

# VUE

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THE METROPOLITAN CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON EQUITY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SCHOOLS  
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY • *Voices in Urban Education*

## Separation and Healing: A Journey Toward Restoration and Recovery in Education



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# Voices in Urban Education

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*Voices in Urban Education* (ISSN 1553-541X) is published twice a year in Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter by the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools at New York University in the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. It features articles and other works of scholarly and general significance to a wide range of interests and communities who experience urban education through a variety of entry points.

Articles seek to cover a wide range of disciplines with a strong emphasis on trans-sectional and transdisciplinary perspectives aimed at examining successes, problems, and questions in policy, advocacy, and teaching and learning practices in urban education. *VUE* pays particular attention to pieces that highlight the experiences, hopes, dreams, and concerns of historically underrepresented and vulnerable groups in education along lines of gender, race, sexual identity, dis/ability, language, ethnicity, religion, and indigenous or immigration status. As an open access journal, *VUE* aims to disseminate important, topical, relevant, and urgent research, thoughts, and commentary to a wide audience.

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- Research Perspectives in Urban Education consist of more traditionally academic research pieces, either studies conducted with an urban education focus or technical commentaries on existing research or strands of research. *VUE* has a preference for transdisciplinary, trans-sectional, participatory or partnership (researcher-practitioner, practitioner-student, practitioner-advocate, advocate-student, etc.) pieces that are inclusive of broader perspectives and experiences within urban education. However, we will consider more traditionally academic pieces that add to the body of knowledge or to important topical conversations around equity, liberation, abolition, and justice in education. Action research and design-based studies with an equity focus conducted by teachers and/or students/parents will be considered. Research pieces should include an abstract, introduction, and up to 40 references (hyperlinked if possible) and may include up to six tables/figures.
- Commentaries on Urban Education consist of technical comments, opinions, and narratives of experience and/or guidance from leaders at the forefront of important conversations and issues in urban education, including but not limited to: school integration, school funding, disproportionality, school culture and climate, school discipline, campus safety, racial bias, culturally responsive/sustaining education, the decolonization of education, critical theories in education, etc. *VUE* considers anyone a potential thought leader, from students and non-instructional school staff through district and state leadership, as well as within and beyond the frames of what is traditionally thought of as leadership. Thought leaders' pieces should be between 2,000 and 4,000 words and may contain up to 10 references to scholarly or other contextual sources.
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# Voices in Urban Education

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A special thank you to Jazmin Shaw who served as a guest reviewer for this issue. We also thank students from across NYC public schools whose art brings life to this issue of *VUE*, with particular gratitude to this issue's front and back cover student artists Mehelia C. and Eloise Harcourt.

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This autoethnographic commentary includes anecdotes along with scientific background, ending with suggestions to do your best work as an equity warrior. It examines how, when working to dismantle racist systems, there are many setbacks that equity warriors face time and time again. The author suggests that “warriors” face re-traumatization when listening to the radio, watching the news, even viewing comedy shows—hearing triggering stories from the heated political climate repeatedly.

## Separation and Healing: A Journey Toward Restoration and Recovery in Education

A month before we were set to publish, there was a very different introduction to this issue. In that other version, we wrote briefly about certain structural conditions in this country, and how the divisions created and upheld by those conditions unfold in our schools. We spoke about how schools can in some ways serve as microcosms of different corners of the American tapestry and be seen as social conditioning mechanisms that accustom students to what the dominant culture expects of them, in particular the learned expectations of deficit and failure transmitted to the students in our most underfunded and underserved schools.

Over the past several years, the spectrum of how human life is valued has been in vivid and horrific detail through video, photographic, and journalistic display. From detention camps to police body cam footage, evidence abounds in our society of how costly the deep social divisions are to those most targeted by those divisions, along intersectional lines of race, gender, language, sexual identity, economic security, religion, national origin, and dis/ability. In turn, we see echoes in our educational system of these products, from the misidentification and mis-servicing of multilingual students and students with disabilities, to the hyper-surveillance, hyper-discipline and hyper-exclusion of vulnerable students, sequestering or secluding them from the traditional classrooms made accessible to their peers.

But that other introduction, the one that dove a bit more deeply into those issues and others of their kin, while relevant, was disrupted by the current crisis in which we find ourselves. The novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 has—upon this writing—disrupted education across the country, sending home students and educators to maintain physical distance. In an issue dedicated to the theme of divisiveness, nothing is currently more divisive than the physical division of students from schools where this has occurred, and the differential impact COVID-19 has had and will continue to have on schools, students, families, and communities.

Some things have been revealed in these first phases of our collective weathering of the current crisis. A spotlight has been shined upon how health crises impact families unevenly in ways that exacerbate existing disparities and vulnerabilities within our economic and health systems, and the impact of COVID-19 has exposed and deepened these chasms between the most privileged and the most vulnerable. One pressing example is the inconsistent availability of technology-enhanced educational services for students and families. It raises important and necessary questions about overburdened and under-resourced districts' ability to continue to uphold their legal



and ethical obligations to continue providing educational services; but beyond this, they must also maintain vital and necessary services for students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and those living in the most dire conditions. Each of these previously existing divisions is deepened by the present situation, and as of yet there is little clarity on districts' long-term sustainability plans for resolving all these issues if remote learning were to continue indefinitely, as appears to be the case in many areas of the U.S., including the nation's largest school system, NYC. We must remain vigilant in pointing out these pre-existing conditions of disparity and ensure that those who are most neglected by the political, economic, and health care systems are not excluded from the educational system as well, as the cause and continuance of disparity in any one area is inextricably intertwined to them all at the root.

Importantly, however, we have also seen in these recent most uncertain days the resilience of communities, and evidence of communities pulling together to better navigate this new normal. We have witnessed emergent discussions of what Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education for remote learning can look like. We have seen teachers and systems adapt new ways of teaching and learning, and we have seen families and students push strongly to advocate for access to things many of us take for granted but are more necessity than luxury: stable internet access, reliable and safe access to transportation and food, clean water, enough food and supplies just to continue our daily existence, and affordable quality healthcare. While these basic human needs are universal, the gaps in how they are enjoyed have been laid bare before us, as those gaps have become more visible and continue to widen.

To borrow a principle from physics, every force encounters an equal opposing force. The opposing force to the divisions we see is, as laid out in these pages, the force of healing. Healing is what brings us back together, not merely to oppose division, but to examine the wounds, determine their cause, and apply the necessary care, while supplying the air for those wounds to breathe while healing. Bound in this issue are examinations of some of the wounds of division and their root causes, but also hopeful examinations of how they can and do heal. The pages themselves, laid out before you, provide the air for them to begin to heal. Accordingly, we have divided the pieces in this issue thematically into two sections: *Separation* and *Healing*.

In this issue of *Voices in Urban Education*, our contributing authors examine a variety of the divisions they have witnessed, studied, and contemplated in urban education. In the first section of this issue, titled *Separation*, are three pieces focused on some critical divisions in education. R. Kelly Cameron and Renee McCall take a close look at the experiences of three African-American students in the Massachusetts METCO program. Their examination takes a look at the role dominant culture plays in the decision-making of students of color, including how they confront situations in which they make choices about whether and to what extent they must assert, adapt, or repress their cultural identities, essentially how they must navigate decisions about whether to divide themselves. In her Commentary piece, Gloria Rosario Wallace examines how school leaders can employ "human-centered" systems to confront racism and bigotry in ways that move beyond individualism. Wallace explains how such systems can center not only humanity instead of division, but also communities and collaborative solutions so that school leaders do not feel like tackling long-standing systemic racism in their school community is a duty they must bear in isolation. Finally, Jessica Cardichon and Linda Darling-Hammond examine some of the most substantive and harmful changes to federal disciplinary guidance on disproportionality that occurred in the transition from the previous presidential administration to the current one, including the loss of important and even critical

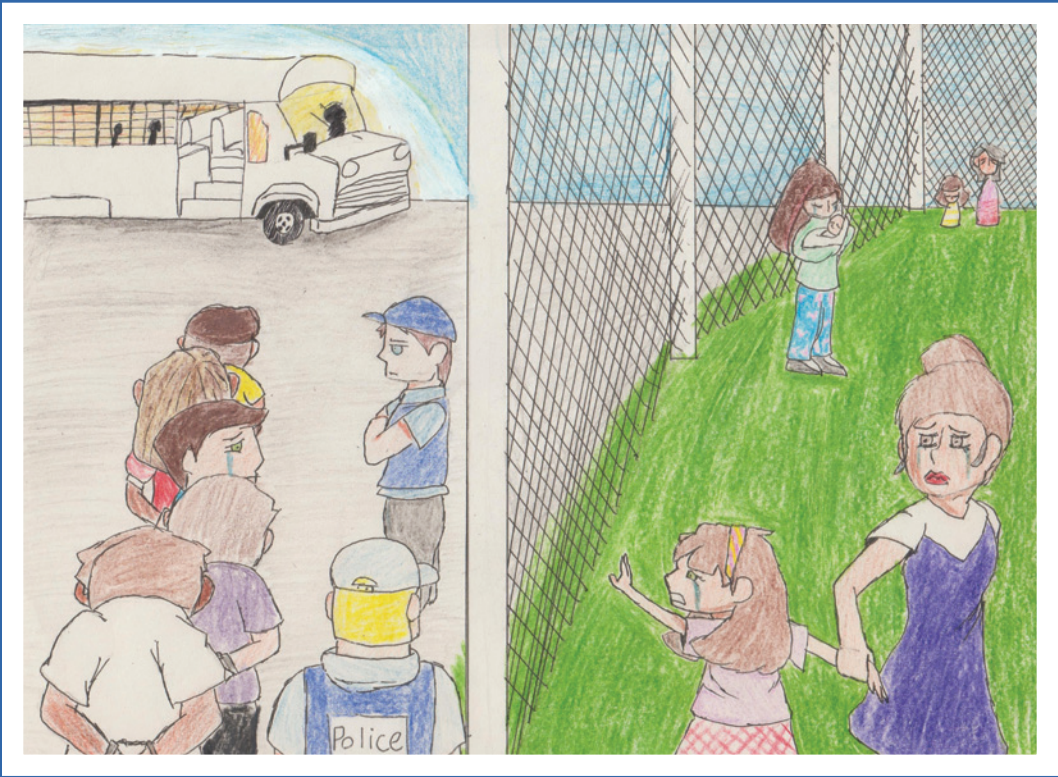


protections for some of our most vulnerable students, including transgender and disabled students, and the loss of guidance on zero tolerance policies, practices which have been proven particularly harmful to already vulnerable students.

On the flipside of this divisiveness, the second half of this issue examines *Healing*. In their piece, Jane Quinn and Martin Blank take a long-term and macroscopic view of community schools and provide ten essential lessons learned, including what community schools have gotten really right and how they provide an important perspective into debates on school reform and school choice. In an interview with us, Nellie Mae Senior Program Officer Delia Arrellano-Weddleton has given important insight on how racial equity has become a focusing lens for the philanthropic work of the Nellie Mae Foundation and how her own experiences and background influenced her path and direction. Finally, in the piece that inspired the title of this issue, Lyrica Fils-Aimé examines the role of the “equity warriors”: those who do the ongoing groundwork of identifying, confronting, challenging, and uprooting racism and white supremacy. She digs deeply into the emotional and psychic toll such work takes, reminding us that we are not machines and cannot expect to do this challenging work without being affected and risk becoming (re)traumatized by it.

The student artwork contained herein also supplies a crucial balance of voices, full of both pain and promise, hurt but hopeful, to ground these discussions in the issues most pressing and pertinent in their lives. In these pages, they tell us in images and emotions what separation means to them; yet, they also give us a sense of how to heal. It is our hope that these voices resonate as powerfully as any in this issue, and that together these images of Separation and Healing remind us of the importance of equity in all our work and the humanity of all those touched by it.

In these times, more uncertain than ever, we center ourselves and our work upon exposing separations and giving them air to breathe, so that together we may find the healing that awaits on the other side. We hope you enjoy the small voyage through a process that this issue and its contributors have collectively brought to you.



Dorian Mejias

# Part 1: Separation



Dorian Mejias

# Coming from Where We're From: The Stories and Experiences of African American Students in Predominantly White High Schools

R. KELLY CAMERON AND RENEE MCCALL

*This research is presented in a narrative form that captures authentic student voices and experiences of African American students, who have faced the complexity of adjusting to and navigating through unfamiliar terrain while simultaneously building nuanced relationships—peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher—across racial, cultural, and ethnic boundaries. It notes that the social and academic experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for suburban White students, as compared to their urban African American peers vary significantly.*

Not only are urban and suburban public schools vastly different in terms of educational outcomes for students with European origins as compared to African Americans, but their lived experiences and daily interactions differ as well. Urban represents central city; suburban represents areas surrounding a central city within a county constituting the metropolitan statistical area (Hu, 2003).

Conditions that exist in a suburban school setting, such as larger budgets, access to more personalized curricula and extracurricular activities lead to an increase in the student population's access to opportunities such as social and economic mobility. On the other hand, according to Darling-Hammond, Friedlaender, & Snyder (2014), inadequate funding hampers many schools serving low-income and minoritized students from fully realizing their goals and addressing student needs. Urban principals report having about seven times less autonomy in matters of school policy, resource allocation, and personnel decisions than their average suburban counterpart (Hannaway & Talbert, 1991). As a result, an urban setting typically has more funding shortfalls and simultaneously fewer resources, human capital and otherwise, with each negatively impacting urban student outcomes. Incongruity in urban schools, often referred to in research literature as *inequality* is stark and has the potential to impact students' long-term personal development. While geographic location and socioeconomic status are just two factors that may lead to difficulties for traditionally marginalized students in obtaining a quality education in American society (Gordon, Gordon, & Nembhard, 1994), the experiences of students in the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) program illuminate other nuanced variables that detail their educational journeys in suburban schools in Massachusetts.

A lack of funding for public schools has potentially broad consequences when considering equity and access to quality education. For urban school districts, "Because American schools are typically funded through property taxes and African American

families are more likely to live in communities with lower property values, they are unable to generate enough tax revenue to fund their schools at the same level as their suburban counterparts” (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 106).

In Massachusetts, during the early 1960s, educational differences and inequalities between suburban and urban public schools created a sense of urgency for low-income parents, particularly parents of African American students. The METCO program was established in 1966 to address inequalities in the urban and suburban education systems and rectify unequal access to formal public education (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011). The program and participating school districts emphasized voluntary suburban district participation in the public-school integration process. The plan was to bus students from urban communities to suburban school districts that were predominantly White to provide such students with an integrated educational school experience (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011).

Historically, for some African American students, internalized racism has reinforced thoughts of suburban schools being superior to urban schools, and children who attend schools in the suburbs receive a better education (Golba, 1998). Harper (2007) informs how internalized racism occurs when socially stigmatized groups (e.g., Black males) accept and recycle negative messages regarding their aptitude, abilities, and societal place, which results in self-devaluation and the invalidation of others within the group (Essed, 1991; Jones, 2000; Lipsky, 1987; Pheterson, 1990; Pyke & Dang, 2003). African American students who participate in the METCO program, therefore, gain access to a presumably superior academic experience at a school far from their neighborhoods.

These students often find themselves at a cultural disadvantage in an environment

that does not actively affirm and celebrate their ethnic and cultural identities, yet the students attempt to navigate intercultural relationships with White teachers and peers nonetheless (Nieto, 1999). Nieto (1999) further posits that it is not possible to separate learning from the cultural context in which it takes place, or from an understanding of how culture and society influence learning. The learning process is a complicated matter and is influenced by many factors, like the individual’s experiences, cultural values, ethnic and racial connections, and relationships between student and teacher (Nieto, 1999). Furthering the point, Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) inform how crucial it is for teachers to learn about their students, especially those who are culturally different from themselves; teachers must also comprehend that students who are racial or ethnic minorities see, view, and perceive themselves and others differently than those who are of the majority group.

African American children bring to school with them culturally-based ways of doing, seeing, and knowing; however, White teachers responsible for educating diverse populations of students struggle with interpreting the complexity of the influence that culture, race, and ethnicity have on the academic, social, emotional, and psychological development of students of color and its connectedness to learning (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Culturally-based ways of doing, seeing, and knowing are naturally expressed by African American students with urban backgrounds through their use of African American English, code-switching techniques between urban and suburban settings, traditionally Black or African American hairstyle options and clothing choices, often containing socially conscious messages, like “Black Lives Matter” and “Hands up, don’t shoot”. Educators need to learn as much as they can about their students: who



they are, what they value and believe, and what they hope for and desire (Nieto, 2012).

Embedded in this research are detailed experiences from the point of view of a sample of African American students who participate in the METCO program. Their narratives describe the ongoing complexity of adjusting to and navigating through unfamiliar terrain and simultaneously building productive relationships—peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher—across racial, cultural, and ethnic boundaries. Broadly put, this research interprets how African American students maintain, negotiate, or veil their cultural and social identities and the strategies they leverage to negotiate a suburban, predominately White school environment.

## PURPOSE AND JUSTIFICATION

This research explores in detail the manner in which the participants, African American high school students, make sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher interprets meaning from the participants' experiences to "describe insights and lessons learned" (Callary, Rathwell, & Young, 2015, p. 65) based on the students' perspectives of various events (Smith et al., 2009). The presented findings intend to contribute to the ongoing yet limited research related to the complex experiences of African American high school students attending predominantly White schools. A 2012 report, *The Urgency of Now: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and the Black Male*, sponsored by the Schott Foundation for Public Education, (Holzman 2012) highlighted the fact that all students should be given a fair and substantive opportunity to learn, regardless of who their parents are, where they were born, and the zip code in which they reside. However, the report further posited that this was not always the

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To meet the learning needs of African American students, teachers working in desegregation programs need to exhibit an 'ethos of care towards minority students that is culturally appropriate and authentic.'

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case for many students, and as a result, a moral imperative to address such identified inequities needed to occur. To meet the learning needs of African American students, teachers working in desegregation programs need to exhibit an “ethos of care towards minority students that is culturally appropriate and authentic” (Holzman, Jackson, & Beaudry, 2012, p. 95). An ethos of care can be powerfully cultivated by practicing culturally responsive pedagogy, an approach to teaching and learning that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Holzman et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ware, 2006).

Current research emphasizes the level of sensitivity that students of color experience as it relates to culture and the role it often plays in their perception of the school as a whole, and of their learning experiences, specifically. Teachers and other staff may look upon the students of color they serve as “damaged and dangerous caricatures” (Delpit, 2006, p. 13) who are ill-equipped to meet academic standards. This fog, or the interplay of one's bias and ignorance, influences teachers' interactions with students of color and perpetuates stereotypes about student capabilities. As such, assumptions are made about students based on their race, sex, class, disability status,

religion, language, national origin, legal status, and other identities due to teachers' biased perspectives that need broadening in order to more adequately relate to, affirm, and sustain students' cultures (McCall, 2019). According to Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011), "Theories and research which argue that students, especially those from status-oppressed minority groups, are sensitive to their treatment in school by teachers, administrators, and peers" (p. 67). Therefore, McCall (2019) posits that teachers strive to instill in students that, as an educated populace, it is critical to reject and/or overcome learned helplessness and to subvert, rather than reinforce, perpetuate, or confirm negative stereotypes. The misinformed, dominant view and the imbalanced systems that keep subgroups of students down and elevate others must be recalibrated, and schools have the potential to do just that by bettering students' lives through fostering learning experiences that affirm their individuality, cultures, backgrounds, and ideas.

Through a program like METCO, an underlying goal of this research is to further inform the secondary education community of the lived experiences of African American students attending predominantly White schools. By presenting lived accounts, this research supports and advances Brown-Jeffy and Cooper's point about "the relevance of the text to the child's own experience" (2011, p. 68). In the voices of the student participants, they are empowered to analyze their own understandings and ultimately influence their daily academic and social interactions in predominantly White spaces.

### PROBLEM TO BE CONSIDERED

African American students in urban school contexts face a number of difficulties and challenges in receiving a quality education and are often

unable to access the same educational opportunities as their White suburban peers (Gordon et al., 1994). Little is known about social factors linking lived experiences to the opportunity gap between African American and White students, but what is known, for some African Americans, the disadvantages are severe and pervasive (Downey, 2008). McCall (2019) highlights the fact that systemic challenges exasperate societal racial disparities that fuel the underperformance of African American boys in school, resulting in the fact that only 47% graduated on time from high schools in the United States in 2008, compared to 78% of White boys (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). The consequences of this situation have generally created significant limitations on students' socioeconomic mobility, leading to high rates of unemployment, crime, and incarceration for growing numbers of young African American males, but all youth have agency to determine who will play an active role in the construction of their developmental pathways, choosing who they engage with and for how long, chiefly as it contributes to the individuals academic success and long-term betterment of their life (Lee, 1995; Pufall Jones, et al., 2017).

While scholarly research has been conducted, "Sociologies have not paid enough attention to similarities in the daily experiences of African American and White students in school" (Downey, 2008, p. 113). To address the lack of high-quality educational experiences in urban school contexts, a school desegregation program such as METCO was specifically designed to bridge existing gaps by opening a door of opportunity to students of color, mostly African American and Latinx. As part of the program, these students were provided full-service transportation from their urban neighborhoods to "opportunity-rich suburban schools" (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 1).

According to Angrist and Lang (2004), METCO students benefit from the program, despite obvious socio-cultural differences between White teachers and their African American and Latinx students. In fact, some African American students are satisfied with their White teachers, but for other African American students attending suburban schools, their experiences are not always positive (Dickar, 2008; Eggleston & Miranda, 2009; Henfield & Washington, 2012). According to Eggleston and Miranda (2009), the existing literature related to African American students within predominantly White schools is limited to their specific academic experiences that do not adequately embody the full essence of the African American students' unique experiences beyond academic underachievement. Our research contributes to the field through an interpretation of stories and lived experiences shared by students that show commonalities related to issues surrounding race and the manner in which participants negotiate those experiences. Complexities exist for students in terms of their depth of association with multiple identities, and the relationships with others in the community that serve to support or dismantle those identities of African American students attending a METCO-affiliated program high school.

Students of color from urban contexts who attend predominantly White suburban schools often face challenges that their suburban White peers do not and, as such, may "experience a different type of 'normal' life" (Milner, 2007, p. 389). In general, the experiences of African Americans in the United States differ significantly from those of other ethnic groups, due in part to the navigation and negotiation of three distinct but interrelated realms of experience: (a) oppressed minority, (b) African-rooted Black culture, and (c) mainstream U.S. culture (Boykin, 1986; Sellers et al., 1998). According

to Ladson-Billings (2013), "We fail to recognize how different the experiences of today's students are" (p. 106), but the findings in this thesis will advance research efforts to better understand the experiences of African American students attending predominantly White high schools through METCO. These different experiences, as internalized as academic and cultural challenges by students of color further the need to conduct research to better understand them to level the playing field.

### SCHOLARLY PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURE AND IDENTITY

According to Collier (2009), culture and identity are two theoretical concepts developed to build knowledge about the communicative processes used by individuals to construct and negotiate their cultural group identities and relationships in particular contexts. African American students in the METCO program socially participate and academically compete with both in-group and out-group networks. Interestingly, Tajfel and Turner (1979) found, even without competition, participants tend to favor their in-groups over their out-groups. Socially, individual movement and participation between groups is linked to an individuals' self-esteem, confidence, and ability to interact and actively engage others, both in-group and out-group. Tajfel and Turner (1979) identified two sources of self-esteem: (a) personal status and accomplishments, and (b) status and accomplishments of the groups. The two scholars posit that affinity groups were an important source of pride and self-esteem, and these groups give individuals a sense of identity and belonging in the social world.

Carlton-Parson (2008) informs that culture is an important variable to the practice of teaching and learning, yet research involving African Americans often neglects the cultural-historical domain. Prior to this, Prager (1982)



typified the relationship between the African American (Black) cultural ethos and mainstream American culture by stating:

It is not the mere fact that Blacks hold a dual identity . . . ; to one degree or another, every ethnic and racial group has faced a similar challenge. The Black experience in America is distinguished by the fact that the qualities attributed to Blackness are in opposition to the qualities rewarded by society. The specific features of Blackness, as cultural imagery, are almost by definition those qualities, which the dominant society has attempted to deny in itself (p. 101).

African American students in the METCO program adjust to their dominant culture school settings while simultaneously maintaining their sense of value and identity by commonly displaying behaviors, traditions, and cultural styles that may not conform to dominant cultural norms. Because of physical identifiers, such as skin color, clothing and vernacular choices, or one’s gender and stature, African Americans must be consciously aware that others may respond to them differently due to deep-seated implicit biases about a racialized group. The sense of duality that exists and the constant codeswitching that occurs for these

students, particularly boys, stunts their authentic selves in a community that appears unsupportive at times (McCall, 2019). Conversely, Holland (2012) addresses the phenomenon by which White suburban students place capital on Black culture, particularly music, hairstyles, and language. Albeit a recent phenomenon, research with a focus on further exploration of the perception, beliefs, and interactions between White and African American students and its impact on the social and academic experiences of both African American students is worth understanding.

PHENOMENOLOGY

In phenomenological studies, the research is trying to describe the *what* and *how* individuals experience phenomena while simultaneously avoiding explanation or offering an analysis of the experience (Creswell, 2013). In keeping with the tradition of IPA research, we interpreted the phenomenon of experience as described by our participants, allowing each student to serve as the individual expert. The following argument is presented in a narrative form that captures authentic student voice and experiences. A thematic cross-student analysis demonstrates commonalities amongst the participants, but also details distinct experiences.

METHODS

Through parental ties, three high school students were invited to voluntarily share their individual lived experience as METCO students for this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The student participants attend three separate suburban school districts participating in the METCO program. The students, a 10th grade male and two 11th grade females, each identify culturally and ethnically as African American, even though the male and one of two females also acknowledges

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African American students in the METCO program adjust to their dominant culture school settings while simultaneously maintaining their sense of value and identity by commonly displaying behaviors, traditions, and cultural styles  
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their West Indian origins as being important to their identity. Also offering expert insight into this study are two administrative leaders representing METCO, Inc., individuals who are not only cognizant of the African American student experience in predominately White high schools, but who are also working with METCO program students, their families and alongside school leaders to bring about more awareness and need for sociocultural training to White teachers and staffers concerning sociocultural sensitivity training. The two administrative leaders offered recommendations and working with students, families and alongside school administrators to bring awareness to the experience of African American students attending predominately White high schools.

African American students are the focal point of this research for two primary reasons: namely, the cultural connectedness between researcher and participants, and researcher positionality and personal understanding of inner-city African American culture. As an African American with a colorful and storied lived experience, I attended a predominantly White high school during the tumultuous era of bussing in Boston, and the experiences and opportunities afforded to me are similar to those described by participants in this study. The socioeconomic disadvantages often associated with, or contributing to, the lack of African American student success- poverty, long commutes to school, or limited access to learning supports and certain opportunities like tutoring or quality afterschool programming- were all common experiences between the participants and the individuals who conducted this research, which happens to be as an African American male and African American female.

By using an IPA method, the research gives voice to the participants as they describe and make sense of their

experiences (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2008) as African American students from inner city Boston attending a predominantly White suburban high schools through the METCO program. To learn more about the personal experiences of each participant, a central question asked individually [and privately] of each participant over the course of a nearly 90-minute, nearly six-month interactive interview process was: “What’s it like for you culturally and socially to attend a suburban high school as a METCO student?” Expressed individually from each African American participant were multiple forms of interaction between distinguishable “communities”, like school, home/family, sports and peer friendships. Figure 1 Web of Support best captures the intersecting points described by the participants actively contributing to their life experiences as school-aged African American youth participating in the METCO program. Unlabeled markings serve as placeholders, exclusively reserved for individuals to add extensions of their networks, or factors contributing to their lived experience as a METCO student.

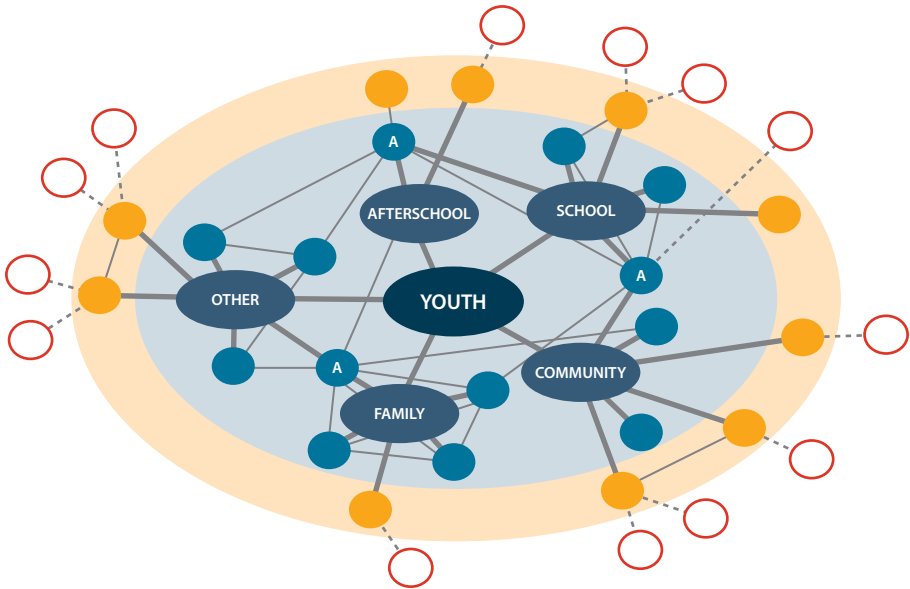
## IDENTIFIED THEMES

Three themes emerged throughout this research study: (i) long commutes on the school bus contribute to the lived experience and after-school activity decision-making of METCO students; (ii) METCO students possess a desire for their suburban school communities to nurture cultural interactions in a formalized manner; (iii) African American students maintain intact cultural identities in their predominantly White suburban school settings.

### **Finding I: Long Commutes on the School Bus Contribute to the Lived Experience and After-School Activity Decision-Making of METCO Students.**

Participants were asked about their overall attitude toward their daily

**Figure 1. Web of support.** Adapted from “Defining Webs of Support: A New Framework to Advance Understanding of Relationships and Youth Development,” by S. M. Varga and J. F. Zaff, 2017. Retrieved from [https://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/d8/webssupport\\_researchbrief\\_v2.pdf](https://www.americaspromise.org/sites/default/d8/webssupport_researchbrief_v2.pdf)



commute to and from school, and its impact on their decision making and resultant perceptions about their school setting. According to Hale and Bocknek (2016), it might be significant to determine the amount of time a child spends in quiet activities or active movements when researching the phenomenon of experiences. Participants shared that the bus ride to/ from school was an active moment used to engage with peers, in addition to brief intervals of rest, like sleeping. Despite strong public interest in METCO, there is little evidence of any effect of daily commutes from Boston on METCO participation (Eaton & Chirichigno, 2011, p. 1615-1616). One participant, John, a 15-year old student travels a considerable distance to school. When asked about his morning commute to school, he said:

I wake up around 5:30 a.m. to 5:45 a.m. On a good day, it takes about an hour to get

to school, on a bad day, an hour and a half, 2 hours. There was this time last year, I was on the bus for two and a half hours I think, but it was snow and traffic, so I couldn't really blame that on a specific reason, well I could, but wasn't like it was anyone's fault.

John shared that his friends, who live in the town where he attends school, wake up “around 7-ish, some of them later than that because they're like 5 minutes away, walking distance.”

In posing a similar question to Jennifer, a 16-year old female student, she responded by saying:

I'm lucky enough to get this good opportunity and sometimes you have to take the good with the bad. The bad would have to be the traveling. It's long. It's hard. I get up at 5:30 a.m. and it takes around

50 minutes to get to school on the bus, sometimes longer in the winter, but that's because we stop at another school.

Continuing, Jennifer furthered her thought about “the good with the bad” by adding:

I mean, riding the bus was never really good from when I was younger. Kids were mean and for people to be mean to you for like 50 minutes, it's annoying, it's really upsetting. Plus, I feel like sometimes with our classes, too, it's like I don't want to say there's never any mercy, but it's like we have so much to juggle, the waking up earlier than everyone else and then the long homework assignments and then trying to combine that with sports is also hard and everybody gets home like 3 hours earlier than us, so it's hard and sometimes it's like they can't give you a reprieve, like “I can give you one more night.” They'd never do that, so it's a little hard sometimes.

**Finding II: METCO Students Desire Their Suburban Schools to Nurture Cultural Interactions in a Formalized Manner Across the Student Body.** As Harper (2007) informs, peer support is critical to African American student success and significantly enhances the quality of their experiences in predominantly White learning environments. During the interviews, noticeable among participants was their willingness to establish friendships of different types across cultures and ethnic groups, yet all participants resisted the concept of trying to “fit in” with their White peers.

Peer-to-peer friendships are established, or attempted, in a variety of ways and settings in school, like the classrooms, or common areas like the cafeteria and athletic field. In addition to classroom

interactions, the African American participants emphasized nonacademic spaces, like athletics, student clubs, and the cafeteria as chances to cultivate friendships with their White peers. Each participant in METCO emphasized how the amount of time in the program played an important role in the formation and sustainability of their multicultural friendships.

In some cases, attending a predominantly White school can appear culturally isolating, prompting African American students to form culture cliques where groups of students who share similar interests or cultural traits gravitate towards one another in an affinity. Debra Ward, Director of Student Support Services for METCO, put it this way:

In my experience, students of color who live in the suburban town and those from the inner city felt some isolation, but once inside the school, formed their own bond and were protective of each other. They would all sit together in the cafeteria, and staff would ask, “Why are all the Black kids sitting together?” So, we look at things like that and ask; what is the affinity, where do kids get their support during the day, particularly in the high school? Because they're all in different classes and sometimes they're the only one of their

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Peer support is critical to African American student success and significantly enhances the quality of their experiences in predominantly White learning environments.

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kind in a classroom. By the time lunchtime rolls around, they want to be with somebody who looks like them, who understands their language, and their language not just being English, but understands their cultural language, their diversity and where they can take a breath, let their hair down, so to speak, and just be themselves.

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In spite of expressing a willingness and openness to increasing their friendships in school, expanding friendships to include White student peers outside of the immediate social network presents challenges.

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With a majority of participants providing a glimpse into how they view and value their interracial friendships, it remains unclear exactly how those friendships were established. Even more, the number of cross-race ties the African American students participating in this research tells little about whether the boys or girls feel like a valid member of their respective school community (Holland, 2012). In spite of expressing a willingness and openness to increasing their friendships in school, expanding friendships to include White student peers outside of the immediate social network presents challenges. The participants shared views of isolation, whether consciously or unconsciously, and the degree of difficulty in their efforts to form new friendships across the cultural spectrum and school community. On the other hand, students who have been in the program over multiple years described how their long-standing multicultural friendships have substantive meaning.

The establishment and maintenance of meaningful peer-to-peer relationships are important, but the racial composition of both the school and individual classrooms can also affect students’ friendship choices (Fries-Britt, 1997; Goings, 2016; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Holland, 2012). From personal interviews, students indicated how long-standing relationships with White students who reside in the suburban school district were extremely pleasing, enjoyable, and sustainable to the participants. Still, for some African American students, forming new friendships with White peers outside of their immediate social circle remained somewhat knotty. Sydney, a 17-year old 11th grade female who has only attended a METCO school describes it this way, saying:

At my school, there’s not that many of us, there’s only two people of color that I’m really close with and then there’s one student who lives in the town that we’re all close with, so it’s like the five or six of us, but the METCO kids are usually on one side, and the White kids who live in the suburb are on the other side and they’re not gonna come say anything to us, so the only way we’re gonna be friends is if the METCO kids mingle in with them.

Similar in thought to Sydney, Jennifer said:

I don’t want to say I’m isolated to METCO students and kids that are ethnic, but that’s how it feels a lot of the time, but if you’re an athlete and you’re Black at my school, your status is elevated to the max. Everybody knows you, all the girls like you. I wouldn’t say all the Black girls like you because if you’re in METCO and you’ve been with these

kids since kindergarten, they're like *that's just Paul and nobody cares about Paul*, but a lot of the White girls, they go crazy over the Black athletes.

**Finding III: African American Students Maintain Intact Cultural Identities in Their Predominantly White Suburban School Setting.** From identity, multiple layers are discovered and revealed. In theory, both objective and subjective identities emerge. The subjective identity produces a personal identity, which is made up of “unique elements that we associate with our individual self” (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 212) and a collective identity that influences our social and cultural identities (Jameson, 2007). Ogbu (2004) posits, “People express their collective identity with emblems or cultural symbols which reflect their attitudes, beliefs, feelings, behaviors, and language or dialect” (p. 3). Unmistakably, situations and circumstances involving race and culture arise, particularly for African American students in suburban, predominantly White school districts. Professionally, the current CEO of METCO, Inc., Milagros Arbaje-Thomas is keenly aware of issues concerning or affecting METCO students and offers suggestive approaches to addressing issues involving students, race, and culture. She said:

I keep aware of all the racial incidents in the towns and following-up with the districts about what they're doing. I'm hiring a director of diversity, equity and inclusion, with the METCO headquarters supporting the towns around racial incidents that are happening. I've been keeping up with all those things, people using the N-word, people putting videos out there and making fun of our students. To respond to that from a headquarters level, we'll have

a person respond to that and support a process when it does happen, at both proactive and preventative levels. This person is going to be creating a new curriculum for us on diversity training, cultural competency and curriculum bias. My goal is to go to all the towns, if you are a METCO town; you have to go through our training, and we can be a professional development entity for the sites and towns.

Even though some educational research has sought to unpack the social and academic experiences of African American students attending predominantly White schools, an increasing amount of research – like this – has been exclusively dedicated to the life experiences of African American students attending predominantly White schools (Ford & Moore, 2013; McGee, 2013; Thompson & Davis, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to interpret the lived experiences of African American students attending predominantly White high schools through the METCO program. Using cultural identity theory as the theoretical framework, this study interpreted findings from one-on-one interviews conducted with a sample of African American high school students. Shared are findings from the personal accounts of how African American students manage their cultural and social identities, while simultaneously making sense of their placement, belonging, and interpersonal relationships in their predominantly White school districts as students in the METCO program.

Researchers have not paid enough attention to similarities and differences in the daily experiences of African American and White students (Tyson et al., 2005). As increasing numbers



of African American families move into White suburban areas each year, research remains mainly concentrated on academic experiences of African American students within predominantly White suburban schools (Eggleston & Miranda, 2009). Because race is such a significant part of American society, most African American students are able to report feelings about being African American and attending a predominantly White suburban school (Rowley et al., 1998). Still, “the effects of racial integration are quite pervasive and often present situations that are almost impossible with which to cope” (Hornburger, 1976, p. 239). Separately, each participant interviewed articulated situations validating their collective identity, mentioning how they either encountered, handled, or coped with culturally sensitive challenges at school.

Browaeys and Price (2015) inform how culture partially shapes our identity, how we define ourselves, and how we define others. Socially, the participants independently identified themselves as METCO students who participate in multiple non-academic activities within their suburban school, like sports, student clubs, and occasional school dance parties. Not surprising, the students culturally identify through parental descent and naturally gravitate toward their defined culture group in school, where they feel most comfortable and possess a true sense of belonging. Still, interview findings illustrate a collective sense of not wanting to change who they are or how they speak; they simply want to be understood and accepted for their differences from suburban classmates and peers while participating in all school and community-related activities (Fecho, Davis, & Moore, 2006; Hill, 2009). As Ms. Ward put it:

I tell my students, this is your learning environment, you have 4 years to complete it, and the only difference between you

and them is your zip code, so therefore I want you involved in everything possible.

Although Ms. Ward promotes a message of sameness between the African American students participating in the METCO program and the White residents of suburbia, she is not suggesting the cultural differences and lived experiences of individuals from each of the two distinct groups are similar, they’re dissimilar. Later in her interview, Ms. Ward talked about how her message is meant to inform the African American students, the access and opportunity to a quality education and afterschool programming is the same between the two groups, so take advantage of all that is available while you’re a student in this school district.

As researchers, we intend to learn firsthand about the lived experiences of African American students participating in the METCO program. In response to learning, we plan to revisit METCO leadership and other interested parties to share research findings. In doing so, we offer a suggestive proposal to assist in planned efforts to formalize professional learning in the area of cultural competency for teachers and administrators. Effective teacher interaction with students that support and affirm their identities is critical. An emphasis must be placed on dedicating time and space to provide that training to improve staff-student relations and students’ perspectives on school climate and culture. A series of professional development that supports school and district staff inquiry into issues of race and gender identities, along with effective teaching and learning strategies and their intersectionality, could address the needs that surfaced during the focus groups. A firm commitment to more inclusive practices in a setting that values and affirms the backgrounds of others will serve as a safeguard against disconnection and serve as a scaffold for increasing students’ sense of belonging.



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# Creating Human-Centered Systems to Address Racial Disparity in Schools

GLORIA ROSARIO WALLACE

*This article explores how school leaders can strategically organize to create humanist systems within their schools to effectively counter the racial bigotry and systemic oppression that has existed since the founding of this country but has gained more attention in the current political climate. Many school leaders are trained to operate as a superhero—where one person makes the right decision and saves the day. Racial equity challenges us to think beyond an individualistic approach and operate in a collaborative way that recognizes and supports all the individuals within that school community including staff, families, and students.*

*“In the end anti-Black, anti-female, and all forms of discrimination are equivalent to the same thing: anti-humanism” —Shirley Chisholm*

The current socio-political climate is one where a person cannot escape the news of the day no matter what they are doing. Reading the paper, listening to the radio, scrolling mindlessly through social media, even chatting with a neighbor can provide us with unfavorable information about our current state of affairs. School leaders must manage this reality both in their personal and professional lives. The impact on their students and school community is immediate and constant, whether it is how the humanitarian crisis at our city centers and borders are impacting our students and families who are document insecure or how the constant assault on Black and Brown people settles onto students and staff like a film that slowly hardens and immobilizes them. It is imperative that school leaders are able to process how these events impact them personally and professionally as well as organize their school community to be able to do the same. In order to organize effectively and for a greater purpose, a school leader has to act decisively and in collaboration with their community.

Too often school leaders are trained and supported to work alone; the false mark of an effective leader. In order to create anti-racist schools and communities, isolation has to be targeted and seen for what it is -- a purposeful barrier towards racial equity. Only through meaningful collaboration can this work succeed within the school and on a larger scale even though it can be challenging to create and maintain meaningful collaboration within. In my work as a school leader and now supporting leadership at the district and school-level, it is clear that school leaders need guidance and support to create human-centered systems within their schools in order to develop and lead with a racial equity lens. It is with this lens that

systemic change can occur to improve the experience and outcomes for Black, Brown, and Indigenous students.

A human-centered approach borrows from the ethical belief that centers human beings, their experiences and needs over other mandates. A human-centered approach is necessary in racial equity work because the larger system is perfectly designed for its intended results, a phrase credited to organizational design expert Arthur Jones. Schools are organizations comprised of various systems and supposed to be centered on their students' experiences and needs. However, the racial disproportionality and long-standing segregation present in most school districts are not accidental. Too often we see that the school system is not designed in a way that can be responsive to the people, students and staff within it.

In my current work supporting school and district teams to develop authentic and humanist systems to address the racial disparity within their respective schools and districts, I have found that school leaders need more support in understanding the purpose of teaming and collaboration as it relates to racial disparity. This realization has been echoed by others entrenched in this work, including Glenn Singleton who is known for his work in supporting communities engaged in addressing racial disproportionality. Mr. Singleton noted that, "schools cannot achieve racial equity without explicit processes for leaders and staff to examine their personal, professional, and organizational beliefs about race. But in 25 years of working with schools and organizations in the United States and abroad, I have learned that educational systems are deeply challenged to examine their beliefs about racial equity" (Singleton, 2018, p. 1). My own research echoed this need. While exploring the instructional culture that high school principals create in order

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Too often we see that the school system is not designed in a way that can be responsive to the people, students and staff within it.

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to make meaning of the various district mandates and their students' academic and personal needs, I discovered that principals felt ill-equipped in creating systems for personal examination and reflection that included them. Principals went above and beyond to create school communities that were collaborative and supportive of their staff's needs, particularly the teachers. However, each principal remarked on how isolated and alone they felt in leading the work (Rosario, 2014). The notion that school leadership should be a solitary endeavor is false and yet it permeates almost every system a school leader interacts with. Therefore, it is not surprising that principals would think deeply about creating systems to eradicate teacher isolation but not consider their own.

Reflecting on the world in and out of the school building with a critical eye towards protecting their students from those harms can only happen in spaces where meaningful and humanist collaboration is centered and through 1) reflecting on themselves and their racial consciousness journey, 2) identifying where their staff is individually along their own journey towards racial consciousness, and 3) Creating multiple and consistent feedback loops that will allow the school leader to inoculate their community from the various harms that this current climate is injecting into the culture.



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**In order to recognize the humanity of each person within the school community and create systems that counter the problematic and biased status quo school leaders need to understand why this matters to them.**

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Self-reflection is absolutely critical for a school leader to truly lead this charge. Too often as a school leader, one becomes the face of a policy that is unclear or mandated without consideration of the school community. Racial equity work is personal and professional, requiring support in both domains. In order to recognize the humanity of each person within the school community and create systems that counter the problematic and biased status quo school leaders need to understand why this matters to them. That process of self-discovery takes time and purposeful reflection.

Ultimately a school leader will ask why they need to do this work or what the greater purpose is. Their answer will be greater than any mandate: “while schools cannot do this work alone, they have a legal and moral responsibility to ensure that every student exits our systems with the knowledge, skills, competence, confidence, creativity, curiosity, tenacity, support, sense of advocacy and efficacy to access and succeed in college, careers, and society” (Rimmer, 2016, p. 2). Developing a racial equity lens in leadership matters because without it, underserved and undervalued students and staff, primarily Black, Brown, Latinx and Indigenous people, will be unable to succeed in a system that is designed for their failure. The moral responsibility to get this right is profound; we are not engaged in this work for ourselves

or for our children. It truly is living the Seven Generation Principle, which comes from atavistic Iroquois philosophy, where we are thinking beyond our current state and instead focused on the world we want to leave for our descendants.

Those who have spent time in their journey towards fuller consciousness and see the importance and urgency in aligning a school’s systems with their racial equity goal may lack the patience it requires to bring their entire staff along. In this work we often say that everyone is starting from a different place. Planning with racial equity in mind can be challenging and requires authentic and humanist collaboration. Collaboration is essential for various reasons including job satisfaction, which according to Bakotic (2016) and Eckman (2004) is a key aspect of work performance. Therefore, if principals want to see increased productivity from their teams, it is important to establish meaningful ways for their communities to engage in this work. In my work we recommend the implementation of equity teams. An equity team is a form of inquiry teaming that distributes the work of interrogating the school’s systems to analyze their impact on student outcomes. Through this structure we support schools in exploring data-informed questions such as:

- Based on our data, which students are more likely to experience positive outcomes, like being enrolled in the honors program?
- Based on our data, which students are more likely to experience negative outcomes, such as a classroom removal or suspension?
- How are these groups of students related to each other?
- How are our systems and beliefs supporting these disparate outcomes?

Race is a part of this inquiry, and if the school team is engaged in color-evasive thinking, also known as colorblind thinking, then the entire process will be compromised. Engaging in this inquiry stance will feel foreign and uncomfortable. However, the clearer the school leader is in their reasons why this work is important for them and their school, the process will be richer and more productive. I've experienced equity team meetings where the participants are afraid of naming race or cannot accept that their school is engaged in practices that target their most vulnerable students. These conversations are stifled and don't result in actionable next steps. On the other hand, for teams with a clear purpose and focus on creating new systems that honor their students' humanity still feel discomfort, but they are able to move through that discomfort into an action plan to address the disparity within their school. I often compare this inquiry process to modifying habits to be healthier. Changing my diet and incorporating strenuous physical activity doesn't feel good on the first day and if I am unsure why I need to do those things I am much more likely to disregard these behaviors before I see any change. However, if I understand how changing my diet and hitting the gym consistently will lower my blood pressure which will help me keep up with my children and feel better, I am more likely to stay in the discomfort long enough to see progress physically. In inquiry as in health, it pays to stay committed to the process.

It is essential to create multiple and consistent feedback loops to assess the work as the team engages in it, both to measure the effectiveness of the equity team's efforts as well as how the work is resonating for each team member and members of the school community. Dr. Edward Fergus, who is a central figure in this field and has essentially provided

the roadmap for engaging in this style of inquiry in a humanist and collaborative way, strongly advocates the use of feedback, "...given the inevitability of our own blind spots, we have a responsibility to seek out regular feedback on the racial and economic ecology of our schools" (Fergus, 2019, para. 21). As previously noted, the principalship can be lonely and isolating, therefore it is equally as essential that a humanist and collaborative approach be applied to principals as well. Creating a space for principals to be brave and engage in these conversations together allows for a stronger and more robust journey towards racial equity in schools.

Every person has a blind spot and every system has a process gap which can be incredibly difficult to identify with the naked eye. As previously noted, this work is both personal and professional. For school team members who identify as BIPOC or as a member of a marginalized community, engaging in racial equity work can further, trigger and traumatize them. It is critical that the school leader utilizes multiple methods to assess the work, including but not limited to: individual meetings, use of surveys, opportunities for written reflection and feedback, as well as intra- and inter-racial conversations. The extensive system of providing and receiving feedback is designed to target the emotional toll of racial disparity in schools. Maslach (2003) identifies burnout as the prolonged, negative response to stressors in the workplace. Over time this negative response will impact the individual to the point where it can impact their work and well-being. The current socio-political climate is impacting students and staff negatively and it is manifesting in schools in many ways. For a school leader to be able to connect with their community and receive how each person is processing and engaging in this work will target burnout. A principal should focus on what they can control and creating authentic spaces for acknowledging



the impact of the current socio-political climate is a strong step in the right direction.

In an interview, author and scholar Ibram X. Kendi shared the difference between a racist and an anti-racist which would alarm many school staff and leaders, “...anti-racists support policies that yield racial equity. Racists do nothing in the face of racist policies that are creating and reproducing racial inequity” (Kendi, 2019, para. 10). In thinking about the policies that govern schools, many well-intentioned people will wring their hands and say there is nothing that can be done about them. They may be district mandates, they may be the way things have always been done, they may be comfort policies that would upset the status quo if changed. Regardless of why these policies continue to persist, they are hurting the students we need to uplift and honor the most.

In order to impact and ultimately change the status quo it is essential that purposeful, human-centered structures are created and led by a person who deeply understands why they are engaged in racial equity work. More importantly, the leader needs to have a greater vision for their work guided by benchmarks towards their intended results. Until then, we will be complicit with a toxic and dangerous system that continues to get its intended results at the cost of Black, Brown, and Indigenous children.

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## Protecting Students' Civil Rights: The Federal Role in School Discipline

JESSICA CARDICHON AND LINDA DARLING-HAMMOND

*This article takes a careful look at policy tools that presidential administrations have at their disposal for ameliorating educational inequalities. These tools, the authors suggest, include issuing federal guidance that informs and supports states and districts as they work to implement policies and practices that comply with federal law. However, as the authors point out, the extent to which administrations have chosen to leverage these opportunities to advance educational equity has varied over time.*

Too many students continue to face pervasive inequities in opportunity in the current U.S. education system. Past federal administrations and congresses, recognizing their critical role in eliminating inequality, often acted to address disparities and violations of students' civil rights that had been left unresolved by states and districts. Beginning with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, the U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Education were able to investigate and litigate violations of the law.

In addition to legislation, presidential administrations have several tools that allow them to play a significant role in ameliorating educational inequalities. These include federal guidance, regulations, statements of administration policy and investigative powers, as well as data collection and dissemination and budgetary requests. The extent to which administrations leverage these opportunities to advance civil rights has changed over time. Some administrations have taken strong action to enforce protection under the law and to prevent instances of discrimination from arising.

One example of strong administrative action is the Obama administration's decision to respond to calls from the civil rights community and other grassroots advocates (Watanabe, 2013) to support state and local efforts to end exclusionary and discriminatory discipline practices in education. These practices impede students' equal access to educational opportunity. Responses to these practices included issuing a series of guidance documents, including guidance on the nondiscriminatory administration of school discipline (U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education, 2011). These documents were based on extensive research that demonstrated how specific disciplinary practices can close educational opportunity gaps and improve student outcomes.

Despite the strong research base underlying the guidance, the Trump administration rescinded it, leaving schools without information about how to address actions

that reinforce disparities in students’ treatment in school and access to learning opportunities. At a minimum, this rescission could stall progress toward achieving educational equity; in some cases, it may even reverse progress.

The current administration has withdrawn nearly 600 policy documents regarding K–12 and higher education (Strauss, 2017) and has rescinded or delayed implementation of the following federal guidance or regulations (O’Hara, 2017):

- **Guidance on civil rights and school discipline** issued by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice describing how schools can meet their legal obligations under federal law to administer student discipline without discriminating against students on the basis of race, color, or national origin (2014). Research shows that discriminatory discipline practices have a significant negative impact on students of color, including compromised educational outcomes due to lost instructional time and a higher likelihood of involvement with the juvenile justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003). (Rescinded December 2018.)
- **Guidance on the voluntary use of race to achieve diversity and avoid racial isolation in elementary and secondary schools** issued by the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice and the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education. This guidance was issued to “explain how, consistent with existing law, elementary and secondary schools can voluntarily consider race to further compelling interests in achieving diversity and avoiding racial isolation.” Social science research has demonstrated that diverse learning environments benefit students of

all racial backgrounds—including preparation for global citizenship and social interactions with diverse peers (Killen & McKown, 2005). (Rescinded July 2018.)

- **Guidance on the treatment of transgender students** issued by the U.S. Department of Education and Department of Justice asking schools to treat transgender students according to their gender identities, including with respect to names and pronouns, restrooms, and dress codes. Research shows that transgender students experience high rates of bullying by peers and adults and that the stress of harassment and discrimination, including implementation of policies that do not treat students according to their gender identities, can lead to lower attendance and grades as well as depression, anxiety, and suicidality (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2017). (Rescinded February 2017, just one month after the president took office.)
- **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act regulations** issued by the U.S. Department of Education “aimed at promoting equity by targeting widespread disparities in the treatment of students of color with disabilities” (2016). Research has shown how misidentification of African American children for certain special education categories obscures their real educational needs and compromises their educational outcomes (Skiba et al., 2006). The Trump administration’s attempt to delay implementation of this regulation was struck down by the courts in March 2019.

Although these actions do not change underlying federal civil rights law or students’ rights to equal protection under the law, they do hinder the speed and effectiveness of implementation

and signal to states and districts a lack of federal commitment to upholding students' civil rights and access to equal educational opportunity. The current administration's actions not only depart from the traditions of federal oversight, but also ignore the social science research that has shaped the policy, practice, and law protecting students' civil rights in education.

This article examines how this shift in the federal role in education could affect protections of students' civil rights in the area of school discipline.

### **THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF ZERO-TOLERANCE DISCIPLINE POLICIES**

Exclusionary discipline practices are often the result of zero-tolerance state and local policies that apply strong punishments—including suspensions and expulsions—for particular infractions. Initially, zero-tolerance policies were intended to deter students from violent or illegal behavior because the punishment for such a violation would be harsh and certain; they were applied to incidents that involved weapons, drugs, or acts of violence (Youth United for Change & The Advancement Project, 2011). However, over time, they were applied to nonviolent and more subjective offenses, such as willful defiance, tardiness, or truancy (Losen & Skiba, 2010). In the 1990s, states and districts began adopting zero-tolerance discipline policies and increasing police presence in schools on the belief that applying highly punitive approaches to minor violations would deter more serious behavior (Shared Justice, 2018).

Research shows that these policies had negative effects on student academic achievement, attainment, and welfare (Balfanz et al., 2014). Students removed from school lose instructional time and tend to have lower academic achievement, higher rates of grade retention, and lower graduation rates

and are more likely to be diverted into the juvenile justice system (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). Even upon a first suspension, a student's odds of dropping out of school double. Research finds that even for "students who are otherwise regularly attending school and passing their courses in the 9th grade, being suspended can lead to more suspensions, lowered attendance and course failure in later years, and as such act as the trigger mechanism which puts them on the path to ultimately dropping out" (Balfanz et al., 2014).

Exclusionary discipline policies also perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline (Anti-Defamation League, 2015), increasing the likelihood that students who experience exclusionary discipline policies will become involved in the juvenile justice system (Steinberg & Lacoe, 2017). In some states and districts, "school discipline becomes criminalized through its extension into the juvenile court," (Hirshfield, 2008) regardless of the severity of the behavior.

The life consequences of zero-tolerance policies can be devastating for young people. More than one third of African American men between the ages of 20 and 34 who did not complete high school are currently incarcerated (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). The impact of exclusionary discipline policies also takes a lasting toll on communities and their economic well-being, according to a recent study by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA (Marchbanks et al., 2013).

These policies are ineffective and often applied in a discriminatory manner—one of the key concerns the discipline guidance was intended to help states, districts, and schools address. Racial disparities in discipline rates are not a result of differences in student behavior. They are a function of the fact that students of color are often punished more harshly when they engage in behaviors similar to those of their White peers. Students of color are often

suspended from school for behaviors that do not pose a serious threat to safety (Losen, 2014), and studies show that African American students receive harsher suspensions for more subjective and less serious behaviors than their White peers (Finn & Servoss, 2014).

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National data show that African American girls are 5.5 times more likely and Native American girls are 3 times more likely to be suspended from school than White girls.  
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The Civil Rights Data Collection and other national data sources found:

- During the 2015–16 school year, African American male students comprised 8% of students enrolled and 25% of students who received an out-of-school suspension. By contrast, White male students comprised 25% of students enrolled and 24% of students who received an out-of-school suspension. National data show that African American girls are 5.5 times more likely and Native American girls are 3 times more likely to be suspended from school than White girls (Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017). The discriminatory application of exclusionary discipline policies is also tied to disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2015-16), gender, and LGBTQ status (Palmer et al., 2016).
- During the 2013–14 school year, the most recent year for which data are available, African American children represented 19% of public preschool enrollment and 47% of those who received more

than one out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, 2013-14). By contrast, White students represented 41% of public preschool enrollment and 28% of those who received more than one out-of-school suspension. A study that includes both private and public preschool programs reveals similar disparities—African American preschoolers are 2.2 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than other children (Malik, 2017).

- During the 2015–16 school year, African American students represented 15% of student enrollment and 31% of students referred to law enforcement or arrested. By contrast, White students represented 49% of student enrollment and 36% of students referred to law enforcement or arrested. Students with disabilities represented 12% of student enrollment and 28% of students referred to law enforcement or arrested (U.S. Department of Education, 2015-16).

ALTERNATIVES TO EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE PRACTICES

During the Obama administration, both the Department of Education and Department of Justice recognized their federal responsibility to respond to discriminatory practices, putting forward nonbinding guidance documents designed to remedy these disparities in discipline rates and to support states, districts, and schools in creating safe and inclusive learning environments by (1) identifying the harm zero-tolerance and similar policies have on students, (2) identifying discriminatory application of exclusionary discipline practices, and (3) sharing research-based policies and practices to reduce disparities in exclusionary discipline and improve school climate.



Research is clear that zero-tolerance policies and the use of exclusionary discipline for nonviolent behavior are largely ineffective in changing student behavior or creating safe learning environments (Skiba, 2014). The rescinded guidance contained considerable research about effective policies and practices, which include:

- **Replacing zero-tolerance policies and suspensions and expulsions for low-level offenses with strategies that teach social-emotional skills** (Advancement Project, 2014). These strategies include teaching students skills that enable positive relationships, help them resolve conflicts peaceably, and prevent bullying (Taylor et al., 2017). They also include targeted behavioral supports and methods for promoting student-school bonds (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011). A review of more than 200 studies found, for example, that programs that teach social and emotional skills have yielded significant positive effects on student attitudes about self, others, and school; they also improved school safety (Durlak et al., 2011). Research also indicates that these efforts increase graduation rates, achievement, and positive behavior (Taylor et al., 2017).
- **Providing targeted support for educators.** Research demonstrates that interpersonal, instructional, and environmental supports produce better school performance when they include caring teacher-student relationships that foster commitment and bonding to school; engaging teaching approaches, such as proactive classroom management and cooperative learning; and safe and orderly environments that encourage and reinforce positive classroom behavior (Blum & Libbey, 2004) and contribute to students' immediate and long-

term behavioral change (Catalano et al., 2002).

- **Eliminating disproportionate rates in student discipline by providing training on implicit bias and asset-based youth development** for teachers and administrators, school resource officers, police, juvenile court judges, and others (Staats, 2015). Research shows that implicit bias is an important factor in disciplinary disparities. Educators may perceive student behaviors differently based on a student's race, contributing to the disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline. Implicit racial bias often manifests as negative stereotypes of students of color (Rudd, 2014). This may be a function of more generalized implicit biases regarding race and criminal or delinquent behavior, including an association between race and a perceived threat of aggression (Gilliam et al., 2016). Such biases can negatively influence a teacher's academic expectations for students, as well as his or her treatment of students (Blum & Libbey, 2004).
- **Developing and implementing a model school discipline policy and agreements that clarify when educator discipline versus law enforcement discipline is warranted,** such as through a memorandum of understanding. This includes eliminating referrals to law enforcement for all nonviolent, noncriminal offenses and replacing them with effective staff-led strategies for classroom management, conflict resolution, and mediation (National School Board Association, 2013).
- **Creating relationship-centered schools that support strong family and community engagement.** The voices of youth, family, and the community are particularly important in low-income communities of color in which experiences with

the school system have been, and can still be, less inclusive. Parent and community involvement can contribute to an improved school climate and higher-quality learning programs for students (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Many states and districts have already adopted less punitive approaches to school discipline with the goal of creating more inclusive learning environments. According to a recent analysis of state legislation, over the last seven years many states have placed limitations on punitive discipline, encouraged the use of alternative strategies, and implemented planning and reporting requirements (Rafa, 2019). In the 2017 legislative session, for example, lawmakers proposed at least 35 bills related to suspension and expulsion and 26 bills related to alternative school discipline strategies. Of those, 14 were enacted. In 2018, at least 11 states and the District of Columbia enacted 15 bills broadly related to suspension, expulsion, or disciplinary alternatives (Rafa, 2019).

To reduce the use of exclusionary practices and replace zero-tolerance policies, California established social-emotional supports for students, as well as restorative justice practices centered on promoting respect, taking responsibility, and strengthening relationships (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Supporting these efforts, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing passed new standards for teachers and administrators, including competencies in teaching social-emotional skills and in using restorative practices. In addition, the California Department of Education initiated forums and workshops to make districts, administrators, and teachers aware of successful alternatives to suspensions (California Department of Education, 2016).

As a result, California has achieved a sharp decrease in suspension rates while making schools safer. Between 2011 and 2016, suspensions declined by 34%, driven by a 77% decline in suspensions for “willful defiance,” and expulsions dropped by 40% (California Department of Education, 2016). According to national data, school-based firearm incidents in the state, which were well above the national average from 2009 to 2010, were far below the national average by 2015–16, declining by more than 50% in the 7-year period. Significant decreases also occurred in rates of school-based fights, bullying incidents, and classroom disruptions over that period. These declines have held true for all racial and socioeconomic groups and school levels, narrowing disciplinary gaps among racial and ethnic groups across the state (California Department of Education, 2017).

### RESCISSION OF THE FEDERAL DISCIPLINE GUIDANCE

The Trump administration chose to rescind the guidance on December 21, 2018, despite no evidence that Obama’s discipline guidance was making schools less safe. In fact, trends suggest schools were becoming safer while the guidance was in place. For example, the “percentage of public schools recording one or more incidents of violence, theft, or other crimes was lower in 2015–16 (79%) than in every prior survey year. (Incident rates ranged from 85 to 89% between 1999–2000 and 2009–10.) Similarly, the percentage of public schools that reported one or more incidents of violence, theft, or other crimes to the police was lower in 2015–16 (47%) than in every prior survey year (ranging from 60 to 65% between 1999–2000 and 2009–10)” (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018).

The Trump administration used a report released by its Federal Commission on School Safety in 2018 to justify the

rescission, despite the minimal research cited in the 180-page report. Among the few references to research in the report is a study that claims that the relationship between suspensions and race is “likely produced by pre-existing behavioral problems of youth that are imported into the classroom.” However, the study’s conclusion goes beyond the empirical evidence presented and does not demonstrate a relationship between actual, observed misbehavior and suspension. Rather, the research shows a relationship between adults’ perceptions of students’ social skills and behaviors and suspensions. The influence of racial bias is not accounted for in the study or in the commission’s report overall.

The administration also eliminated the focus on correcting discriminatory discipline policies and practices and identifying appropriate remedies when a civil rights violation occurs. Although some states and districts are implementing evidence-based approaches, those efforts are far from universal. While some states and districts will likely continue their efforts to implement policies that create safe and inclusive learning environments, others will undoubtedly take their cue from this administration and implement ineffective policies that make students less safe.

The administration’s rescission of the discipline guidance occurs within the context of its other efforts to roll back civil rights protections. Another report released by the Federal Commission on School Safety in 2018 recommends that when investigating claims of discrimination, only those that can be proven to be motivated by discriminatory intent, regardless of discriminatory impact, should be addressed. The Trump administration is seriously considering this recommendation, directing the Department of Education and “senior civil rights officials to examine how decades-old ‘disparate

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If the administration continues on this path, students will have less recourse when discipline policies are discriminatorily applied, although these actions will likely be legally challenged.  
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impact’ regulations might be changed or removed.... Under the concept of disparate impact, actions can amount to discrimination if they have an uneven effect even if that was not the intent (Meckler & Barrett, 2019).” If the administration continues on this path, students will have less recourse when discipline policies are discriminatorily applied, although these actions will likely be legally challenged.

This approach is a reversal of the prior administration’s approach. Under the Obama administration, when the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights received an individual complaint related to complex issues, such as school discipline, the investigation could include steps to determine whether the allegations were part of a pattern of discrimination (Huseman & Waldman, 2017). As the data previously cited demonstrate, discriminatory treatment related to school discipline is often found to be a pattern of treatment for particular groups of students, specifically students of color and students with disabilities. A narrow approach ignores this reality and is likely to result in a required remedy that does not address the broader school, district, or state policies that lend themselves to discriminatory application.

The Trump administration’s rescission of the discipline guidance does not abdicate the federal government’s responsibility for protecting students’

civil rights under federal law. At best, it misses the opportunity to support states and districts in creating inclusive and equitable learning environments that research shows keep students safe. At worst, it ignores the role of implicit bias in school discipline and encourages practices that criminalize student behavior. One of the federal government's greatest responsibilities is to protect students' civil rights. The failure to meet this responsibility can perpetuate negative consequences for students of color and other historically underserved students and can have a harmful and lasting impact on their life outcomes.

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Anjel Sealy

STUDENT GALLERY : SEPARATION



Waleed A.







Jazmin Ramirez

## Part 2: Healing

# Twenty Years, Ten Lessons: Community Schools as An Equitable School Improvement Strategy

JANE QUINN AND MARTIN J. BLANK

*This article features two leaders of the contemporary community school movement who share their reflections on key lessons learned by community school practitioners and advocates over the past two decades and outline ideas about the challenges facing the field in the years ahead. They offer a brief history of community schools in the United States and provide an update on the evidence of the strategy’s effectiveness, particularly in high-poverty urban schools. They also explain how the current “generation” of community schools has addressed two specific shortcomings of earlier iterations of this holistic approach to education. Acknowledging that today’s political climate creates both opportunities and obstacles for education reformers, the authors argue that the community school strategy is increasingly recognized as a compelling alternative to the neoliberal dream of public-school privatization.*

In a 1902 speech to the National Education Association, John Dewey outlined a comprehensive approach to American schooling that encompassed adults as well as children, fostered holistic development and brought community resources into strong partnerships with schools. More than 100 years later, even in a challenging educational environment dominated by marked economic inequality and technical solutions (such as test-based accountability and privatization of public education), Dewey’s vision is being enacted across America through the community school strategy. As two of the leaders of this modern-day movement, we want to reflect here on recent progress in realizing Dewey’s vision of every school a community school, with a focus on how this strategy is being adapted to contemporary economic and societal conditions.

We served as directors respectively of the Children’s Aid National Center for Community Schools and the Coalition for Community Schools, working together over the past 20-plus years to advance the community schools agenda across the country. The Coalition led national advocacy efforts, building a broad alliance of education, youth development, human services, higher education, and community organizing, and creating tools to support the field. The National Center focused on capacity building at the school, district, and community levels, assisting most of the country’s major community school initiatives through training, consultation, and on-site coaching. Throughout our collaboration, we witnessed both encouraging successes and formidable challenges. Our intent in this article is to outline key lessons learned by community school practitioners and advocates over the past two decades and to consider the challenges ahead as we hand over the reins to the next generation of capable community school leaders. We begin with a brief history of community schools

in American education, then move to our reflections on the role of this strategy in contemporary reform efforts.

### COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: A BRIEF HISTORY

In an incisive history of the field, UCLA Professor John Rogers described the current era of community schools, starting in the early 1990s, as constituting the fourth generation of such work (Rogers, 1998). Rogers cited the earlier “generations” as including, first, the innovations during the Progressive Era, summarized by John Dewey as the “school as social center” (Dewey, 1902); followed during the 1930s by the second phase, in response to the problems generated by the Great Depression; and then, a third wave in the 1960s, during the period of great social unrest and social reform that included battles over community control of public education. Rogers concluded that, despite the very appealing and sensible nature of the community school approach, the earlier generations of reform did not gain permanent traction in American education because of two factors: first, earlier reforms tended to frame discussions of community schooling’s purposes in a narrow way, thereby failing to convey the comprehensive nature of the intended approach; and, second, previous community school advocates did not adopt an adequate political strategy. Leaders in the current era have taken these analyses to heart, making sure to articulate the multifaceted goals and elements of the community school strategy and to create strategic political alliances and robust advocacy campaigns.

Rogers also observed that community schools gain prominence as a strategic intervention during periods of socio-political upheaval and disequilibrium. Specifically, he noted that there are three kinds of societal pressure that have contributed historically to the rise of

community schools in the United States: (1) when existing social institutions cannot meet the demands of society; (2) when the public challenges the validity of existing solutions and knowledge; and (3) when the public questions the capacity or intent of the professionals charged with educating children. The socio-political environment of the past two decades reflects these factors, thereby creating receptivity to the many advantages of community schools.

The current generation of community schools in America began in earnest during the early 1990s, with the development of the Beacon schools and the Children’s Aid community schools in New York City, the Netter Center’s university-assisted community schools in Philadelphia, and the United Way’s Bridges to Success model in Indianapolis. All these initiatives started around the same time, each with a slightly different emphasis. What the models had in common, however, were strong partnerships between schools and community resources that could build on the strengths and respond to the needs of students and their families. Researcher Joy Dryfoos observed these developments and began writing about them, first in articles and monographs, then in a pioneering book entitled *Full-Service Schools: A Revolution in Health and Social Services for Children, Youth, and Families* (1994). Shortly thereafter, Dryfoos joined forces with colleagues from Children’s Aid and the Netter Center (then called the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania) to create a unified networking and advocacy organization, which became the Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership. Marty Blank was selected to lead the group, which received initial funding from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund. Jane Quinn, then the Program Director at Wallace,

moved to Children’s Aid in early 2000 to direct its National Center for Community Schools.

**KEY LESSONS FROM OUR TWENTY YEARS OF COMMUNITY SCHOOLS LEADERSHIP**

**Lesson One: Community schools is a strategy for supporting student learning and development, not a specific program model.** Although community schools do offer extended hours and services during and beyond the school day, what distinguishes a community school is its deliberate responsiveness to the strengths and needs of its constituents—primarily its students and their families—and its alignment of the assets of educators and community partners. A leading urban superintendent, Patricia Harvey (former head of St. Paul, Minnesota public schools), gave voice to this idea when she observed: “As we implemented the Achievement Plus initiative in St. Paul, I came to see community schools as *a strategy for organizing the resources of the school and community around student success.*” The effectiveness of the strategy depends, in no small measure, on conducting a thorough needs and assets assessment at the building level—and responding to that assessment’s findings. We have seen too many traditional schools with community partners that operate in silos, without a coherent plan for achieving results. We have observed good programs being implemented in isolation, lacking any influence on the school’s culture or demonstrable contribution to the school’s stated goals. Many schools, for example, do not bring together educators and existing community partners offering after-school programs, health and mental health services, or parent leadership supports to examine how they can coordinate and integrate their resources and expertise. The community school strategy uses joint planning teams and related mechanisms

to align the many moving parts and multiple programs of the school around an agreed-upon set of results.

**Lesson Two: The field has developed a consensus about the core elements that need to be included and adapted in a community school.** People asked us for many years: Just what is a community school and how does it work? A recent (2017) study conducted by the Learning Policy Institute and the National Education Policy Center (LPI-NEPC) provides a solid answer. These researchers found considerable consensus on the structures and programs within community schools across the country, noting that their comprehensive review of 143 evaluations identified common features found in different types of community schools. The four community school “pillars” include: (1) integrated student supports; (2) expanded learning time and opportunities; (3) family and community engagement; and (4) collaborative leadership and practice. The LPI-NEPC research team went on to observe:

The four pillars are fundamental to the success of community schools. Individually and collectively, they serve as scaffolds (or structures, practices, or processes) that support schools to instantiate the conditions and practices that enhance their effectiveness and help them surmount the barriers to providing high-quality learning opportunities in low-income communities. (Maier, Daniel, Oakes & Lam, 2017, p. 13).

We were heartened but not surprised that rigorous research identified this consensus; in fact, we both observed and advocated for these very structural and programmatic elements over the past two decades. A similar consensus emerged when the Coalition for Community Schools convened leaders



in 2015-6 to develop school-level and systems-level quality standards. The site-level standards help new community schools more effectively develop and implement their reform plans, assist existing community schools to strengthen the quality of their practice, document outcomes, and provide a consistent language and a framework for advocacy, technical assistance, research, funding, and policy efforts. Similarly, the systems-level standards identify specific actions that school systems and community partners—families, community- and faith-based organizations, local government, higher education, public agencies, law enforcement, United Ways, and others—must take, together and individually, to create the conditions that enable a network of community schools to thrive across an entire district (Coalition for Community Schools, 2017).

**Lesson Three: Community schools represent a long-term strategy, not a quick fix.** America's recent history of school reform revolves around the search for panaceas and quick fixes—despite no available evidence that such solutions exist or are appropriate. The highly influential federal policy known as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), which undergirded American education from 2001 through the end of 2015, exemplified the search for a quick fix. This 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act emphasized a narrow approach to student achievement, one that relied on standardized tests and grades as the principal measures of student learning. Furthermore, it called for a series of sanctions to be applied to schools that failed to make what was designated as Adequate Yearly Progress. The NCLB strategy—of accelerating desired outcomes without supporting additional inputs—is now deemed a failure for having fostered an environment in which the real-life challenges faced by students and families could be ignored.

NCLB's successor, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), takes a broader view of success factors and requires states to name at least one additional indicator of school quality or student success, other than student test scores and grades, that they will use as a school accountability measure. In crafting ESSA state plans for submission to the United States Department of Education, many states have struggled to determine such results, and more than 35 states have named reducing chronic absence as their indicator of choice. As states tackle the underlying causes of chronic absence, they are discovering the salience of the community school strategy—a strategy designed to address the range of factors that affect attendance, including physical and mental health issues, family challenges, and a lack of student engagement. Building the capacity to address these difficult and complex issues is not amenable to a quick fix. But we have seen that when educators work together with families and community partners, by using the community school strategy, they can make significant inroads in reducing chronic absence and addressing its underlying causes. For example, New York City Department of Education data released during the Fall of 2019 indicates that over the five-year period covering the academic years 2013-14 through 2018-19, New York City community schools decreased chronic absenteeism by 9.6%, nearly 20 times the citywide decrease of 0.5%.

**Lesson Four: Solid theoretical and empirical research undergirds the community school strategy.** The underlying theory of community schools draws on decades of solid research into the conditions and ingredients that foster healthy human development—including Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and Werner's resilience theory. As leaders in the community school field, both our organizations articulated that strong theoretical case in several early publications (Coalition for Community



Schools, 2003; Children’s Aid Society, 2001). Since then, the empirical evidence has mounted, demonstrating that the community school strategy works. The most thorough analysis to date about the processes and results of community schools—the Learning Policy Institute and National Education Policy Center study cited above—concluded that community schools represent an evidence-based practice consistent with standards established by ESSA. Specifically, this review concluded that “well-implemented community schools lead to an improvement in student and school outcomes and contribute to meeting the educational needs of low-achieving students in high-poverty schools” (Maier *et al.*, 2017, p. v). The LPI-NEPC research team marshaled evidence about the effectiveness of each of the four pillars of community schools as well as of the comprehensive implementation strategy, noting that these normative supports provide the conditions for learning that all young people require.

**Lesson Five: Community schools take an asset-based approach and build on the strengths of communities, schools, and individuals.** Unlike many prominent school reform approaches that characterize low-income students as at-risk and low-income schools as “failing,” community schools root their efforts in the premise that all students and schools can succeed if they have access to needed financial and human resources. The principles of asset-based community development first articulated by Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), which demonstrate how to mobilize the strengths of neighborhoods and their residents and institutions, animate community schools. Enrichment rather than remediation is a hallmark of after-school and summer programs in community schools; families are key informants, resources, employees and leaders rather than recipients of services; neighborhood institutions

are encouraged to participate in, and benefit from, community school offerings; and instruction is culturally responsive and engages students in the real world. When schools actively listen to what their students and families want from them, they find that both constituencies often describe the features of a community school—schools that are safe, challenging, welcoming, and engaging. Several of the country’s largest community school initiatives—including those being implemented in Cincinnati, New York City, and Oakland—emanated from authentic community engagement processes that gave voice to the hopes and expectations of students and their families. To cite one example, the Oakland community schools year-long strategic planning process engaged more than 5,000 stakeholders—including parents, students, educators, civic and non-profit leaders, and other community residents.

**Lesson Six: A good student support system cannot compensate for a weak core instructional program.** In another recent landmark study, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, Anthony Bryk and his colleagues at the Consortium for Chicago School Research provided a rigorous and compelling analysis of the ongoing work required to improve low-income urban schools (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2010). Without using the term “community schools,” Bryk and his team outlined five key ingredients of school improvement: strong principal leadership committed to an inclusive approach; authentic family and community engagement; coherent curriculum; student-centered school climate; and ongoing capacity-building. This research team emphasized the importance of the interaction among these five ingredients, using the analogy of cake-baking—the ingredients support and reinforce one another to create something greater than the sum

of its parts. Bryk and colleagues also focused on the ongoing nature of school improvement, noting that the long-term combination of these five ingredients was associated with the effects they observed in successful schools.

For those of us in the community school field, this study helped to undergird an argument we had been making since the inception of the current “generation” of efforts—strong student supports and additional opportunities cannot compensate for weak instructional programs. Too often we observed that schools would recruit partners to provide health services, offer student and family counseling, and expand after-school programs without doing anything to improve their core instructional programs. Frequently the term “community school” came to be viewed as the provision of additional student supports rather than the combination and integration of the academic core with expanded learning opportunities and services designed to remove barriers to learning. The LPI-NEPC report corroborates the message of the Bryk *et al.* (2010) school improvement study—the ability to generate positive results from the community school strategy requires a solid instructional core and responsive student supports. These researchers observe that “community schools would benefit from maintaining a strong academic improvement focus to support students’ educational outcomes” (Maier et al., 2017, p. 112). From a community school perspective, that academic improvement would incorporate learning that engages students with issues in their lives, their communities, and our society, as the Coalition argued in its paper, *Community Based Learning: Engaging Students for Success and Citizenship* (Melaville, Berg & Blank, 2006).

**Lesson Seven: Practitioners (educators and their community partners) benefit from consultation, coaching, and other forms of professional development as**

**they shift their practice in the direction of community schools.** This same LPI-NEPC study made an explicit connection between high-quality implementation and the achievement of results. The research team observed that effective implementation yields more positive results for students and schools (Maier *et al.*, 2017). Both the Coalition for Community Schools and the National Center for Community Schools (NCCS) have supported high-quality implementation over the past two-plus decades, regularly providing an array of publications, planning tools, networking opportunities, and national conferences. Also, NCCS developed a fee-for-service technical assistance practice, based on Children’s Aid’s implementation of 22 community schools in New York City. We have seen that community schools benefit from the kinds of intensive, often on-site, capacity-building work that NCCS and other groups offer. Such assistance ideally involves working with colleagues to understand each site’s strengths and challenges, including their political and economic circumstances to customize the implementation advice. Key services include: consultation (initial assessment and development of a technical assistance plan, followed by additional on- and off-site consultation as the plan is implemented); training at various levels, from educators and staff of community partners to city and district leadership; facilitation of strategic planning processes; application of planning tools for needs and asset assessments, partnership development, analysis of progress, sustainability and other issues that are central to the work of building a community schools initiative and system; and study visits to successful implementation sites. While there have been some successes in integrating community schools into the pre-service preparation of principals, teachers, and other educators, much work remains to be done. For example, most higher education institutions have not yet adopted this broader view of

what it takes to educate our increasingly diverse student population.

**Lesson Eight: Committed, collaborative local leadership is fundamental to the growth, sustainability, and effectiveness of community schools.** Roughly 8,000 to 10,000 American schools now identify as community schools, and more than 100 districts and cities have tackled implementation at multiple sites. The level of scale ranges from small districts like West Chicago, IL with all eight of their schools, to medium-sized cities like Lincoln, NE with 23, to New York City where 258 out of the district's 1,800 schools are community schools. In communities from Boise, ID to Fairfax County, VA, from Salt Lake City, UT to Vancouver, WA, from Knoxville, TN to Austin, TX, leaders are supporting community schools. Because most of the implementing districts and municipalities have adopted community schools as a long-term strategy, the numbers in these sites continue to grow each year. For example, Multnomah County's SUN (Schools Uniting Neighborhoods) initiative in the Portland, OR metropolitan area grew from eight sites in 2001 to 90 schools in 2019.

The LPI-NEPC study and the new community school standards affirmed what these and other initiatives learned, as they applied collaborative leadership practices that were effective in scaling pilot efforts. Key practices include community leadership structures that engage multiple stakeholders; similar shared-leadership structures at the school site; the engagement of community school directors or site coordinators who can mobilize community resources and integrate them into the life of the school; a focus on results that matter for students, families, and schools; and mechanisms to engage teacher unions and education organizers.

Local leadership is the heartbeat of community schools, at both the school district/community and school levels.

Mayors have played critical leadership roles in Newark, Philadelphia, New York, and San Pablo, CA; county governments have led the charge in Multnomah County, OR and Kent County, MI; superintendents in places as diverse as Chicago, Nashville, and Vancouver have developed city-wide initiatives; and United Ways and higher education institutions have led and contributed to initiatives in Asheville, Binghamton, Indianapolis, Miami, and Orlando, among other places. Leadership has also proved vital at the school level, where principals function as facilitators who share leadership with parents, students, and community partners. A key role, one that is unique to community schools, is that of the community school director/coordinator, hired by a community partner or the district. This leadership role involves mobilizing community resources and integrating them into the life of the school, communicating with parents and teachers, and enabling principals to focus on their responsibilities as instructional leaders (Children's Aid, 2018).

**Lesson Nine: Advocacy is necessary at all levels—federal, state, and local—and requires strategic organizing, consistent attention, and a multi-faceted approach.** The kind of political strategy envisioned by John Rogers in his historical analysis, one that would overcome the shortcomings of past community school efforts, demanded that this generation's leaders create strong organizational partnerships--ones that share a commitment to the community school vision. Not all this could happen at the same time, of course. As the designated leader of the field's advocacy work, the Coalition for Community Schools started with a two-pronged organizing strategy: engage national organizations with substantial reach through their memberships and allies; and ensure that these partner organizations represented all the constituencies working in community schools—educators, health

and mental health providers, education organizers, teacher unions, youth-serving organizations, parent groups, and others. This work began with a two-year process to build an early vision and shared language for the Coalition and its partners and proceeded in an evolutionary way. Today, the Coalition's member organizations number nearly 200.

Over the past 20 years, this initial and ongoing organizing effort has resulted in many successes. A National Policy Work Group of partners successfully advocated that the Full-Service Community School Program become part of the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act/ESSA in late 2015. Other provisions of the law reflect the principles of community schools: community engagement, broader measures of accountability, and a focus on issues related to the whole child. Specific partners are now actively engaged in organizing community schools. The American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association currently employ staff devoted to community school development. Community organizing groups such as Journey for Justice, Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, and Coalition for Educational Justice build grassroots support for sustainable community schools.

The Coalition also collaborates with other advocacy alliances in the field—Communities in Schools, Beacons Network, and Strive Together—which have slightly different approaches to the broad community school vision. These relationships work because the Coalition has never prescribed a specific model of community schools but has rather sought partners willing to work toward a broad vision of what the strategy entails.

As local community school initiatives emerged, the Coalition organized leaders of these efforts into the Community Schools Leadership Network, a learning

and advocacy affinity group, in 2005. The community school collaboratives developed by these leaders advocated for local school board and city policies in Baltimore, Cincinnati, Hartford, Pittsburgh, and other communities. These local network leaders worked on national issues and, over time, became the backbone of the 20 state community school networks, started in 2012, which operate in alliance with state-based affiliates of national partners. State networks, with little if any funding, have influenced state policy and gained resources for community schools in New York, Maryland, Minnesota, and California, among others.

**Lesson Ten: The community school strategy is all about equity.** In our work as leaders in this field over the past two decades, we have witnessed the passion and commitment that drive the work in cities and districts around the country—passion and commitment that are based on a deep understanding of the inequities that characterize contemporary American life. The early adopters of the community school strategy in this latest generation of the work used language in the 1990s like *leveling the playing field*, *removing barriers to learning*, and *enriching the learning environment* as a way to convey their understanding that large groups of American students have been marginalized by long-standing systemic policies of underinvestment and discrimination in low-income and minority neighborhoods. At the city or neighborhood level, these policies have included housing and employment discrimination as well as severely regressive taxation and resource allocation decisions. Consistent with political decisions made in the broader operating context, discriminatory education policies have included inequitable school financing mechanisms and persistent patterns of school segregation and within-school tracking. While recognizing the wide-ranging underpinnings of these

and other oppressive policies, these leaders saw opportunities to begin ameliorating the policies' effects by taking concerted action to organize school and community resources around student success through the community school strategy. This implicit emphasis on equity gradually evolved into a more explicit focus as community school proponents joined forces with civil rights leaders, such as Policy Link, to involve community schools in the emerging national conversation on equity. A key development in connecting these two movements was the Coalition's 2014 publication of a monograph entitled *Community Schools are an Essential Equity Strategy*.

The relationship between community schools and equity has been recognized by several national studies in recent years. For example, the 2013 final report prepared by the Congressionally-appointed Equity and Excellence Commission outlined a set of strategies designed to meet the needs of students in high-poverty communities. These strategies included the development of partnerships between schools and community resources that support at-risk children, encouragement of family engagement, and provision of health care, health education, and expanded learning time. As an example of such partnerships, the Commission cited the Cincinnati Community Learning Centers Initiative—a community school model. The Commission recommended including an annual needs assessment process at each high-poverty school as an essential element of this approach (Equity and Excellence Commission, 2013). Similarly, the 2017 landmark community schools study cited earlier called attention to the equity orientation of the work its researchers observed, noting:

Today's community schools build partnerships between the school and other local entities...These partnerships intentionally create structures,

strategies, and relationships to provide the learning conditions and opportunities—both in school and out—that are enjoyed by students in better-resourced schools, where the schools' work is supplemented by high-capacity communities and families...Community schools cannot overcome all problems facing poor neighborhoods—that would require substantial investments in job training, housing and social safety net infrastructures, and other poverty alleviation measures. However, they have a long history of connecting children and families to resources, opportunities, and supports that foster healthy development and help offset the harms of poverty (Maier et al., 2017, p. 5-6).

In an October 2019 interview with *Chalkbeat*, Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza described New York City's approach to educational excellence and equity, one that is completely consistent with the vision and strategy of community schools across the country: "We have a high bar of achievement for every student--this is excellence. And we are prepared to deliver the support that each of them needs to meet that bar. This is equity."

## CONCLUSION

Today's turbulent political climate creates both challenges and opportunities for education reformers. The key challenge is how to rise above the constant noise and rampant cynicism that characterize much of our public discourse. The opportunity resides in providing an alternative vision—one of hope, thoughtfulness, feasibility, and fairness. The community school strategy is increasingly recognized as offering such an alternative. It returns the public school to its rightful place as a vital center of community life—where the



community's many assets are mobilized in support of students, families, and neighborhoods. This alternative involves public schools that listen to, belong to, and are responsible to the communities in which they operate.

With students facing increasingly difficult challenges every day--violent shooter drills, immigration raids, serious mental health problems, family crises emerging from opioid addiction, inadequate housing, racial injustice, and a deeply unequal society, among others--our schools and communities must stand up for young people. Only then will we overcome the emphasis on test scores as the single measure of student success, the drive toward privatization, and the relentless criticism of public schools that has dominated recent education debates. The growth and effectiveness of community schools over the past two decades demonstrate the viability of this strategy as a solid response to such formidable challenges. Through strategic partnerships that do the grinding work of social change, we can create the kind of schools that our students and families deserve.

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# A Conversation with Delia Arellano-Weddleton, Senior Program Officer at the Nellie Mae Education Foundation\*

*This interview with Nellie Mae Senior Program Officer Delia Arrellano-Weddleton provides important insight on how racial equity has become a focusing lens for the philanthropic work of the Nellie Mae Foundation and how her own experiences and background influenced her path and direction.*

When this interview was conducted, Delia offered her perspective as Nellie Mae Education Foundation’s Senior Program Officer on leading youth and parent organizing. Her role with the Foundation has since shifted to Director of Engagement and Partnerships. In this new role, Delia supports the Foundation’s engagement with community members to ensure that their voices are well-represented. She is also responsible for building Nellie Mae’s partnerships with organizations that have complementary interests in supporting communities facing racial inequities.

**Kerryn Cockbain (KC):** Could you describe who you are, both personally and professionally?

**Delia Arellano-Weddleton (DA):** Personally, I have identified myself forever as first-generation American born. My parents came to the US from Mexico undocumented and I always share this with people because it is an important part of who I am and how I see the world around us. I was born and raised in Texas and I am a first-generation college graduate; I went from a low-income community to a wealthy Ivy League. To be honest, I felt like a fish out of water the entire time. I went into social work because I had this idea, from a very young age, of making the world a better place. Somewhere along the way, I decided it was okay if I could just make my corner of the world a little better. My social work background involved working with primarily Latino communities.

Just before I came into philanthropy, I was running a small program for immigrants, providing them with resources and helping them navigate the community that they lived in. I came into philanthropy through Nellie Mae Education Foundation’s Diversity Fellowship Program. I often tell people that there have been a couple of pivotal experiences in my life, and one was going off to an Ivy league school, which

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*\*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

put me on a different course in life. The other pivotal experience was the Diversity Fellowship Program with youth and parents that are part of Nellie Mae's grassroots work. The goal of the program was to bring more people of color into philanthropy through a strong social justice lens, and that aligned well with the work I had been doing prior. I've been working at Nellie Mae for 12 years now, including the time of the fellowship. My skills in philanthropy have been honed during my time here and it's been an interesting experience, as I had to adjust to an office setting. As a result of my social work, I was used to being in families' homes, talking to the parents and playing with the kids. I'm grateful that I was given the responsibility early on to build those relationships because that was where my heart was. That's where I've been for the past 10 years, building out our grassroots organizing work, which had been part of the Foundation's efforts to advance public understanding and demand around student-centered approaches to learning.

**KC: You touched briefly on your experiences leading up to where you decided you wanted to go, but what particular experience or set of experiences that you encountered in your life, made you realize that this is the work you wanted to dedicate your life to?**

**DA:** I came to Nellie Mae because I experienced first-hand the difference an education, especially a quality education, can make. Recently, our work has shifted to focus on racial equity. The work I have been doing with young people has helped me to see not only the importance of education, but also to understand the oppressive system I went through. I often tell people I am "long in the tooth," but the stories that I am hearing in 2020 are similar to what I went through. And for me, that's what fuels me. Somebody needs to benefit from me being here, not just me and my

family. Someone out there needs to be better off because I took up this space.

Philanthropy is an amazing animal and it's a very kind place to work, but it's also pressing against some very traditional ways of doing work. I've been here long enough that I had to press against some of those traditional ways. I had to do some of the code switching, similar to how young people are changing their schools; I had to do it in here so that our organization could be comfortable supporting the youth voice and supporting it in the way that young people want it to work, not in the way Nellie Mae was prescribing. Personally, I no longer feel a need to code switch.

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As I've said, some of the youth I've gotten to know over the years, they have helped me find my voice! People of color (youth and parents, etc.) should not be required to code switch - my hope is that we can all be our authentic selves. I don't think I could have done it as well if I didn't know firsthand what they were fighting for.

For me, this work has been really about the heart, about, "How do we support these young folks, who aren't being heard in their schools and how do we provide resources?" It's about just valuing young people, valuing community voice, knowing they have a lot to say. They have a lot to contribute. Our systems are not always set up to privilege their voice or their experiences.

**KC:** Take us back to about 5 to 10 years ago. Can you describe the landscape you were operating in then? Specifically within that sphere of education? And how has that landscape changed or remained the same?

**DA:** Just before we launched into youth organizing, there were very few groups that were actually organizing in New England. Through the years, we have seen that change. There's a lot more organizing, and for better or for worse, I think it is the political landscape that has made a lot of these groups take action and organize. I still think that organization is the third rail in philanthropy. Quite honestly, even though the institution supported [people organizing], there's still a little bit of a dancing thing that needs to take place. For example, I am aware of program officers that need to be cautious about how this work is shared with their CEO or Board members.

There are some amazing foundations that are very grassroots-oriented. They're not apologetic; they just do it full force. Then, there are some program officers that value it, but they still have to pursue everyone else to get on board. In the time I've been here, I have seen more organizations and foundations actively speaking out and changing their strategy. I have been here a long time; I've seen people come and go. There were some amazing mentors 10-12 years ago when I started whose foundations have exited the organizing space. Some new ones have come in. But it's still narrow. One of the things that I'm in the midst of learning about is how limited the dollars are to supporting marginalized voices, in terms of dollar systems or big gifts. It's still very limited. And if you think about organizing, it's probably even more limited, so I think you could say that some philanthropy organizations are starting to get comfortable around the idea of supporting community voice. However, we have a long way to go to work with other marginalized identities.

**KC:** What are some of the changes, either positive or negative, that the shifting rhetoric within the country has brought to your work?

**DA:** There are a lot more groups that are speaking loudly around ethnic studies. I think there's a higher level of sense of identity that's emerging and people feeling more comfortable speaking truth to power and saying, "We need more teachers of color. We need more ethnic studies in our schools. We need restorative justice." I think it's amplified the needs in the community in the sense that people are not going to hold back anymore. We support Connecticut Students For A Dream; they're part of United We Dream. They have worked on statewide policy around tuition for undocumented students. I think the political sea has made people realize that it's now or never. If you don't start speaking up now, things can only get worse.

Nellie Mae began rapid response after the 2016 election, responding to the needs of the communities. I started getting emails and knew we had to do something. I leaned on grantee partners for advice when I started seeing the narrative around Parkland. Many people in the country are now saying, "Wow, this is great. Young people are actually out there marching." I felt that the voices of young people of color who have been marching and taking action for many years were being dismissed or were not surfacing. Our young people were feeling the same way. They were feeling like they were not being seen. We were able to put out resources and say, "Hey, if you're looking at our schools now, you can take the time to notice us too." It was a moment to leverage to ensure other youth people got some spotlight. In that way, I've seen some of the landscape change. I think people are willing to take more of a chance.

**KC: So what do you see as some of the most dominant influences or challenges right now?**

**DA:** We just adopted a new strategy focused on a racial equity lens and I'm at the point where I cannot see things without seeing them through that lens. I think about what happens on a daily basis in the school, but it's also really important to talk about the root causes. One of the beauties about the youth groups that we support is that they really do talk about root causes. They don't just deal with the superficial. They have an understanding. They have a critical analysis around why they're being pushed out, why when they show up to school, they're told to check their culture at the door. I think it's important to acknowledge that people are tempted to say the school system we work within is broken, but quite frankly, it's not broken. It's working the way it was designed to work. Historically, you have people of color that are mostly marginalized and it's not that the system fell apart for them. It's set up in a way that if you're on the margins of society, you're not getting the support you need. You're not getting the love and the respect that you need. The buildings and books are broken and it's just not set up for success. I have a hard time not thinking about racial inequities as being at the center of a lot of the issues that we are grappling with and that our young people, and their parents, are the recipients of on a daily basis.

**KC: So what would you say to the people who through willful ignorance or otherwise disagree that there needs to be an advocacy for vulnerable populations in the educational space?**

**DA:** I think it would matter who I was speaking to. Am I speaking to someone in the school? Am I speaking to someone in the business world? If I think of the business world, it's tempting to think

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about what they stand to gain from things being better. I think I am a work in progress because as I'm learning more and more about racial equity, it's helping me think differently. My previous instinct, if I'm talking to a bunch of business people, would be to talk about how they're going to gain from a higher skilled group of graduates. I'm not certain that I would reply in that way right now. I feel like there's something to be said about what's humane and what's just in our society. That goes to the heart more so than to pocketbooks or peoples' thinking. Unless we can change peoples' perceptions of others, especially others that don't look like them, anything we do is not going to be authentic. When I think about the work we've done around parent organizing, I started with the questions of “Do teachers and school administrators value what parents have to say? Do they respect parents?” Because if there isn't that sense of respect and valuing and desire to work with them, everything's going to feel artificial. Ultimately, it's not an easy process and it takes a long time, but young people, people of color in particular, need to be seen as assets and need to be seen as human beings that matter. It may not be for my own personal gain. It may be about them. I think it's shifting the narrative around who stands to gain from us educating young people of color.



**KC: You speak a lot about what is right and just. Do you have a philosophy, or theory, or framework that guides you? A compass that serves you through these very trying and difficult times that you're facing?**

**DA:** One of the things that guides me is I don't want to waste my time in philanthropy. I just cannot afford to waste it. I feel responsible for young people. I feel responsible for parents and I can't afford to waste this time. This is an amazing opportunity; I'm here and I need to make it worthwhile. That's what drives me. I have to ask myself, "How am I going to make sure that the time I get to be in this place of privilege, benefits others?" That's really my dream: to have made a difference.

**KC: And finally, where do you see the greatest potential for hope and progress right now?**

**DA:** I think it's about continuing to build power in the people who haven't had power or people whose power isn't recognized. I have this mindset that when we talk about communities of color, low-income communities, that there is a lot of power there. There's a lot of strong power. There are a lot of beautiful relationships, but we don't always see that as an asset. We come into it with our own lens of what power looks like. I believe that helping them continue to build that power is going to be critical to making change – helping people come together, build collective power, be recognized, and be seen. This whole thing connects to the saying, "Nothing about me without me." What I've heard lately is "Nothing about me without me is about me." Keeping that in mind, who gets to make the decisions that impact them directly? Many people stop working at the end of the day, but we also have a role as community members. Every single decision that is made- at the local and school levels- impacts lives in our community. I think

it is about helping the community build that power.

We've had a number of stories of parents who probably would describe themselves as not having had a voice and not feeling comfortable speaking. They are now. They have won elections, at the city level and at the school board level, and some of them are leading organizations inside school districts now. There is a lot of hope for the future if we use our strength to bring those voices to light.

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*Delia Arellano-Weddleton (interviewee) joined the Nellie Mae Education Foundation in 2008.*

*Delia, a first-generation American, holds more than 20 years' experience in social services and community outreach, primarily in low-income, immigrant communities. Previously, she worked at the Foundation as a Fellow in the Associated Grant Makers Diversity Fellowship Program. Prior to the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, Delia was the Coordinator of the Newcomers and Neighbors Center in Framingham, Massachusetts, which was created to respond to the needs of the town's large immigrant community. She also previously worked as a Bilingual Family Advocate at the South Middlesex Opportunity Council's Head Start program, supporting English-, Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking families.*

*Delia holds a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's degree in social work from the University of Pennsylvania.*

*Kerryn Cockbain (interviewer) is a South African masters student at NYU and serves as the Communications Coordinator for the general NYU Metro Center. She assists on all communication for the various centers housed at NYU Metro Center and coordinates with each group in external communication efforts.*

# Where We Go Wrong in Equity Work: Separating Social Justice Efforts from True Movement of Healing

LYRICA FILS-AIMÉ

*This autoethnographic commentary includes anecdotes along with scientific background, ending with suggestions to do your best work as an equity warrior. It examines how, when working to dismantle racist systems, there are many setbacks that equity warriors face time and time again. The author suggests that “warriors” face re-traumatization when listening to the radio, watching the news, even viewing comedy shows—hearing triggering stories from the heated political climate repeatedly. She cautions about the very little attention given to the effect this has on our bodies as equity work is happening.*

“But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.”

— Ta-Nehisi Coates

“Pain is important: how we evade it, how we succumb to it, how we deal with it, how we transcend it.” — Audre Lorde

I was listening to “*Biased*” by Jennifer Eberhardt as I was getting ready for my day, soaking up wisdom about the way our brains operate. While brushing my teeth, I saw large droplets roll down my face into the sink. Listening to Jennifer Eberhardt’s account of Terrence Crutcher’s murder by Officer Shelby in 2016, I was crying. Well, my body was crying. At some level, my mind was separate from my body. I hadn’t acknowledged the tears until I saw them and they did not stop me from moving on with my day at that very moment. I continued with my morning routine. I allowed the droplets to fall straight into the sink, instead of going down my face, to prevent ruining my makeup and showing up as visible signs of a tearful morning. I wiped my eyes and went off to work. When a colleague asked me how I was doing, I responded, “I’m good!” and a few moments later, I thought to myself, “Wow. Am I good? I should have taken a moment to process what was happening to me this morning.” Had I been denying the pain I was feeling? Looking back, it was not a great way to start my day. I needed to heal from it. I should have processed those emotions. I needed to store it in my body in a new way; transform it from the way in which it entered.

In the train station on my way to work, I saw an officer in a uniform I had never seen before, talking to a religious representative who was passing out pamphlets. I thought to myself, “I wonder where my father is today?” While he has been a U.S. Citizen for over 25 years, it occurred to me that my father, who had a similar accent as that woman being questioned by the officer, could find himself in a conversation with a comparable officer, who in my mind, was affiliated with ICE. It was sure to be an uneasy encounter in the current political climate.

I walked down the platform, turned on my headphones and heard “The Daily Show with Trevor Noah” podcast. He was speaking about the President’s tweets telling congresspersons to “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came.” The recording played the rally attendees’ chant of “Send her back; send her back.” I felt my stomach turn. I decided I needed something upbeat to get me ready for the day, so I switched to Oprah’s Soul Session. I thought, “That should do the trick.” I can usually hear an uplifting spiritual message to carry me through my day. The episode was about Ava Duvernay’s “When They See Us,” documenting the story of the Central Park 5. I put on an Afrobeats playlist instead.

I continued on after my waterfall of tears in the morning, the scene at the train station, and the informational podcasts, to present an Implicit Bias Workshop in the Bronx. I proceeded to put myself in a proverbial line of fire, teaching others about the workings of our brains and how biases show up in education, vulnerably trying to make an impact on the NYC education system.

This is an attempt to begin to heal the wounds in the education system in New York City. My daily work makes small ripples throughout the city, throughout the state, on Native Lenape land. This is

land that has its own historical traumas, which reverberate throughout as we continue to perpetuate harm. Healing comes during every anti-racist and anti-oppressive conversation as we validate, inform, share, practice, assure, clear up, change, challenge, excite, and recognize the experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in this country and in NYC. As educators begin to understand the harms we cause daily, unknowingly we are beginning to heal the system in small ways. Bit by bit.

At the same time, we put ourselves at risk, daily, to endure more triggers and traumas, which I call “zings,” that jab us, and that we often ignore. If we do not check these zings, we are liable to perpetuate more zings or worse; we can perpetuate more oppression through the hurt. If we don’t process each zing, and realize how it is impacting our emotional, physical, and spiritual selves, then we will no doubt take it out on others, in facilitation, on our teams, with close friends and family, and in interactions with a cashier or on the train. This unintentional ability to manifest my zings onto others can show up outwardly or inwardly, in various shapes of internalized oppression, not limited to feelings of numbness, silence, anger, and shame.

A number of educators in New York City have been facilitating equity work for a long time. But now, for the first time, there are city-wide efforts to make this work occur in as many schools as possible. Educators are participating in diversity councils and equity teams, leading and attending affinity groups, seeking out professional development in equitable practices, teaching culturally responsive lessons, and pushing their colleagues’ thinking in meetings. As this work happens, most educators are missing a vital piece of that work, one that is not highly researched and not even spoken about: a collective culture that allows for healing of the zings.

These educators take a breath, complain to coworkers, and move on. Or, they stay silent, to protect themselves, and unknowingly build up resentment. They share their experience with colleagues and maybe administrators and are surprised by the dysconsciousness they encounter. They experience double consciousness, as presented by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), dividing their identities into several parts, who they are with administrators, who they are with students, and who they are with colleagues. But these zings are not only experienced in the work. They also happen when we live. So, we have double healing to do. We do not want to speak from our wounds. When we do, we are liable to perpetuate the very same violence we are fighting against. This is not to say that “hurt people hurt people,” because that notion keeps oppressing anyone who has been hurt from an eventual place of power, but rather, that we should participate in ongoing healing to check and make sure we are in balance and are attuned.

The warning from flight attendants to “Put on your mask before helping others” is not enough to warn us educators to take care of ourselves. This statement is to be adhered to while in the emergency. We are already in an emergency in the education system. We are helping others to put the mask on while simultaneously trying to put it on ourselves. Jumping into equity work, day in and day out, causes small emergencies for us; we need to be healing continuously to maintain the movement of the system.

When working to dismantle racist systems, there are many setbacks that equity warriors must face time and time again. These setbacks can be discouraging and dehumanizing. Add the political climate, laws created to further oppress groups, statements by a congressperson to defend racism, and videos with racial undercurrents can trigger us when we are not consciously

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paying attention. Warriors face re-traumatization when listening to the radio, watching the news, even viewing comedy shows—hearing triggering stories repeatedly. Very little attention is given to the effect this has on our bodies as we work in education. Many teams who are working to improve systems do not pay enough attention to the self-care that is required to get back fruitfully into the racial equity game. While the term self-care is overused as of late, it is nonetheless vital to the cause, highly undervalued in education, and seen as entitlement in some organizing cultures. That said, we are much more accepting of individual-care but much less comfortable with collective-care. Individual-care is important, but in the end, we show up together to do the work, so we need to heal together, too. Intentional self-care is the declination of the bitter systems we are fighting against, and collective-care is not just a nonacceptance of those systems, but a refusal to participate in them.

The American Psychological Association’s survey on Stress in America (2016) found that sixty-six percent of participants in the USA say that the “future of our nation is a significant source of stress.” Fifty-seven percent were stressed by the current political climate. These numbers increased in 2017. They describe stress as a combination of emotional (worry, tension, irritability) and physical (headaches, insomnia,

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stomach problems) reactions. In 2018, the number of participants who found the future of the country to be cause of stress increased to sixty-nine percent and sixty-two percent of the participants found the current political climate to be a stressor (American Psychological Association, 2018; Keller, 2019).

The stress from political climates combined with an organizer’s stress from their work has yet to be measured by APA, but it is likely that combining these factors would show a sharp spike. The New England Journal of Medicine states that the toxic stress of “hostility or discrimination” on individuals and communities “belonging to stigmatized, marginalized, or targeted group[s], impact[s] cortisol levels” (Williams and Medlock, 2017). How does this stress impact those who are experiencing the injustice? And those who are part of the minoritized group but also fighting for liberation? The “Spirit Murdering,” coined by Bettina Love (2019), of Black and Brown students in education through structural racism and problematic frameworks also impacts those who are fighting for change. All of this adds up for an equity warrior. In schools, the lack of community healing while embarking on equity work takes a toll on the progress the equity work can make. This sabotaging of the work causes us to be less effective. We lose trust, motivation, and feel burnout in the very places we are attempting to heal.

In social work schools, there is a saying, “Things will get worse before they get better.” It is a way that we deal with clients or families who regress as we are seeking to help. It is a way to stick with the work when it gets particularly hard, in order to see it through to the other side. Additionally, it is a way for clients to hear that they should not give up. In equity work, the same statement holds true. I tell superintendents and principals I work with that the tension that arises from difficult conversations is the manifestation of racial systems being dug up, turned over, and examined. Some people will leave the organization. Some will try to stop the work from happening. Others will become numb because they unconsciously need to protect themselves from re-traumatization. To undo a system that has been at work for centuries, we have to sift through the muck. But we must also make time for healing to occur. We have to be alive, in our spirits, emotions, and physical bodies, to do great restorative work in the community. This is emphasized when we can heal together as a community.

Community healing builds attunement. Attunement is a concept that is important in therapy, between therapist and client, especially in play therapy for children and also in parenting (derived out of Ainsworth’s [1970] and Bowlby’s [1958] attachment theories; and specifically used in Theraplay, Jernberg and Booth, 1999). Attunement is how reactive and aware one is to another’s emotions and needs, and a co-regulation of emotions. An attuned relationship will have both individuals responding with reactions of language and behaviors based on what the other individual showcases. Attunement creates belonging. The triggers or zings we experience awaken survival strategies. These survival strategies can provide us with a temporary sense of security but can be damaging to



ourselves and others in the process. We have to look at organizing and healing as the same concept, instead of separating them. Then we can integrate healing into the organizing and begin to reduce the need for the survival strategies, thus being more attuned to each other as we work in equity.

There are many ways education systems uphold a refusal for healing to be a part of the movement while being steeped in examining disproportionality or talking about equity. Educators who embark on equity journeys take a huge risk. Because being a principal or teacher can become that person's entire identity, when the zings happen, it can shake the educator's core identity. Do I really know what I am doing? Did I say the wrong thing? Will this impact my classroom? Can I keep doing my job? Who am I without teaching? This equity work is making things tense in my school; should I focus on instruction? Equity work is not measured or evaluated the way test scores are, so the question becomes, which is more important?

Many educators make great organizers, but some movements participate in dangerous cultures of forced struggle. When organizers fight for those who are struggling, we can be in danger of building a culture of overworking. "The people I am fighting for are struggling so much that I cannot enjoy anything because then I feel guilty. And, it may look like I am not working hard enough." Plenty of educators start equity work because they have experienced an injustice. This can be empowering but can also lead us to thinking that self-care is an indulgence because in our imaginations, the people we are fighting for are not able to indulge. The "social justice work ethic" can be extremely tiring and harmful. Furthermore, for people of color and those experiencing systematic oppression as a part of life, the commitment to fight for others can be

particularly meaningful. It can also be that much more taxing to experience it alongside those you are fighting for.

The systems we are a part of encourage leaders to forget to connect amongst the politics, regulations, mandates, accountability measures. Leaders who are hesitant to care for themselves perpetuate a culture of working without examining the zings. As a leader, I have felt fearful of the connection of my team, when I was not feeling a sense of belonging myself. Some leaders will promote individual-care but neglect the community-care and most of the time it is because of a lack of knowledge of how to do just that. My nonprofit leadership program did not prepare me for this part of the work. Many programs teach research, finance, fundraising, but do not have the capacity to provide leaders with lessons of connection, effective teaming, and restoring of relationships. As a practitioner who works to challenge racist systems in education and mental health in NYC, I find there are not enough resources to manage healing for equity teams. When using texts that guide and orient us to the work, we need companion literature guides and strategies to address the pain and complications that arise, internally and externally, and manuals to address them communally.

Finally, white dominant culture norms impact education in a vast number of ways, accountability, punctuality, individualism, worship of the written word, perfectionism-- all play into the refusal to be collective, cautious, and take time to connect and heal. We are suspicious of pleasure and healing, and question if the work is really happening. Leaders are challenged to navigate the terrain and can remain unaware that the authentic relationships built through community conversations help to reject the white supremacy at play in our systems. At times, this part of the work feels like a huge risk. We are scared

to face each other; it is not the way in which many of us grew up in white dominant culture. When we choose white dominant culture over connecting, we further push the racist agenda.

Engaging in collective healing includes many different methods of equitable leadership and a push away from capitalistic, patriarchal, traditional models of leading. Community work can and should include many different facets. Provide space for the team to check in with others which creates genuine and authentic supportive relationships. Regularly acknowledge stressors with supervisees and ask what they are experiencing on the team and in the world. Reflect on the unspoken organizational methods your team is experiencing. Make sure everyone gets a chance to speak as equality in community voice is extremely important to healing. Encourage and provide activities for those interested in using art or writing to express as another way of ensuring community voice. This guarantees that your team is not organizing in crisis only. Equity teams tend to come together in moments of fear or panic. This ritualistic work ensures you are connected in preparation for those panicked moments and builds the team's capacity to restore.

Providing space to explore each individual's ancestral methods of healing can be a restorative way to reflect. What are rituals and traditions our families participated in? What repatriation and rematriation activities can be done to activate spiritual and emotional connections? Why are they important and how do they carry on today? If they don't, can the team try or practice some of them? Inviting (and paying) indigenous folx from your area to teach your team to release emotions and connect with the land or your ancestors can be a meaningful experience for teams working together. Engaging in ritual is what Malidoma Somé (1993, 1999) outlines as the

“anti-machine,” activating our need to live in relationship with other human beings and repairing what we have lost and reintegrating the fragments. Tying in ancestral values of the community you serve or your own ancestors can create healing activities and ceremonies for the community you work in or for yourself (without appropriating them. For more on appropriating, check out Lorretta Todd's 1990 definition.) What is it like for the team to sit together in ritual? Or to sit together in silence? What comes up? How does the team laugh together and experience joy? Are these random or purposeful moments of connection? These ways of spending time together can slow the zings down in your body and keep them from taking over. Connecting with your lineage can help you to find your purpose and make meaning of your work.

Some equity warriors are not ready for so much connection, including leaders, but they can be reminded that we want to organize through hope and joy and not only through pain. Ask such members for their input in the planning of the space. If you can heal together then that means you can build together. Revisit the purpose in the beginning of each community gathering: “Our team is committed to ensuring our humanity is a part of the work and creating empathy for each other when transgressions occur.” This type of leadership ensures there is a sense of connectivity on the team. When we are triggered or traumatized, the world feels chaotic and unpredictable, and we experience changes in our perceptions and imaginations (Van Der Kolk, 2014). Justice work often feels this way and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color may be walking in skin that feels unsafe daily. The “assaulted sense of self” as Ken Hardy (2013) discusses, explains how being stripped of dignity and the dehumanization impacts the mind, body and soul. Creating community check-in spaces can create regularity and a

predictability in an uncertain world. Trauma actually changes our brain chemistry but creating belongingness, mindfulness, and connection can reorganize our brains (Yellow Bird, 2018; Van Der Kolk, 2014). Collective healing initiatives are especially important after experiences of collective trauma to: promote opportunities for togetherness and storytelling, provide routines, re-establish rituals, and promote social cohesion (Saul, 2014). If we continue the traditional way, steeped in data and changing policies, we will be productive. We will change aspects of the system. But will it last? Will it transform into new pain and systemic oppression? Recently I arrived at a planning meeting for a disproportionality session we were facilitating. In our community check-in, a coworker said, “It is really hard for me to be in my skin today.” He talked about the racial encounter he experienced that morning at a previous meeting. “I realized when I was talking to my son on the phone after what happened that I am a little on edge today. If that shows up in this space, please know that this is why.” We set aside the agenda to provide support. The team empathized. A coworker validated his experience. Another related it to her own experience a week before. We took in a little bit of the colleague’s pain. We held it in the room. We sat with it silently for a few minutes. We prepared to take hold of another meeting with the person he had engaged with earlier. We helped him shift the feeling into a new feeling. He was able to transform it into his body in a new way. We reduced the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual malaise and took pieces of the trauma from him. We gave collective-care. We helped restore and repair the zings before he moved on to his own self-care. “Thank you,” he said. “I couldn’t focus on this meeting without knowing that we are all working towards the same end goal.

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To be reminded that when I am out there, that I have people here lifting and holding me up means I can go back out again.”

Other suggestions to ensure your work is being processed holistically is to try ongoing or as-needed mental health therapy with a person who works with organizers or has core beliefs similar to your own. Look for ancestral ceremonies that can help you create questions and find answers about your roots. Justice focused community gatherings and affinity groups provide space for sharing and collecting wisdom. Some healing centers look to provide the exact community-care outlined in this article.

**For virtual or in-person collective healing:** Harriet’s Apothecary, Minka Brooklyn, Who Heals the Healer, Center for Babaylan Studies

**Online resources:** Ancestral Resistance Offerings and Practices Zine, Universal Partnership, Sierra Seeds, Rematriation Magazine, The Nap Ministry

**More reading:** Emergent Strategy by adrienne marie brown, Turn This World Inside Out- The Emergency of Nurturance Culture by Nora Samaran

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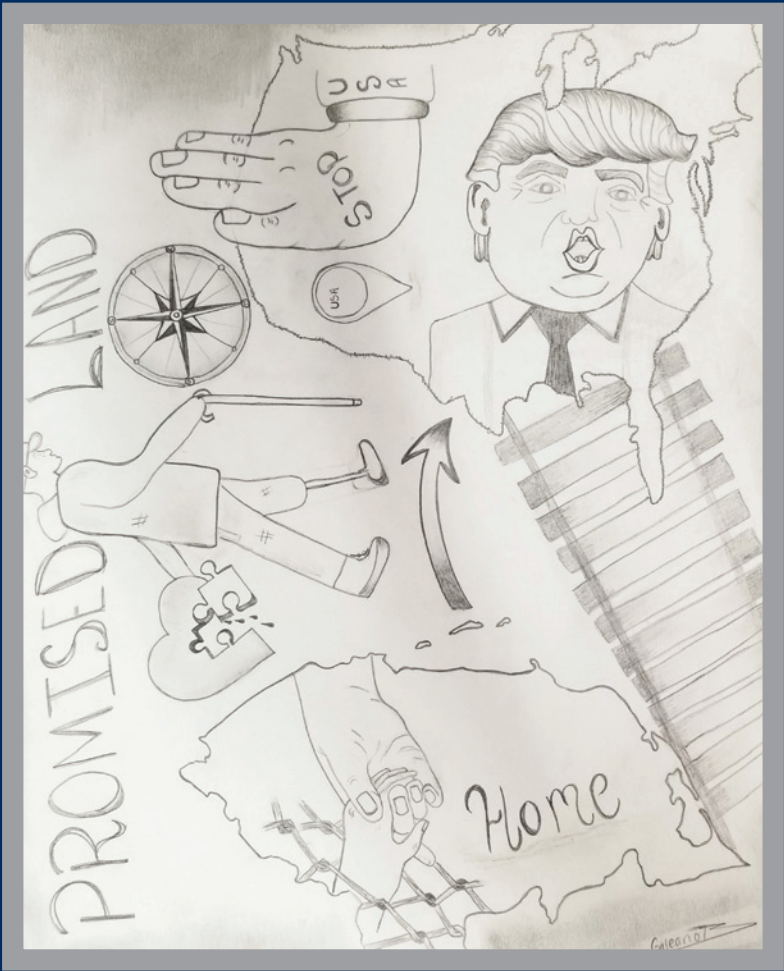
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Baïron Galeano

STUDENT GALLERY : HEALING



Yelena Guiron









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