed in such a way that schools are run like a business with performance goals that don't attend to the needs and strengths of their students.

Related to this, research investigating standardization articulates the implications of success in the education system and society as a result of capitalism. Evidence of this can be found in Casey (2011) who addresses how capitalism has warped the goal of education, transforming the student from a community member into a commodity that upholds the social order. Similarly, Au (2008) takes that a step further by citing the example of standardized testing and the impact it has on students by forcing them to conform to the Western paradigm of standards, needs, and success. Sonia Nieto (2005) adds to the conversation by exploring ways in which the education system can heal in a transformative way in order to honor all students and more humanistic aims of education. The structures for education reform toward a more decolonial model already exist. It often feels like we are too far gone, consumed by the capitalist machine, but, as these scholars remind us, people have done it before and can do it again if we divorce our education system from its capitalistic ideals and images of success.

A final body of research claims that standardization and the testing industry have homogenized education and perpetuated social reproduction. Evidence of this can be found in Ford (2020) who claims that standards assessment works in alignment with popular modes of hegemony. Similarly, Au (2008) demonstrates that high stakes standardized testing impacts student achievement, school curriculum, and the reproduction of the social norms and historical narrative of the dominant culture. Nieto (2005) adds that education has become a source of inequality based on the many (and intersecting) identities of today's students by promoting only one way of being and succeeding in society. Furthermore, Ford and Bobb (2011) compare the experience of refugee students and Black American students attending white serving schools and explore how the traditional education system harms Black and refugee students by failing to recognize their humanity and therefore impacts their self worth. These students, existing outside

of the status quo, are then pressured to conform in order to succeed. Although success doesn't have to equate with assimilation, without humanizing experiences or support from their community that honor their identities, students will either conform to or resist the system. Similarly, San Pedro (2017) describes the impact Eurocentric curriculum has on the academic motivation of Indigenous students. The exclusion of Indigenous history and knowledge systems negatively impacts the futurity, or sense of continued existence, of Indigenous youth. In sum, this research articulates that capitalism has had a profound impact on the goals of education by creating a set of "winners" and "losers," which are defined through white supremacist paradigms and disproportionately harm the humanity of Black and Indigenous students and their futurity. In contrast, Casey (2011) claims that although schools are sites of oppression through the commodification of students, the classroom can be a space in which these constructed needs can be challenged. When taken together, this research suggests the unhealthy, almost parasitic, relationship between capitalism and the education system. By adhering to these standards set by capitalism, we perpetuate the inequality and social roles associated with Western exceptionalism. These authors make a well-rounded argument about the complexities of the influence of capitalism in education and its role in maintaining the status quo, and also illustrate hope through educators' potential to elicit change within the system.

In summary, research demonstrates that education is evolving away from promoting democracy and civic engagement; rather, it is moving more and more to perpetuate capitalism, social reproduction, and inequity. This includes research that illustrates how capitalism and colonialism have transformed the education system, defined ideals of success, and reinforced inequity through social reproduction in education. Taken together, this body of research suggests that counter-hegemonic pedagogies may be a tool for teacher resistance of the hegemony

promoted by the capitalist and white supremacist system. Related to this is the need to counteract the forces of oppression in education by fostering collectivism and coexistence in the classroom through anticapitalist, decolonial, and abolitionist practices.

### **Counter-Hegemonic Pedagogies Center Respect, Responsibility, Relationships & Resistance**

In response to the negative impacts that capitalism has on education and democracy, research demonstrates that counter-hegemonic pedagogies and epistemologies offer an alternative to the individualistic motives of capitalist inspired education. This includes research that illustrates examples of Indigenous education and Black Education Spaces, that articulates the values upheld by Indigenous epistemologies and Black education, and that claims that the answer to inequitable education already exists in the practices of plurality and resistance. This scholarship is important because the current traditional model of education is in need of healing and through embracing plurality, holism, and liberation, educators can resist the hegemony of the education system.

To begin, research illustrates various schools and educators actively implementing decolonizing and abolitionist pedagogies to promote healing for their Indigenous and Black students. Evidence of this can be found in San Pedro (2017) who claims the need for education to affirm the identities of students by providing representation of their knowledge systems in curriculum. Similarly, Lee and McCarty (2017) provide solid examples of Indigenous culture and language revitalization in education through collaborative learning. Sumida Huaman (in press) adds a need for Indigenous education to look back at its ancestry in order to move the practice forward in a way that honors its students. In addition, Warren and Coles (2020) suggest the need for Black education spaces in the fostering of Black liberation in the anti-Black United States Education System. Similarly to Indigenous folks, Warren and Coles (2020) assert the importance

of educational autonomy for the Black community in order to support their futurity. In sum, this research articulates that decolonizing and abolitionist education is not only a form of resistance to hegemony, but a movement *for* the humanity and futurity of Black and Indigenous students.

Drawing on these examples, research investigating decolonizing and abolitionist education articulates the values associated with these pedagogies. Evidence of this can be found in San Pedro (2017) who claims that trust and respect play important roles in building decolonized teacher/student relationships that value the stories and experiences of the community. Similarly, Sumida Huaman (2019) demonstrates that a collectivist sense of responsibility adds to the individualistic accountability for oneself and one's actions to include the care for other living beings of past, present and future generations. San Pedro (2017) adds that collaboration and co-creation of relationships center the students' experiences, allow for participation and innovation, and demonstrate that the teacher is no more important to students' learning than the students themselves. Furthering this conversation, Garba and Sorentino (2020) claim that Indigenous Sovereignty and Black Liberation go hand-in-hand in the fight for justice against white supremacy and hegemony. Black liberation cannot be separated from Indigenous Sovereignty because Black and Indigenous traumas are directly related. To ignore that connection, keeps the impact of slavery in the past and implies that no reparations are necessary, when in fact, their ancestral land was stolen from them as well. Solely pushing for decolonization isn't enough as it diminishes the horror and generational trauma of enslavement. Related to this, Warren (2020) looks at resistance as a positive. He shares stories from his time as an educator and how he has reframed how he thinks about student resistance. Students' resistance is a response to the conditions of their learning environment. He goes on to state how discipline, rules, and what is considered good behavior center the needs of the teacher, not the

student. This emphasizes a need to prioritize student and teacher relationships so that educators can respond to the root of the resistance rather than responding to the behavior itself as defiance. In total, this research illustrates that respect, responsibility, relationships, and resistance are pillars of decolonial and abolitionist education. These scholars illustrate how through the Indigenous worldview of plurality (the acceptance of multiple truths) and active resistance, education can be a site for healing.

A final body of research claims that the humanizing answer to the dehumanizing practices of the education system already exists in Indigenous epistemologies of plurality and the history of Black resistance. Evidence of this can be found in Sumida Huaman (in press) who recognizes that there is plurality in human existence and that each individual's epistemology is influenced by their experiences. Similarly, Styres (2019) demonstrates how plurality accepts and honors the truths of others rather than crowning one narrative supreme. San Pedro (2019) adds that humanizing and decolonizing education has a positive effect on students' motivation, self-worth, and futurity. In addition, Warren (2020) states how oftentimes Black stories and histories of joy and resistance are overshadowed by those of pain. He emphasizes the simple shift toward affirmative language to reframe the struggle against oppression as rather the fight for justice or for the futures of Black youth. In his book, Warren (2020) centers possibility by looking at Black education as a way to promote freedom dreaming as opposed to something that needs to be fixed. When taken together, this research suggests that the goal of decolonizing and abolitionist education isn't to replace one school of thought with another, but to provide alternatives that decenter coloniality and emphasize the plurality of the human experience.

In summary, research demonstrates that decolonizing and abolitionist pedagogies promote values of respect, responsibility, relationships, and resistance to create genuine and



humanizing relationships and experiences for Black and Indigenous students. Taken together, this body of research justifies that decolonizing and abolitionist pedagogies may be a tool for teacher resistance to hegemony by fostering collectivism, coexistence, and co-creation in the classroom.

### **Counter-Hegemonic Educational Values Have Positive Impacts on Students and Teachers**

Research demonstrates that re-Indigenizing and liberatory educational values have a positive impact on students and teachers. This includes research that illustrates how pluralism provides diversity of knowledge, articulates how re-Indigenizing and liberatory education inspires critical consciousness, and claims that re-Indigenizing and liberatory practices benefit teachers by fostering strong and genuine relationships with students and colleagues. This scholarship matters because the positive outcomes of Indigenous epistemologies in education are effective methods of resistance for teachers working against the colonial structures of the education system.

Research illustrates how pluralism provides students with a diversity of knowledge that decentralizes Eurocentric narratives in education. Evidence of this can be found in Avery, Kassam, and Ruelle (2017) who claim that the national agenda pushes colonialism throughout all aspects of the education system. In the context of rural schools in Dakota and Lakota territory, standardization, in the form of curriculum, teacher training, and testing, is contributing to the erasure of Indigenous people and their traditions. Similarly, Hanson et al. (2017) demonstrate the work one Canadian university is doing to re-indigenize its programs and promote the separation from Western epistemologies in higher education. They do so by implementing Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) 25 principles of decolonizing methodologies (Hanson et.al., 2017, p. 21). Through engaging in these principles in their teacher education, future educators have a model

for the relationship building and pluralism that will decolonize their classrooms (Hanson et.al., 2017, p. 23). Acton et al. (2017) add that the only way for education to truly grow and evolve is to accept the plurality of experiences and challenge the epistemological binary, which pits Western and Indigenous epistemologies against each other, rather than as coexisting and equally valid knowledge systems. In sum, this research articulates that Indigenous epistemologies center around respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relationships. These values allow for the opportunity to co-exist as a community while also accepting the plurality of the human experience.

Related to this, research investigating counter-hegemonic education articulates how participating in these critical pedagogies inspires the critical consciousness of students. Evidence of this can be found in Acton et al. (2017) who demonstrate how cultural competence is nothing without the ability to critically self reflect on one's own identity and how it interacts with others. Identifying one's positionality, biases and privileges, allows one to recognize the plurality and multiplicity of the human experience. Similarly, Louie (2020) claims that we must not only teach *about* oppression, but more importantly, educators must teach students to notice, analyze and challenge systems of oppression that have been normalized. Castillo-Montoya, Abreu, and Abad (2019) add that critical consciousness is essential to liberation and liberatory practices. The authors illustrate how the Black Lives Matter movement's social media presence can inspire critical consciousness and promote the resistance of all forms of oppression by raising awareness of injustice and the impacts white supremacy has on the Black community (Castillo-Montoya, Abreu, & Abad, 2019, p. 1128). In total, this research suggests there is an urgent need to implement pedagogies that raise critical consciousness in order to promote equity and justice for all students.

A final body of research claims that re-Indigenizing and liberatory practices benefit teachers by fostering strong and genuine relationships with students and colleagues. Evidence of this can be found in Dzamesi and van Heerden (2020), whose work developing teacher training programs for Kindergarten teachers in Ghana illustrates teachers' implementation of Indigenous play-based pedagogical practices like the arrangement of their classrooms, their use of storytelling, and outdoor activities. This training also changed their relationships to their teaching teams and students to become more collaborative and co-constructed. Overall, this participatory action research project inspired the participating teachers to work for the holistic learning and well-being of their students. Similarly, Hanson et. al (2017) demonstrate how implementation of Indigenizing principles in their university classrooms resulted in identity development, fostering a connection to their living and nonliving ancestors, collaboration, negotiation, futurity and survivance through creativity, and honoring different ways of knowing through storytelling. These practices not only benefit Indigenous students, but all students by building authentic relationships that humanize everyone in the community. Warren (2020) adds to this scholarship by emphasizing the significance of student resistance and how, when responding in the appropriate way, it can lead to stronger student-teacher relationships. When the resistance is met with collaboration rather than reprimands, there is possibility for transformation of the relationship (Warren, 2020, p. 28). Warren (2020) describes his experience as an educator and how through his students' resistance, he realized that their autonomy and humanity were more important than his ego (p. 26-27). When taken together, this research suggests that by putting value on relationships, this allows for the opportunity to co-exist as a community while also accepting the plurality of the human experience. In order to resist homogeneity perpetuated by capitalism, educators must co-create learning spaces with students that serve everyone in the

community, which includes but is not limited to, their identities, their interests, and their strengths.

In summary, research demonstrates that re-indigenizing and liberatory educational values have a positive impact on students and teachers. This includes research that illustrates how resisting educational and epistemological hegemony contributes to a sense of value and respect for diversity within the community, articulates how re-Indigenizing and liberatory pedagogies incite critical thought and citizenship, and claims that re-Indigenizing and liberatory practices foster authentic and meaningful relationships within the educational community through values of respect, responsibility and resistance. Taken together, this body of research justifies that decolonizing and abolitionist pedagogies may be a tool for teacher resistance of hegemony by fostering collectivism and coexistence in the classroom.

### **Summary**

This literature review claims that counter-hegemonic pedagogies may be a tool for teacher resistance toward hegemony by fostering collectivism and coexistence in the classroom. Evidence that supports this claim shows how education has moved away from its democratic beginnings and perpetuates capitalism, social reproduction, and inequity. The evidence also highlights how counter-hegemonic pedagogies center around respect, responsibility, relationships, and resistance and how counter-hegemonic educational values have positive impacts on students and teachers. This evidence can be understood through the theoretical framework of critical, decolonial and abolitionist pedagogies. This claim and body of evidence address that there is a need for liberation and healing in education by ethically and respectfully implementing Indigenous epistemologies and Black Liberation and resistance into the pedagogy of all teachers. With my research-based field project, I analyzed the curriculum and pedagogies

practiced in the school under study and created the space and opportunity for educators to reimagine education within their institution and the education system as a whole.

### CHAPTER III FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This chapter describes the findings of the research. The findings are organized according to the conceptual framework of the study which looked at hegemony, social reproduction and inequity, and colonialism in education. Deconstructing hegemony and colonization in education not only requires changes to the content being taught (and the lens through which it is taught), but also a systemic investigation of how schools are contributing to social reproduction and inequity through policies and procedures, unconscious bias, and a resistance to change. In describing the findings, hegemony and counter-hegemony connect with pedagogy, or teacher-led strategies, that either sustain or disrupt the dominant narrative; decolonization and liberation was seen more as connecting to a call for systemic change in order to foster a sense of true belonging for students and faculty of color. The data for both of these categories are further divided into what these aspects of the theoretical framework look like at the school and why they matter to student and teacher constituencies as well as opportunities for growth in order to become a more humane, decolonized, liberated institution that supports the education of every student at the school under study. The data was collected through a two-part focus group composed of seven faculty and administrators at the school under study.

As the school is my place of employment, I wanted to be in full communication with my administrator in order to ease any concerns and maintain a positive relationship with them and the school. In doing so, I sparked curiosity and was asked to include our anti bias coordinator in my sessions as my work pertains to the curriculum through an anti bias, or decolonial, lens. I have already built trust with them and consider them to be a true ally, so although I had originally aimed for my focus groups to be made up solely of teachers, I welcomed their expertise on the social emotional aspect of decolonizing education. As the date of my focus

group approached, in a message of support, my administrator, who is white, told me that they would also be in attendance for one part of the focus group. Considering most of my participants are people of color, I worried that their presence would deeply impact the psychological safety of my colleagues and in turn, influence what and how much they shared. In the end, my administrator was not able to attend, which allowed the space for my colleagues to give a candid, thorough and thoughtful examination of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our community.

The following sections are guided by questions that were determined during the data analysis process. In conducting these two focus groups, I had envisioned focusing more on how the curriculum could grow into something cohesive and seamless across subjects and grade levels. However the more present and pressing needs of participants were in regards to the structures and conduct within the institution that are dehumanizing and replicating colonial systems. The first round of data analysis was in the form of a long list of recurring themes in the two conversations, which I then tried to condense to a list of fewer themes with multiple examples. I then took a step back to look at all my data through the lens of the theoretical framework for my research: critical pedagogy, decolonizing education, and abolitionist teaching. I decided to split the data between teacher-led strategies and institution-led strategies within the context of decolonial and liberatory pedagogies. I then divided each of those categories further to account for how these themes of decolonization and liberation show up, if at all, in our school, why it is important for faculty and students of color, and where participants recommend opportunities for growth. These six categories were then translated into five questions to guide each section of this chapter:

1. In what ways does hegemony show up in our interactions with students and what does counter-hegemony through teacher-led initiatives look like at the school

under study?

2. Why do counter-hegemonic pedagogies matter to faculty and students of color?
3. What do colonial structures and systems look like at the school under study?
4. Why do decolonial and liberatory practices matter to faculty and students of color?
5. What opportunities for growth are there for the school under study to foster a true sense of belonging for all members of the community?

**In what ways does hegemony show up in our interactions with students and what does counter-hegemony through teacher-led initiatives look like at the school under study?**

With only 23% of students receiving financial assistance for \$39,450 worth of tuition, an overwhelming majority of the student population at the school under study comes from wealthy families and the curriculum tends to reflect that. When the curriculum the school uses depicts a singular way of life, it contributes to upholding the dominant narrative. One participant lamented that both the math and literacy curriculum that we use throughout the lower school is centered around wealth and that it “does not give the students space to think critically about the world.” They gave an example of their current math investigation that revolves around a family’s trip to New York, which is insensitive to the fact that many students and families do not have the means to travel. They shared how in the moment, they are able to pivot their instruction to be more justice-oriented, whether that’s to have a conversation about how travel is a privilege or to talk about how urban development relates to the unhoused community in conjunction with the second grade construction of miniature cities in social studies. Through this shift in perspective, this teacher is able to disrupt the language that highlights inequity among their students. Although this comes naturally to them, they worry that others are not trained or committed to doing that



same work to “take the time to try to be anti racist” and “take a look at your lessons and think ‘how am I going to make this equitable?’” Through their intentionality, this teacher is taking the time to model to their students that there is more than one way to exist in their classroom and in the world.

Some other participants noted the importance of books that reflect the identities of the students as well as the world as a whole. A first grade teacher shared how they intentionally share “different ways that people live and exist” in order for the students to make connections and notice differences cross-culturally. Allowing students to make connections with those who come from a heritage, or family structure, or socioeconomic status that is unknown to the students gives them the chance to develop an understanding that there are also ways in which they are similar or have similar desires. It also teaches them that life would be much less interesting if we were all the same, ate the same food, had the same traditions, and wore the same clothes.

Most participants emphasized their work in sharing experiences and perspectives from people of color and other historically oppressed communities, whether from their own lives or otherwise. In doing so, some teachers expressed how this fosters respect for others and a celebration of diversity. When much of the curriculum and school culture centers around one particular demographic, it is important to integrate diverse narratives as equally important to the students’ learning. On the flipside, most participants also share their support for students of color through their shared affinity. One participant kept bringing it back to the importance of representation of a multitude of identities to provide students with both windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990). They expressed that the way the school is represented and the demographics of the majority make it so that, “in your mind you already have the idea that you need to assimilate

in some way.” In addition to representation through instruction, diverse representation of faculty is also an integral part of supporting students of color and introducing new narratives to students of the dominant culture. A few participants echoed this sentiment in regards to the faculty experience in how they present themselves professionally as well as the student experience to be exceptional in order to succeed. One participant spoke on how they amplified their proximity to whiteness in their interview saying that “had I not been a small brown woman... had I not had that green dress and cute shoes and cut nails. I cut my nails for the interview... I straightened my hair for the first time in years... those are things I don’t do for myself” continuing on to reflect they asked, “if I wasn’t a very feminine presenting woman, would I have been hired?” Another participant related this to the student experience stating that, “some of the students are being forced to learn how to code switch because otherwise they cannot succeed [here].” Without ample representation of diverse identities, both students and teachers of color have felt the pressure to present themselves in a way that reflects the culture of the school, fragmenting their true selves from their lives at the school under study.

Some participants spoke on how they build relationships with their students in order to truly see who they are. Specifically speaking on the work of facilitating student affinity groups, one participant shared how it can be as simple as having students “[share their] story.” After witnessing a group of fourth grade students independently advocate for more Black representation and recognition, one teacher brought up the power of student voice asserting that, “where are their voices? ... We should be asking them what they think,” in order to allow them to express their opinions and for them to be heard. These educators are honoring the identities of their students (as well as all the students in the community) by providing them the opportunity to speak, be listened to, and feel respected.

All of the participants in this focus group shared their strategies for disrupting hegemony in their classrooms, whether through diverse read alouds, the integration of antiracist lessons and conversations, or their existence as members of historically oppressed communities in a space built on white supremacy. The methodologies may vary, but overall, the tool for disrupting hegemony is through representation in all of its forms and in all areas of the school.

### **Why do counter-hegemonic pedagogies matter to faculty and students of color?**

My colleagues report being engaged in and committed to creating a true sense of belonging particularly for our students of color. Most participants stressed the desire and work to feel comfortable being their whole selves within a homogeneous community. If faculty and staff are feeling this way, most participants worry about the isolation the students feel when their identities are not being honored. One participant passionately stated, “I teach for the little Black and Brown girls who don’t get seen as they are as full humans.” My colleagues are concerned for the students who don’t see themselves reflected in their teachers, their classroom libraries, and their learning experience as a whole. Without diverse representation, the students’ of historically oppressed communities may feel like their culture or their life experiences aren’t valid or valued.

Many participants agreed that there needs to be continued work to counter hegemony so that students and teachers can see their identities honored and celebrated within the culture of the school. Truly diverse, consistent, and intentional representation has the potential to change the culture of the school and allow students and faculty of color to freely present themselves as they are.

### **What do colonial structures and systems look like at the school under study?**

One participant, though deeply committed to this work, reminded us that, “I just want to be real, capitalism is what makes this place.” They recognize that an independent school is “an

institution built on [capitalism and white supremacy]” and how “the highest beneficiaries of those two markers are, for the most part, the folks who are at this school.” They posed the question about how we, as educators committed to justice in education, can reconcile the structures of inequality that the institution was built on and how it continues to be maintained.

In a more nuanced representation of capitalism and coloniality, most participants cited instances in which they felt that leadership was making decisions by putting the focus on the business versus acknowledging the humanity of the people within the community. For example, one participant cited how there had been pride for how many days students were in school and went on to ask, “how many of these days are draining for faculty?” Particularly throughout the pandemic, teachers have been operating like it’s business as usual, without a moment to slow down and take care of their own well-being, rather than keeping up with the rapid pace set by capitalism. Another colleague referenced parent-teacher conferences in the fall, in which homeroom teachers were off-campus conducting conferences through Zoom, while specialist teachers were on-campus with the students left feeling like they were “second tier,” as described by another specialist teacher. One teacher added that this time could have been better utilized for professional development rather than insisting the children stay in school for those two days. The lack of teacher involvement in those decisions along with the wasting of time that could have been used more wisely contribute to the sentiment that as educators, our voices are not heard and that we are not valued. Another participant chimed in with, “we’re saying there’s no time. No time and no money, and yet somehow we had money for other things,” like a millions dollar renovation to the lower school and a Mardi Gras themed party to celebrate the end of said renovation. Without the opportunity to provide input, educators have felt dehumanized and invalidated by the institution, rather than like the intellectuals and innovators that they are.

All participants acknowledged that there are many ways in which they feel that they are not seen, heard, or supported by the administration. In this regard, many participants reported feeling isolated and unsupported because they were not given the opportunity or circumstances to build trust, rapport, and relationships with their colleagues. One participant recognized the impact the pandemic has had on the community and acknowledges “how everything has been the past two years, I feel like we need to get to know each other, just build up trust.” Another participant reported how they feel as if they have few allies within the community and that they have “experienced microaggressions from people in our community and [they] have seen white people not do anything and [they] don’t feel safe.” In that regard, they recognize the fear of confrontation, and they expressed a desire for “some way to support each other and build that sense of community and safety.” On the other hand, another participant shared how building trust is essential to decolonizing our institution because, “if you don’t even feel comfortable approaching [a] colleague, these conversations are never [going to] happen.” It is important to provide opportunities for colleagues to connect on a personal level before they have to connect on a professional level. As it stands, the level of trust and communication is not conducive to a safe and productive environment for conversations about decolonization and liberation in education.

A consequence of this, some participants reported, for faculty of color is that they feel that they need to assimilate to the culture of the school and note the privilege that they have in their (assumed) proximities to whiteness, with one participant sharing that, “I am very small, I am loud, but I’m not very scary... and so I feel like ...white people sometimes can trust me a little more.” Another participant emphasized that their racial identity does not represent the entirety of who they are. They asserted, “I want them to see me as a complete person” while

another colleague touched on the lack of trust and community for faculty of color, lamenting that, “as people of color we shouldn’t only have one person we feel comfortable with. We should be able to just be.” Engaging in conversations about race and privilege is essential to the health and safety of faculty of color in a predominantly white space.

Some participants related this to what students of color must experience as well and they specifically asked questions regarding admissions and intentional recruitment for students of diverse backgrounds. As has been stated, in order to provide an education that is critical and diverse, the culture of the school must reflect that as well. Some participants went on to share how they’ve seen the impact on one particular student who, being the only Black student in her grade, has a lack of affinity among all of the people they come into contact with at school. One teacher lamented, “they didn’t think through how alone she’d be, she is alone.” My colleagues recognize the importance of mirrors for students of color and how the lack of one may have an impact on her self-worth (Bishop, 1990). One participant in particular noted how admissions is looking for students that fit the mold of what it means to be a student of this school rather than cultivating a community of students that all add their strengths and experiences to an evolving culture of the school. Later in the conversation, another participant echoed this sentiment in regards to the school’s proclivity for tradition as a long-standing institution by saying that, “sometimes tradition doesn’t allow room for innovation.” Tradition can oftentimes tread dangerously close to harmful and can be a crutch for a school’s resistance to change.

Participants/colleagues believe that the innovation at the school under study is coming from the bottom up as some reported the many ways in which they play a role in furthering this work toward more decolonizing and liberatory education. Their efforts prove that there is a need for solidarity so that this work does not fall on the backs of a few people, but rather a collective

responsibility to the well-being of the community. One participant demonstrated this sentiment when they said, “you can’t do it by yourself.” My colleagues recognize that people of color within the school are in need of protection, care, and community and they demonstrate how support from other people of color and allies would provide the environment where they feel that they can be themselves without compartmentalizing parts of their identities.

### **Why do decolonial and liberatory practices matter to faculty and students of color?**

Many participants reported that by providing systemic support for students, families, and faculty of color, there would be greater retention of these constituencies. Failing to recognize how race and privilege play out in the institution can result in a loss of retention for both students and faculty of color. A few participants in particular brought up the issue of retention, asking, “what happened to our teachers of color?” and demanding, “there needs to be conversations about retention for educators of color at [the school under study].” Between the end of the 20-21 school year and the end of the 21-22 school year, the lower school will have lost eight faculty of color, most of whom had their positions filled by white educators. The data demonstrate that educators of color do not feel supported as well as the fact that the school is not recruiting specifically to have a diverse faculty. This results in the dominant culture gaining more dominance and further marginalization of the people of color that remain in the community.

Overall, my colleagues reported that more support is required from our administration to provide a safe environment for people of color and to further diversity, equity, and inclusion at the school. Participants cited many ways in which the school’s leadership could provide systemic support, such as an ethnic studies specialist, counseling for faculty of color, anti-bias admissions screenings, and opportunities to build trust. Most participants believed that if our administration demonstrated diversity, equity, and inclusion as a priority, we would grow into a stronger, and

safer community for students and educators of color.

**What opportunities for growth are there for the school under study to foster a true sense of belonging for all members of the community?**

In regards to pedagogy and teacher-led initiatives, most participants urged the need to look at the current curriculum through an anti-bias or decolonial lens. They cited examples of lessons in which students were able to make real world connections and think critically. For example, one teacher remembered a math lesson where students created art from collected data. The artist that inspired this work had created a piece of art that showed ethnic distributions within different cities, which allowed their class to start a conversation about why certain groups of people are focused in particular areas and what resources or hazards are in those areas as well as connecting it to math and art. Some teachers shared that by integrating real-world scenarios, students will be able to practice making connections across subjects to deepen their understanding of the world. When students begin to understand the world outside of school, they are able to start thinking critically and ask questions that challenge the “common sense” of traditional education (Kumashiro, 2015).

One way of accomplishing this, many participants cited, is representation across the board: in curriculum, in classroom materials, in faculty, and in leadership. By bringing in perspectives of people of color, non-Christians, queer folks, people that use wheelchairs, etc., students will begin to not only notice the oppression they experience, but the joy, wisdom and capabilities they bring to our community. Recruitment for more faculty of color was also brought up by most participants as an essential part of counter-hegemonizing and decolonizing the school under study. One participant stated, “what I really wish we had was more representation within the faculty and staff.” In doing so, some participants reported that it would bring in more



perspectives and create an environment in which conversations about diversity, race, privilege, etc. are normalized and not feared. Similarly, some participants expressed a desire for more intentional diversity efforts in the recruitment of students of color, not only to provide a critical mass for students to feel a sense of community, but as a way to grow and innovate as a school. A common thread throughout these findings is the need for greater, more diverse representation because the only way to challenge the dominant narrative is to bring in the voices and experiences that challenge it.

However, in tandem with recruitment, most participants asserted that there must also be accountability from leadership to show that diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging is a priority. Most participants urged the need for time, space, and money to be dedicated to supporting students and faculty of color through diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging at the school under study. A few participants shared that it is often treated as an afterthought, which, one participant cited, can lead to people not taking it seriously. Most participants expressed their desire for more intentional, frequent, and differentiated training to further the school's diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging work. A few participants expressed the need for a specialist, or someone dedicated to coach educators on the curriculum and their relationships in regards to race and ethnicity. Although my colleagues, by agreeing to participate in my focus group, expressed interest in engaging in conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion, that doesn't mean that all my colleagues feel the same way. That is why my participants all agreed that the responsibility falls on our leadership to demonstrate that they are invested in DEI and that it is a non negotiable area of professional development to ensure that people of color are supported at all levels of the organization.

In sum, all participants reported a desire for more time and more intentionality for DEI training and conversations. Many also expressed an urgency for a diverse representation of faculty, students, and educational experiences. Although some colleagues shared ways in which they are teaching through an anti-bias lens, many lamented that because this is not a priority of the school, that people of color in the community are made to feel unsafe, undervalued, and isolated. In order to be a school dedicated to equity and justice, the school under study must recognize the ways in which it harms people of color and work toward mending that harm.

## CHAPTER IV CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings illustrate that there is much to be done in order for the school under study to foster a true sense of community and belonging for students and faculty of color. This chapter concludes the research by examining how the findings address the research questions, explaining the significance of this study to different constituencies, describing what I have learned throughout this process, and discussing the implications and recommendations of this study.

### **What Narratives Does the School Under Study Instruct and What do Those Narratives Convey About BIPOC History, Culture, and Community?**

Whether through its curriculum or through its culture, the school under study prioritizes wealth and whiteness. Though there are efforts from individual teachers and different affinity groups on campus, the institution was built on white supremacy and remnants of that legacy are seen by the teachers participating in this study as present in how those in power (administration, people on the board, donors, parents, etc.) treat people of color in the community. Much has been done on the individual level or on a smaller scale to provide a diverse and inclusive education to support our students of color, but the school is seen as lacking the systemic support that would make these efforts at a larger scale.

### **How, if at all, does the school honor the identities and experiences of students of color?**

My colleagues are very passionate educators who do what they can to make sure their students feel seen and valued. Many educators work hard to create justice-oriented curriculum, provide windows and mirrors for their students, and teach responsively to the needs of their class. There are also many assemblies throughout the year where students get to speak on different holidays and traditions of their cultures and ethnicities like Japanese Girls Day, Lunar New Year, and Black History Month. However, these opportunities are few and far between, so it

is essential for educators to integrate other narratives into their instruction and curriculum. The school is currently operating with the contributions and additive approaches to multicultural education as described by Banks's Four Levels of Integration of Ethnic Content (Banks, 1993). Meaning that the curriculum and school culture mostly highlight famous figures, holidays, cultural elements, themes, and perspectives in addition to the Eurocentric, mainstream curriculum rather than truly transforming the lens through which we teach to promote advocacy and direct action (Banks, 1993, p. 142).

Where the waters get a bit murky is in regard to what the culture of the school is perceived to be and how that impacts our students of color. Some participants expressed concern for BIPOC students with learning profiles, their access to outside support, and narrow-minded expectations put on children as a result of the highly selective independent school system. No matter how much we tell our students that success is subjective and that we value the process as opposed to the right answers, families of the school are promised their children will get into a "good" high school so they can get into a "good" college. This pressure to succeed results in a fast-pace that doesn't allow students the time to process their learning. It provides only a singular model for what academic excellence is, and leads students to believe that they need to be something that they are not or do not want to be. This corresponds to wealth and whiteness and has implications beyond academics. For example, I recently had one of my students, who is Black, tell me that when they were in kindergarten, they drew a self portrait in which they drew themselves with blonde hair and blue eyes. Educators may or may not be assessing their students on a deficit model, but the students may do it to themselves when the models of success around them are predominantly white.

**How, if at all, are Educators and Administrators Upholding Policies and Practices That Play Into Oppressive Structures of Power?**

In terms of educators, there is a lot of unlearning that needs to be done to mitigate our unconscious bias, especially in regards to behavior and what is expected of our students, not only in regard to race and culture, but other aspects of their identities like neurodivergence, ability, and gender identity and expression. My colleagues at the school under study care about their students and support their students' growth in many ways. It is important to remember that we are facilitators that provide opportunities for growth that are authentic to our students rather than a guide that leads them toward a specific ideal.

It takes a concerted effort to push aside preconceived expectations of what a successful student is, especially when we are overworked, underpaid, and not given enough time to plan and self-reflect. That's why it is so important to have support from leadership and systems in place to foster this kind of professional development that broadens the definitions of achievement, behavior, and social competencies. When our administrators are seen as not exhibiting cultural competence, diversity, and inclusion as a priority, faculty feel less obligated to do the work intentionally, thoughtfully, and holistically. It is important to mention that decolonization and liberation are processes that affect the whole-being. So allyship is undermined when you commit microaggressions, allow people to commit microaggressions, and don't hold people accountable for committing microaggressions. Given what participants shared, this standard must also extend to the greater community to include families, donors, and board members because their influence and power have an impact on our pedagogy, our curriculum, and support provided to students and faculty of color.

**How do Participants Envision Decolonization and Liberation at the School Under Study?**

Decolonization and liberation would require a complete culture shift at the school under study. It would take a lot of work, but it is work that the participants are engaged in and willing to do. Counter-hegemonic strategies create a humanizing experience that is welcoming, inclusive, and where all members feel that their identities are honored, their voices are heard, and their experiences are validated. It would not only nurture and support the people in the community, it would attract and seek out students, teachers, and administrators of diverse backgrounds to contribute to the innovation and growth of the school. A truly decolonized and liberated school would be a space where all members feel comfortable bringing their whole selves. To achieve this, the participants in this study want to see the school and its wider community work hard to dismantle the systems of oppression that currently exist within the school and to recognize that this work is ongoing and ever evolving.

**Why it Matters**

This study illustrates that although many of my colleagues are putting in the work to become anti racist, anti bias, and culturally competent educators, there is much more work that needs to be done within the school to make systemic changes that will continue to move this work forward at a greater scale. The findings should matter to administrators at the school under study, as well as other independent schools, because despite their innovation, the schools are built on wealth and power, which frequently need to be checked in order to mitigate their inherent inequity. This study is significant for educators of color, families of color, and white co-conspirators within independent schools by validating their experiences in a predominantly white institution and recognizing the additional work taken on to counter the hegemony that it often promotes. I would also like to emphasize how the participants in my focus group felt

deeply impacted by this study because it allowed them a space to think and speak critically about our employer. It gave them the opportunity to work in scholarly collaboration while also creating a sense of solidarity upon realization that they are working toward a common goal that would shift the culture of the school to more intentionally honor the people of color within the community. Ultimately, this study could be incredibly impactful to the students of color that attend the school under study. Provided the opportunity to set their own expectations for success, rather than ones placed on them, the participants believe students will have space to thrive, grow, and succeed in the way that is authentic to them.

### **My Own Growth and Learning**

As the researcher of this study, I learned a lot through connecting my academic life to my professional life. Much of my graduate work has been done in connection with my work as a teacher, but this was the first time both worlds interacted with each other in a concrete and collaborative way. I had never once engaged in conversation with my colleagues about my passion for radicalizing and revolutionizing education and I was pleasantly surprised that my participants echoed similar sentiments throughout the two focus group sessions. As we are provided very little time to connect, I was thrilled to listen to the passion of my colleagues and the work that they have already been doing in their classrooms to provide a diverse and equitable education to their students. I was reminded that as educators, we are inherently intellectual people and that the nature of the profession is to continue to seek out opportunities for growth and tools to better support our students.

What I will take away from this experience is that I am not the first, I'm not the only, and I will not be the last person to challenge hegemony and push for justice in my institution. I don't say this to villainize independent schools, rather, to recognize that all teachers encounter inequity

and that there will be compromises no matter where they are situated. In independent schools, teachers have the freedom and flexibility to teach for diversity and inclusion, while also contributing to the further advantage of privileged students and families. On the other hand, while public schools provide equal access to education for all students, they have access to fewer resources and are beholden to the standards their state requires which may not be equity-minded either. The education system is built in this way to replicate the capitalistic ideals of success and equity minded educators must engage in consistent work to dismantle these structures.

Although that is daunting, I am choosing to look at it as an ongoing process that requires stamina, perseverance, and solidarity. More often than not, teachers tend to feel isolated in their grade levels or even within their classrooms, missing opportunities to collaborate and commiserate. Existing as an unperfect anti-capitalist person of color within a predominantly white and wealthy institution generates much of the same feelings I get as a unperfect anti-capitalist person of color participating in capitalism. There is a tension between what I believe and what I must do to meet my basic human needs. Our society is so entrenched in capitalism, that it, and the injustices that come from it, are almost inescapable. I attempt to reconcile that tension by taking actions that speak out against inequality, like making donations to organizations for systemic change, creating lessons on Black liberation, and divesting from banks that contribute to the fossil fuel industry. Though these actions are taken at the individual level, they demonstrate how small wins can contribute to a greater movement and maintain momentum toward systemic change. Through conducting this focus group, I have gained a community of colleagues that are my allies in collective action, which, much like celebrating incremental progress, is crucial to our sustainability and well-being in this work to dismantle the oppressive structures in our community.



### **Implications and Recommendations**

This study implies a need to hire and recruit intentionally for diversity with the goal in mind to innovate the culture of the school. Without a wide representation of identities and experiences in the community, it is easy to accept the dominant narrative as the default and the norm. Most of our students stay within a small radius in their neighborhoods, so even if they are exposed to other cultures through what they learn in school, they are not given opportunities to connect that learning to the world outside of the classroom. This sheltering prevents children from thinking critically about the world as a whole and the world that they live in. By providing windows into diverse life experiences, students will develop a sense of understanding and learn to understand that we exist in a world of multiple truths. However, this study also implies that being a person of color in this community comes with many challenges that often lead to students and teachers of color leaving the school. So in addition to recruitment and outreach strategies, the school must also have support systems in place for students and faculty of color and educational opportunities for the white folks in the community in order to retain and sustain the well-being of our community members of color.

One recommendation to achieve this is to further education and support for all faculty to deepen their cultural competence. Many participants shared how they felt as if Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion was not a priority because there is no time or money put into it. The participants expressed a desire to continue learning and re-envision their pedagogies and curriculum, but there is a lack of time, money, and people to make this happen. I recommend that the school under study raise or find the money to hire a full time specialist dedicated to decolonizing the curriculum. For the remainder of this section, this specialist will be referred to as the ethnic studies specialist. The ethnic studies specialist will function much like our literacy, math, and

learning specialists that advise on differentiating in their respective areas of expertise. The ethnic studies specialist can be called up to help revamp existing curriculum to be more equitable and inclusive, they can co-create new curriculum with grade level teams to fill gaps in the narratives, they can provide and suggest training for educators at different phases in their anti racist work, and they can provide emotional support for students and faculty of color existing in a predominantly white institution. Ideally, this isn't a one-person job, this level of support and institutional change requires a team, but I believe that having at least one person in a position of perceived power to meet these needs will make a huge difference in the well-being of people of color in the community.

The findings of this study imply that there is a lot of work to be done on the systemic level at the school under study to support and expand on the collective and individual efforts of the faculty. The actions, and lack thereof, on behalf of the administration has given faculty the impression that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion are not a priority to the institution. There is a flaw in the implementation on a wider scale when those meant to hold us accountable are themselves not being held accountable for sustaining this work. In order for the school to make intentional systemic changes to support their students and faculty of color, I recommend that those with perceived power must all be in alignment with these values and actively demonstrate their advocacy for equity in the institution.

I recognize the inherent tension between counterhegemonizing an institution that was meant for wealthy, often white, families and currently exists in a city in which the wealth gap is only getting wider. This work, to decolonize and liberate education, is not easy and it is important to remember that success may always be partial. However, the need still remains to honor students' identities that often are excluded from the dominant narrative to validate their

existence, acknowledge their intersectionalities, and value what perspectives they bring to the school community.

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