Black School Leader Truth: How Black School Leader Epistemology Influences Liberatory Mindset Development in Their Staff

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BLACK SCHOOL LEADER TRUTH: HOW BLACK SCHOOL LEADER EPISTEMOLOGY INFLUENCES LIBERATORY MINDSET DEVELOPMENT IN THEIR STAFF

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Black students in the United States have consistently been denied access to empowering, culturally affirming, and responsive learning experiences in the traditional public system. The epistemological and pedagogical beliefs embedded in a liberatory mindset can subvert this pattern of disempowerment (Shujaa, 1998). Black school leaders (BSLs) who understand the systemic and institutional pressures Black children may face and have to overcome, having undergone similarly racialized experiences in school, are uniquely placed to create liberatory spaces for Black students by recruiting and developing these liberatory mindsets in their staff. This instrumental case study used qualitative research methods of front-porch pedagogy (McTighe & Haywood, 2018) through observations and interviews with BSLs and staff in one urban school. The study explored BSLs’ interpretations of the liberatory mindset, how it impacted staff selection, and ultimately guided alignment with staff on the co-construction of empowering environments for Black students. Findings revealed four elements that guided BSLs’ hiring and professional development decisions and positioned critical hope and personal liberation as levers for Black student empowerment: (a) Liberatory and Responsive Education Systems, (b) Resilience and Personal Growth, (c) Sociopolitical Awareness and Advocacy, and (d) Self-Determination and Courage as Outcome Drivers. The study indicates the importance of giving Black families educational choices, including ethnoculturally autonomous schools, and for leadership and teaching preparation programs to consider community of color epistemologies. It also invites aspiring non-Black educator allies to gain a deeper understanding of how their own epistemological development impacts their pedagogical presumptions of the potential of their Black students.
DEDICATION

The process from preprogram application through submission of the dissertation could not have been possible without the support and dedication of my wife Dr. Blanca Ruiz. You have given me the inspiration, confidence, and faith to believe that I would persevere through this process. You gave . . . give me space, sustenance, encouragement, understanding, and a reason to smile. The process here was ultimately to tell the story of a school that seeks to help Black children liberate themselves. You helped me keep their story as my main focus and to free myself from fear or doubt that I would get it right. Thank you! I dedicate this to our two children, Xiomara Fela Williams and Miles Marshel Williams. You are the beginning of our families’ next seven generations, and you both are such incredible warriors. Take what your mother and I have passed on to you and continue to make it better, in your own way.

I dedicate this to my mother, Phyllis Gwen Williams. Full stop. You left this world in 2016 to join our ancestors and the Supreme, and everything changed. You protected the young baby boy who came into this world in 1975 from Day 1 to your last. I would not be able to grow into a strong Black man and father had you not poured all of your strength and love into me.
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STORY OF SELF

Didn’t everyone . . .

- sit up in the crib yelling curses at age 2 in order to mimic what they heard in the next room?
- have to be consoled at 5 because they thought the white people were going to come take them away like they did Kunta?
- shudder fear when their father called their name?
- see their mother terrified as the bedroom door closed and be pretty sure that’s how they conceived you?
- lookout for police on the roof of their building and get paid in now-laters, ice cream money and safety by the older kids?
- watch aunts uncles and their friends fight drinks and smoke and sniff while they thought you were confined to the back room with your cousins?
- know the contours of at least 2 different jail cells . . . or correctional facilities (as they like to call them)?
- think that their life was the same as every other kid in the world?
- see the world as a dangerous place no matter where they stood ready?
- check the box for yes when love was first discovered?
- spit the razor out of their mouth in their first freshman seminar because they didn’t need to protect their book bag anymore?
- know that hood politics will always be more complex that organic chemistry, but less lucrative . . . deadly even?
- escape drama and danger by retreating to their grandparents house?
From college graduate, to teacher, to AP to arriving as a school leader in 2002 I was sure everyone knew these things. I also knew why students needed help in navigating these realities. I spent my 1st year as a principal telling the students that their oppression under my leadership was of their own good . . . didn’t everyone?

My body, mind and spirit were aligned in the celebration of my anointment as the poster boy for all other aspiring overseers. I was a black-on-black criminal, and proud of it. I was an extension of “we sick” and aimed to eliminate any deviations from his master plan. I wasn’t sleeping, I barely ate and never spoke to anyone outside of my chains desperately trying to prove my worthiness. I was connived that my hardness as a child was serving me well as I ignored signs that by swinging the hammer I was beginning to fail physically, mentally, and emotionally . . . just like he did.

I hammered down spirits successfully for 2 years in that role before I had to drop the hammer from exhaustion. I laid on my mother’s couch broken, and unable to figure out why I was not being rewarded with more destructive energy. my staff came to my mother’s house and gave me love and an ultimatum, “we love you and trust you and believe you can be better, because what you have been doing has left you here and has not honored the humanity of the kids and community we teach . . . what’re you going to do?”

They introduced this concept of school to prison pipeline. I knew about that, didn’t everyone? Everything that made me was now being used to make more of me . . . sullied, silenced, inhumane, angry, saddens, anxious . . . I felt shame for the first time as an adult . . . didn’t everyone? For the first time I became more complex than the boy and the man that was performing life in order to survive. ad I didn’t want my students and staff to perform their roles, but rather to explore their roles as I was just beginning to do.
Kunjufu, Shujaa, Baldwin, Lorde, dead prez, my mother, Mr. Reid nana & poppy revealed themselves to me again for the first time. They told me that I was human, deserving of complexity without judgement.

I started exploring this thing called freedom and liberation. I liked. it was pure, freeing :) liberating :), and I deserved it, didn’t everyone?

I was changing, evolving, and catching up to my present. bounced around a little, different roles but more in tune with activities that replenish or drain my soul. relationships began to replace priorities as motivation to get better as a man.

Now a father and a husband (or a “rent” and an “eww” as my daughter would say) I am not the same. I look down to stay present and back to stay aware.

Blanca and I say to Miles and Xiomara

“You know mommy and daddy are here for you and want you two to love yourself and each other as much as we do you. you have us as people in your life that love you unconditionally.”

They respond, “shocking . . . we know daddy, doesn’t everyone?”
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery
None but ourselves can free our minds

–Bob Marley and the Wailers, *Redemption Song*

Educators, caregivers, and communities generally accept school as a place where students can begin to explore themselves, the natural world, and their purpose. In this study, I centered student academic success, as other scholars (e.g., Freire, 1972; Ladson-Billings, 1994; B. J. Love, 2000; Shujaa, 1998) have, coupled with the development of critical consciousness and sociopolitical awareness, as the primary purpose of schools. These researchers and others have argued academic success without awareness and critical consciousness limits the potential for students to view school as useful and thus boost their engagement. El-Amin et al. (2017) shared, “contemporary research has found that critical consciousness not only expands young people’s commitment to challenging pervasive injustice but also increases academic achievement and engagement” (para. 7). Through the combination of academic achievement, sociopolitical awareness, and the development of critical consciousness, the school becomes an environment in which students examine their own condition and the environmental, economic, social, political, and cultural factors contributing to their reality. School is a place where students become more confident and comfortable and claim their curiosity and agency.

Unfortunately, some students, many of whom are Black, experience significant obstacles to thinking about their futures due to biased, destructive, and oppressive messages they internalize about their own racial, cultural, or linguistic identities. Described as the *encounter stage* (Tatum, 1997), many young people have a period in life when they realize their race, and
messages about their self-worth are either tested or affirmed. The most vulnerable stage of life for disempowerment, mental colonization, subjugation, and internalized racial inferiority is childhood (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sharp, 2002; Tatum, 1997). The result is Black children regularly and “unfairly accept responsibility for the lack of their educational opportunities . . . [and] believe that they have failed due to their own inadequacies, rather than inadequate schooling” (Huber et al., 2006, p. 199). Black children, and often other children of color, are bombarded with messages about their lack of intelligence, beauty, capacity for joy, self-determination, and connection to present and historical cultural excellence. If the Black child begins to believe these societal cues about themselves, and doesn’t regularly experience alternative messaging, they may easily develop a sense of “devalued status in the world” (Tatum, 1997, p. 58). Once this socialization has begun, often as early as prekindergarten, it becomes incredibly difficult to rebuild one’s self-image and reclaim unlimited potential for personal liberation and self-determined success. Experiencing “mis-education” (Woodson, 1933/2023) in school, mass and social media messaging, and witnessing the somatic, emotional, mental, physical (i.e., psychosomatic), and socioeconomic impact racism has on the Black community can also severely affect and even permanently damage Black children’s self-conceptualization (Tatum, 1997). Within these constraints, Black children become adults who have rationalized their own limitations often due to their race alone, and also how it intersects with their gender, sexuality, or other aspects of their identity (Diem & Welton, 2020). To reverse this trend, schools need to be places where students can freedom dream (Kelley, 2002) by imagining a world, and their place in it, free from the oppressive and dismissive forces of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, and any other forms of oppression based on identity. Schools can also be a place where success is defined beyond social mobility (E. Jensen, 2016) and the maintenance
of the current social and economic status quo (Collins, 2009; Kurt, 2015). In these types of schools, identity-based oppression is replaced with a supportive freedom dreaming space for Black students. Kelley (2002) asserted freedom dreaming can only be achieved if BSLs also have experienced the need to imagine possibilities for their own success and freedom outside of the boundaries and limitations presented by traditional public schools. These BSLs, through the virtue of their own racialized experiences in school, understand the systemic and institutional pressures Black children may face and have to overcome to preserve their ability to thrive. As a result, these BSLs make decisions for vision, design, staffing, and instruction to support the ability of their Black students to freedom dream about their futures.

According to Segal (1996), the racial designation Black is defined as, “belonging to the African Diaspora—such as African-American, African-Caribbean, native African born, Afro-Asian or Afro-Latinx” (p. 17). The U.S. education system has a history of dismissing and disempowering Black students directly through miseducation and/or indirectly by separating them from Black staffs and school leaders (Anderson, 1988; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Ramsey, 2008). Schools attempting to create opportunities for a counternarrative to Black student success need Black leaders who have the courage, defiance, and competence to design, staff, and lead them (Khalifa, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1995; B. L. Love, 2019). These BSLs center liberation (i.e., the ability to define and pursue one’s own goals free from oppression), social justice (i.e., equitable access to opportunities for advancement, cultural preservation, and safety under the law), and access to the full rights of all human beings by providing spaces for Black students to imagine possible futures despite the uncertainty of the present and without psychosomatic or socioeconomic confinement.
This chapter begins with developing a better understanding of the current realities for Black students in the United States and what they need—in addition to more Black school leaders—to thrive in school and beyond. These needs include more Black staff, acknowledgement of the negative impacts persistent of school resegregation, a critique of the traditional public school academic and disciplinary practices rooted in white supremacy culture, and addressing the dangers of internalized racial inferiority. Those BSLs who are engaged in addressing these issues, are committed to pursuing personal and collective liberation for themselves, their staff, and their Black students. The focus of this study’s inquiry was to gain a better understanding of how this liberatory mindset develops and how this epistemology is reflected in their staff. The liberatory mindset informs how these BSLs use their own educational and professional experiences with racialized oppression to inform their pedagogical decisions—including hiring, staff development, curricular decisions, and policy making (Lomotey, 2019). These decisions are intended to empower their Black students by providing them with academic and sociopolitical tools to develop full perspectives on their desired success while staying connected to the overall needs of their Black community. BSLs with a liberatory mindset find innovative ways to simultaneously co-construct a pedagogical alternative to white supremacy culture with their staff, while seeking to support their Black students in curtailing the development of internalized racial inferiority and nurturing the growth of a positive self-image to thrive (B. L. Love, 2019; Shujaa, 1998).

**Background**

Black students in the United States have consistently been denied access to high-quality, culturally relevant, and culturally affirming learning experiences in publicly operated, traditional K–12 school models (Anderson, 1988; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1994). However,
research on Black staff’s impact on Black students has shown that staff who can regularly understand and respond to these students’ often-neglected sociopolitical, emotional, cultural, and academic exigency contribute to higher Black student achievement and satisfaction with school (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Toldson, 2019).

Studies indicate that Black students thrive when they are taught by Black staff (Gershenson et al., 2022; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Schools with “larger proportions of both Black [and Hispanic] staffs correlate with more equitable [and frequent] placement of both Black [and Hispanic] students into gifted programs” (Grissom et al., 2017, p. 5). In addition, for Black students, exposure to Black staff increases the likelihood of (a) regularly attending school, (b) feeling cared for by their staff, (c) being referred to gifted programming in K–12, and (d) enrolling in college, while decreasing the rate of negative disciplinary encounters with school staff (Egalite & Kisida, 2017; Gershenson et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2017; Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

Black school leaders also can have a positive impact on Black students (Barshay, 2016; Eiland, 2022). As Black students remain disproportionally denied access to schools and to those school leaders who will most improve their academic, social, racial, emotional, and wholistic development, BSLs committed to their success despite the professional and institutional obstacles are a large part of the solution. These BSLs understand that the path to empowerment and self-realization for their Black students requires a pedagogical approach rooted in each student’s personal liberation. BSLs that lead with personal liberation as a requirement for Black student development are motivated by their reflections on their own school experience. The pedagogy emerging from the liberatory mindset is grounded in student empowerment, awareness, and analysis of social inequity, self-realization, and sociopolitical action (Freire,
This process of personal growth, awareness-raising, and professional evolution can occur during this own K-16 experiences or as a reaction to ideological differences with their school of employment (Horn, 2016). These leaders often face the challenge of aligning their ideology with compliance- or status quo-driven pedagogies provided by their employer (e.g., district, charter management organization, private school administration). Similarly, BSLs committed to creating empowering and liberatory spaces for Black children must contend with a legacy of practice in U.S. schools that has disempowered and damaged Black children and problematized their ability to succeed.

**Persistence of Segregation**

In New York City public schools, “74.6% of black and Hispanic students attend a school with less than 10% white students. Additionally, 34.3% of white students attend a school with more than 50% white students” (New York City Council Data Team, n.d., para. 2). As of 2021, nationally, the partitioning is even worse, with “70% of U.S. students attend[ing] their neighborhood public schools in racially segregated communities result(ing) in racially segregated schools” (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2018, p. 34). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), in 2021, Black students made up 15% of the national student population, whereas Black staffs reflected only 6% of the total teaching force and Black school leaders reflected only 9.5% of the school leader population. The ideal of “separate but equal” was a fictitious outcome of the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision for Black students. Most Black students attending U.S. public schools are not taught or led by adults who are best equipped to provide them with the strongest academic and developmental experiences leading to empowered life outcomes (Carrillo & Salhotra, 2022).
Homogenization and segregation of student populations in schools by race results in groups of students having vastly different learning experiences, learning opportunities, and, subsequently, academic and lifelong outcomes (B. L. Love, 2019; Lyiscott, 2019; United Negro College Fund, n.d.). The distribution of students and resources remains inequitable, and the distribution of school leaders has followed the same pattern. In addition, of those school leaders who identify as Black, the number who ascribe to a liberatory mindset in their school visioning, development of staff, and inspiration of children in an environment that demands Black student compliance is arguably infinitesimal (B. L. Love, 2019). These Black school leaders are relentless in their pursuit of liberatory learning opportunities and regular experiences for Black students, and they are the school leaders Black students need most.

**What White Supremacy Culture Tells Black Children**

Racial and cultural dominance in the form of white supremacy culture demands subservience and compliance for those who are not in the dominant group, no matter the impact or damage to their individual psyche or generational opportunities (Okun, 1999). Traditionally U.S. schools have “helped maintain racial domination by attempting to assimilate . . . excluding specific racial groups from educational opportunities . . . and creating educational spaces and curricular content riddled with white supremacy, physical and symbolic violence” (Diamond & Gomez, 2023, para. 4). The typical archetype of school leadership has focused on a uniquely white dominant expression of school and life success that lacks in understanding and affirming the cultural identities and experiences of Black children (Gray, 2020; Schukow, 2023). This state of leadership simply reinforces the distorted and limited view of Black students’ potential based on the imposed assumption they are less educable. This archetype can exist in non-Black and Black educators. D. Martin et al. (2019) described this internalized “ontological obstacle of
Blackness” (p. 34) as a state in which BSLs and Black educators have internalized misinformation about Black student potential and educability and created or maintained oppressive and limited experiences for Black students. In making the shift to a liberatory mindset, BSLs identify and validate the often ignored or historically omitted social assets of Black students. These leaders encourage their Blacks students to pursue personal fulfillment undistracted by hegemonic spaces that socially, academically, personally, and professionally seek to degrade their feelings of self-worth and collective power (D. Martin et al., 2019; Ortiz, 2020). Black leadership that reclaims its goals toward empowerment and liberation despite the distractions of assumed ineptitude defy the expectations of leading Black children to simply reproduce the white dominant status quo.

Breaking away from this deficit-laden archetypal model of school leadership, the perspectives of Gooden et al. (2023), B. L. Love (2019), Kelley (2002), and Delgado Bernal (1998) can be synthesized to develop an alternative model that applies specifically to Black school leaders. According to them, Black school leaders bring a liberatory mindset to their leadership style, school designing and staffing. BSLs with a liberatory mindset get greater clarity regarding their decisions around school design, hiring and staff development. These BSLs seek ways to reinforce self-love, self-determination and cultural heritage and culturally relevant practices in their schools that differentiates them from other Black school leaders. Aware of the dangers their Black students face regarding the development of their self-worth and sociopolitical awareness, BSLs adopt the three pillars of a liberatory mindset. These are co-constructing a pedagogical alternative to white supremacy culture with their staff, curtailing the development of internalized racial inferiority in their Black students, and nurturing the growth of a positive self-image in their Black students (B. L. Love, 2019; Shujaa, 1998). In this alternative
model of leadership, these three components combined with academic outcomes define student success.

**Dynamic Offerings of Black School Leaders**

Despite potential challenges presented by the system or institution employing them, BSLs with a liberatory mindset provide an environment that challenges the status quo by supporting Blacks students’ wholistic development while delivering culturally relevant instruction (Dumas & Ross, 2016; Khalifa, 2020). BSLs often find innovative ways to develop and deliver an ideological alternative to white supremacy culture for their students through the staffs. These leaders can imagine new learning opportunities and experiences for their students while addressing and combatting the messages of internalized inferiority and anti-Blackness that bombard Black students daily in U.S. society. BSLs employ many tools to create learning environments for Black children that combat and protect them from racial toxicity and promotion of internalized inferiority (Diem & Welton, 2020; McKinney de Royston et al., 2021).

**Supporting Black Children to Dream Bigger and More Critically**

For Black children, engaging in freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2002) cultivates their genius and potential, supports them in the resistance and rejection of stereotype threat or internalized inferiority, and affirms all aspects of their identity. The pathway to freedom dreaming first begins with a Black child’s ability to reclaim the right to imagine a future for themselves unencumbered by the lowered and negative expectations of the dominant society and to protect their mind from colonization. Brown (2017) asserted:

> Imagination is one of the spoils of colonization, which in many ways is claiming who gets to imagine the future for a given geography. Losing our imagination is a symptom of
trauma. Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together as Black people, is a revolutionary decolonizing activity. (p. 130)

Black leaders who are successful in creating environments where freedom dreaming is possible support Black students in preserving their heritage and their psychosomatic and socioeconomic health while developing critically conscious critiques of their school and society (Reyes & Morrell, 2008).

Critically conscious critiques allow BSLs, staff, and students to begin understanding the difference between equality and equity and their connections to liberation. *Equality* is defined as giving all participants in a given endeavor or social agreement the same resources, opportunities, training, and support in pursuit of a clearly identified goal (Loefler, 2006). This perspective behavior inevitably disadvantages those participants whose needs differ in pursuit of a goal, such as the needs of a person in a wheelchair at the foot of a set of steps in attempting to ascend to a higher floor. In contrast, *equity* purports to give each participant what they uniquely require or request in pursuit of that goal (Reyes, 2022). *Liberation* emerges as not the goal of equitable pursuits, but rather as a release for each participant to define and pursue their own goals free from subjugation or psychosomatic or socioeconomic confinement (Reyes, 2022). In the case of BSLs, Black students, and the Black community, liberation often entails reconnecting with existing traditions of Black joy, Black pride, Black power, Black resistance, and Black excellence in education and all aspects of society (D. Ross, 2022). By awakening untapped power, agency, connection, and cultural centering, BSLs can look beyond the definitions of Black student success created by the legacy of disenfranchisement in public schools. The liberatory mindset of BSLs pushes them to redefine learning experiences for Black students. Such liberatory learning opportunities protect and nourish the psychosomatic and sociopolitical
growth of Black students while giving them access to their own emerging liberatory perspectives as alternatives to the dominant culture’s desire to colonize their mind and limit their possibilities. Without environments to protect the health and identity-affirming development of Black children, the perils of an uninviting world can scantly be avoided. BSLs with a liberatory mindsets can serve as the architects of environments that lead Black students to mental, emotional, and intellectual freedom.

Restoring the Vision of Self-Determination

The notion of Black people reclaiming their agency and humanity is captured in the words of Marcus Garvey in 1938 when he shared, “We are going to emancipate [liberate] ourselves from mental slavery, for though others may free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind” (adapted by Bob Marley in “Redemption Song,” 1980). The semantics of emancipate versus liberate are debatable (Victorious Living, 2021), but the intention behind these words is just as important for Black students today as they were in the 1960s. The intention was not the transfer of mental or physical ownership (i.e., physical freedom) but rather the self-guided removal of mental, emotional, and sociopolitical constraints around thoughts and actions (i.e., self-determination). The “ourselves” of whom both Marcus Garvey and Bob Marley spoke are the minds and bodies of formerly enslaved Black people. For the BSL, the vision of liberation for themselves, their staff and their students are crafted on the notion that freedom is attainable when the conditions are aligned to that intention. A school leader’s vision for success in any school building is actualized by the staffs and staff they hire. Values transferred to students about their academic potential, self-worth, and identity affirmation are deeply dependent on both direct and indirect messages they receive from their staffs (Blakeney, 2005). These messages are linked to the definition and examples of success constructed and envisioned by the school’s leader.
Because school leaders cannot teach every child, they impact students’ school experience through the development of their staff. The staff are the frontline architects of the educational experience co-constructed with their school leader. Their efforts are orchestrated by the beliefs, intention, design of the school’s leaders. The staff’s performance is also evaluated against a standard of academic effectiveness and student growth that the school’s leader hold them accountable to. The school’s leader set the bar of success for and with staffs. Therefore, understanding the elements of their pedagogical development and that of those they hire is the central focus of this study.

**Purpose of the Study**

In U.S. education, Black students and communities have a tradition of fighting for access to educational and lifelong opportunities which historically have been denied due to white supremacy culture’s violent and oppressive reaction to their existence. Black school leaders with a liberatory mindset understand the critical importance of liberation, as the goal for themselves and their Black students. This is achieved through viewing equitable access to resources, opportunities, and support for Black children as a prerequisite for their personal liberation. BSLs with a liberatory mindset, due to their shared racial and cultural context, have the ability to create spaces that support the development of a strong self-image and self-determination in their Black students, because they have done it for themselves. In this study, I investigated the factors that influence the development of a liberatory mindset in BSLs and how this mindset influences their hiring and staff development decisions. This qualitative case study sought to answer the following research questions:

- How do BSLs interpret the liberatory mindset as they seek to create empowering learning environments for Black students?
o To what extent does this interpretation effect their selection of staff and collective professional development?

- How do BSLs and their staff align their understandings of the liberatory mindset to co-construct empowering learning environments for Black students?

Observing and analyzing the actions and intentions of BSLs who center liberatory pedagogical practices can uncover techniques for the development of staff and schools that promote the critical consciousness, confidence, sociopolitical awareness, self-advocacy, and positive self-concept of Black students (Gooden, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016; Randolph & Sanders, 2011). Through intentional pedagogical decision-making arising from the liberatory mindset, BSLs and their staff provide opportunities for the development of a counternarrative of Black academic excellence students can carry with them once they move to the next stage of their journey toward mental freedom and liberation. Unlocking possibility and arming Black students with all these elements of life preparedness clarifies the intent behind designing and amplifying liberatory learning spaces.

**Methodology**

I conducted this study using a case study approach to gain contextual and in-depth knowledge about two self-identifying BSLs (one cisgender man, one cisgender woman) with a liberatory mindset developed their pedagogical perspectives. The leaders jointly run a school focused on creating and maintaining liberatory learning experiences for Black students in Brooklyn, New York. The study focused on the two BSLs as well as 16 staff members of the school. The school leaders participated in two separate individual semistructured interviews, while the staff members participated in two community circles.
Staff members were invited to participate in the study by their school leaders. Given an overview of the time requirements and research questions, 16 staff members volunteered to participate. The BSLs reported that the staff that volunteered represented significant diversity in tenure, gender, subject area, and ethnic identity within the African diaspora. The BSLs were asked to reflect on their process of liberatory mindset co-construction with their staff. These reflections provided greater insight to the process each BSL experienced when developing their own liberatory mindset, and how it complements their shared perspective on pedagogical practices. The reflections also supported the identification of successes, challenges, and desired student outcomes that BSLs and their staff enlists when translating their collective liberatory mindset into pedagogical actions. Through reflecting on their own experiences in school, the BSLs and their staff crafted and refined a vision for the experiences they want their Black students to have.

**Theoretical Framework**

Through the application of a critical racial lens (Khalifa et al., 2016), which focused on understanding the impact of race on individuals and communities, this study examines the process by which Black school leaders with a liberatory mindset impart this mindset to their staff to support Black student success. Black critical race theory (BlackCrit; Dixson & Anderson, 2017; Dumas & Ross, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1994; k. ross, 2019) provided the framing necessary to delineate how BSLs’ lived, racialized experiences helped direct their pedagogical inquiry, training, and resulting critique of traditional learning experiences for Black students. Through counterstorytelling, BSLs integrate the historical truths of Black excellence and resilience into an alternative narrative of staff development that redefines Black student and school success beyond the confines of the dominant paradigm (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This
process of self-examination and alignment of pedagogical approaches between the BSLs and their staff can result in the creation of liberatory learning environments that center, celebrate, and protect the cultural heritage and psychosomatic health of Black students (Morsy & Rothstein, 2019; Reyes, 2022). BSLs with a liberatory mindset use their own experiences as counterstories to the expected dominant narratives of Black underachievement. The assumption is leaders are a sum of their triumphs, challenges, self-discoveries, trusted feedback, historical awareness, and motivation for liberation and improvement for their staff and students (Coleman & Campbell-Stevens, 2010). This landscape of formative opportunities reinforces the development and necessity of cultural intuition most successful BSLs use. Rocha et al. (2023) described this “scholar-practitioner cultural intuition” as a “tool that helps us navigate dominant culture and negotiate our multiple identities while also honoring student voices and experiences” (p. 17). These leaders take all these experiences and incorporate them into a clearer and evolving definition of their own purpose and of school success. BSLs are not constrained by the sole demands of the system, institution, or organization for which they work; rather, these leaders are committed to understanding and navigating their own liberation and creating learning environments that do the same for Black students.

Last, co-constructing liberatory educational experiences requires BSLs to consistently examine their practice and the practices of their staff. This examination includes an analysis of practice for alignment, opportunities for affirmation, and willingness to accept responsibility to constantly critique instructional content and practices (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Dumas and Ross (2016) described one aspect of BlackCrit as “[examining] how anti-blackness informs and facilitates racist ideology and practices” (p. 417). BSLs with a liberatory mindset consistently use the BlackCrit foundation of critical examination when analyzing their own school design,
policy creation, hiring, and instructional practices. These leaders are working closely with their staff to minimize any traces of policy or practice that reinforce notions of cultural or structural racism and may lead their Black students into developing internalized racial inferiority.

**Researcher Positionality**

As a cisgender Black man, former school leader, and trainer of school leaders, I reflected on my approximately 20 years of experiences as a student, a staff, 11 of which were spent as a school principal. For this study, my experiences enhanced my ability to relate to the leaders. I, too, have worked almost exclusively with Black (primarily African American and Caribbean American) students in New York City for the bulk of my professional career as an educator. I shared several identity markers and experiences with the two BSLs in this study.

Initially, my goal as a Black school leader myself was to create a school that ensured strong test results and conditioned students to be compliant and respectful. This pursuit left no room for student voice, agency, or identity development. This version of school success was given to me by the charmer management organization I was employed by and not developed in collaboration with the staff, community, or students. By the end of my 2nd year as a school leader, two truths were clear for me. First, the struggle for compliance led to a substantial amount of frustration and angst among staff and students. The staff felt like we were enforcing rigid boundaries on the students without helping them develop a sense of self-advocacy or independence. The students expressed the lack of freedom and self-determination that was resulting in feelings of disdain for their school experience. In addition, the more I exposed myself to models of school design created in the tradition of Black excellence and cultural affirmation, the less they resembled the school model I inherited. Along with my staff, I began to explore the challenges Black students had with our school and the traditional U.S. public school
system. We collaborated with members of the community to recenter relationships, identity development, and sociopolitical awareness as pillars of design success in our school. This development began by recreating the definition of excellence and achievement to one that reflected our emerging liberatory mindset. Through essential readings (e.g., hooks, 2022; Kunjufu, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lorde, 2018; Shujaa, 1998), conversations with Black educators versed in traditions of Black academic excellence, and my own desire to move from fear- and compliance-based leadership into empowerment and liberation, I realized the path to change was through the development of myself and staff toward a new set of goals. I aspired to create and maintain liberatory learning experiences for my students that defied the expectations of the larger educational system in which I worked. My pedagogical developmental process involved the interruption and abandonment of any instructional or curricular elements that reinforced feelings of marginalization or racial inferiority in my Black students.

At the time of this study, I had been out of the school building for over 10 years and had developed an even greater perspective on the system-level expectations of enforced compliance, lack of cultural affirmation, and inequitable academic opportunities for Black students. BSLs are still expected to be complicit in reinforcing these expectations and are often evaluated on their ability to do so. I noticed that without an effective intervention through the efforts of BSLs with a liberatory mindset, Black students are rarely able to find opportunities for consistently empowering learning experiences. Without the presence of adults who are committed to cultural and racial affirmation, empowerment, sociopolitical awareness, and self-determination, I found that Black students can become perpetual targets for all forms of disempowerment, dehumanization, and racial injustice.
The trust necessary to invite BSLs to share critical learning experiences in their professional trajectories stemmed from our shared experiential resonance with the role. With so mutual cultural and professional characteristics with the school leaders of this study, I initiated this exploration with cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) not afforded to other researchers across greater lines of difference. My own social and cultural knowledge supported my trust building to achieve vulnerability with the BSLs in this study (Loveless, 2023). I entered into fellowship with leaders in this study through shared cultural capital centered on the Black resistance and aspirations for empowering Black children (Yosso, 2005). The BSLs then granted me access to their truths related to the challenges and triumphs of being responsive to the needs of Black children in ways other schools may ignore. The humility with which I entered the space was also reflective of respect necessary when entering someone’s home. The connection BSLs who possess a liberatory mindset have with their physical space is one of deep reverence and fierce defense. This protectiveness comes from understanding that liberatory learning spaces for Black students, sadly, are rare and often targets of opponents who wish to ensure Black students remain compliant, misinformed, criminalized, and disempowered (Given, 2022; Lipman, 2007; Shujaa, 1998; Soja, 2010).

Significance of the Study

Too few BSLs are given both instructional and pedagogical decision-making rights in a school setting. More often, BSLs are called in to affirm policies of compliance or enable charter management organizations to show evidence of their success at “turning around” failing schools through zero-tolerance disciplinary practices—reminiscent of restrictive law enforcement practices that denote the school-to-prison pipeline—or through an academic program based solely on test performance (i.e., disregarding college readiness, student interest, cultural
appropriateness or content exploration; Diamond & Gomez, 2023; Solomon, 2002). Leaders seeking to shift their perspective on their purpose and success must confront the “expectation to maintain a culture of harmony [that restricts] their interrogation of racist ideologies and power relations that are embedded in the social, cultural, and political structures of schools” (Solomon, 2002, p. 174). While there is significant research on Black classroom staff engaging in this interrogation of their practice, there is little on Black School Leaders who intend to do the same schoolwide. Learning how Black school leaders acquire a liberatory mindset and/or how their thinking evolves over time is important because of the immense influential opportunities they have on the development of staffs of Black children. Ultimately, the liberatory impact of leaders on their staffs may lead to larger number of Black children having liberatory learning experiences throughout their K–12 school career. Learning how BSLs co-construct and align their liberatory mindset with their staff can support the creation of schools where Black students thrive. With a greater understanding of environments that promote Black student success, the staffing and pedagogical ethos of a school’s leader and staff are critical to examine and reimagine.

Ideally, the findings in this study and critical focus on counternarrative development will continue to activate and support BSLs seeking to develop or strengthen their own liberatory mindset. This study will also offer potential impacts and implications for aspiring Black educator preparation, while also presenting opportunities for future research.

**Summary**

The practices of BSLs with a liberatory mindset begins with their beliefs. These beliefs have been shaped in part by their own personal experiences with school. BSLs use these experiences, combined with their academic expertise, to create a vision for Black student success
that is a departure from the racist expectations most Black students experience in the U.S. public school system. This chapter outlined the rationale and significance of this study. In addition, my positionality as a researcher with a unique “insider–outsider” perspective was shared (Griffith, 1998). In the next chapter, the literature review provides a clear connection and rationale for the liberatory mindset as praxis for BSL and staff developmental alignment and pedagogical action.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Once we have identified that the systems in which we are currently existing repress the brilliance, creativity, and cultural expression of our students, we have an obligation to adopt something new.

–Matthew Kincaid, *Freedom Teaching: Overcoming Racism in Education to Create Classrooms Where All Students Succeed*

Black students in schools have experienced disempowerment through sociopolitical pressure, economic inequity, curricular miseducation, and intellectual violence, all of which can contribute to a mindset of inferiority and hopelessness and further disenfranchise them of opportunities to freely determine their own futures (Joseph et al., 2016; Kunjufu, 2004; B. L. Love, 2019; Shujaa, 1998). Racial segregation, inequitable distribution of resources, and meritocracy remain prominent in public schools and have a disproportionally negative impact on the experiences and outcomes for Black students. Even though research shows that BSLs can have a very positive impact on Black student success, these leaders remain scarce throughout the traditional public school system nationwide (Gooden et al., 2023). As a result, Black students remain disproportionally denied access to schools and to those school leaders who will most improve their academic, social, racial, emotional, and wholistic development. Through critiquing their own experiences as Black students in school, Black school leaders can conceptualize new, empowering, and affirming learning environments for future generations. Kelley (2002) urged all BSLs to establish a greater understanding of what “young activists are dreaming about” and “what are they fighting for” (p. 117) so they can inspire the next generation of Black students.
Generational experiences with schooling among Black communities reinforce feelings of powerlessness in Black children before they enter society formally as fully participating, adult citizens (Given, 2022; B. L. Love, 2019). The aspiration to reclaim the right and freedom to dream is unknown to a Black child who is left unprotected and unprepared for dominant society’s disdain for their attempts at equitable humanity. The legacy of fighting against these pressures is a pillar of the Black academic tradition in the United States (Anderson, 1988; DuBois & Aptheker, 2001; Washington, 1901; Woodson, 1933/2023). Dreaming of new futures for themselves and their Black students is an aspiration for BSLs in the United States (Given, 2022; Kelley, 2002). The motivation and training for this goal begins long before BSLs assume their roles. The conditioning on what the entity of school represents and offers to Black children has historically and currently been heavily influenced oppressive systemic pressures to a proxy for racial, economic and political caste is the United States (Royal & Gibson, 2017; Shujaa, 1998; Wilkerson, 2023; Williamson, 2005) retain requires an examination and understanding of their own epistemological evolutions (Gooden et al., 2023).

BSLs and their staff collaborate consistently on the expression of a liberatory mindset in their planning, pedagogical alignment, instructional delivery, and maintenance of school culture. This ongoing collaboration and co-construction have a direct influence on students’ ability to freedom dream in pursuit of their own ontological development (i.e., the constant shaping and reshaping of one’s understanding of their own existence and inherent brilliance; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2006; Ortiz, 2020).

A motivator for some Black educators is the knowledge that the depiction of BlackJoy, BlackGenius, BlackLove, and self-determination is noticeably absent from the ethos of the traditional public system (J. Bell & Sealey-Ruiz, 2023; B. L. Love, 2019). Literature that states
that Black school leaders can be effective in reversing this legacy of negativist school experiences for Black students and that the liberatory mindset is one pathway towards this outcome. In these following sections of the review the historical and contemporary contexts that shape the legacy of resilience and resistance among Black educators is shared as the foundation of the liberatory mindset. The foundation of historical and contemporary contexts supports the theoretical frameworks through which the main components of the liberatory mindset construct can be viewed and explained (Merriam, 1998). The theoretical frames of critical race theory (CRT) and Black critical theory (BlackCrit) combine to provide the scaffolding to inspect and examine various aspects of epistemological development and resonance among a team of Black educators (Calderón, 2011; Calderón et al., 2012; Coles, 2020; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Dumas & Ross, 2016; D. Harris, 2019). Counternarrative as a tenet of both CRT and BlackCrit acknowledges the collaborative creation of a view of Black possibility that is the antithesis of the prescribed hegemonic expectations of failure and disengagement of Black children in school. As a part of recreating the story of Black possibility and success in schools, Black educators have historically engaged in several expressions of resistance and educational alternative-making (Givens, 2022). These deviations from traditional oppressive and disenfranchising school practice are often based on four ideologies: Black liberalism, Black nationalism, BlackCrit, and Functionalism (Grant et al., 2016). Within and between these four ideologies is the desire to create systems and structures that empower Black children to persist despite the obstacles and coercive forces due to systemic racism in education. Research has shown that BSLs with a liberatory mindset endeavor to create liberatory learning spaces for Black children that empower, affirm, and educate (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Gooden et al., 2023; Kelley, 2002; B. L. Love, 2019). Black leaders with a liberatory mindset combine their own educational experiences with
the lessons from these ideologies to create a community of adults that share in their liberatory vision. Due to shared heritage and culture these Black leaders and their staff intuitively have a desire to create liberatory spaces for their Black students (Delgado Bernal, 1998). These liberatory spaces are aided by abolitionist pedagogical approaches that support the ability for Black student to envision the world and life they want for themselves, and to determine what are the actions need to attain it (B. L. Love, 2019). This process of cultivating new possibilities for the future has been called freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2002). Lastly, this review presents how some BSLs have assumed responsibility for maintaining the legacy of creating and sustaining liberatory spaces for Black students.

**Black Educational Realities in the United States**

The shared racialized experiences of Black students and Black school leaders begins with the origins of the current K–12 public educational system in the United States. This history has direct implications on the contemporary context of education for Black students. These shared experiences can help BSLs to gain greater insight on their own socialization and how they can safeguard Black students from the lure of assumed inferiority and underperformance in schools. This section presents the educational inequities that have existed historically, which Black school leaders will have experienced, and Black students continue to experience within a contemporary context.

**Historical Context**

Since the introduction of stolen and enslaved Africans to the United States, Black people have continued to persevere through many efforts, including refusal to relinquish the desire and ability to transcend their physical reality. By improvising intellectual expression and secretly preserving the communal values of interconnectedness, Black people across the diaspora, but
specifically in the United States, have continued the ancestral legacy of celebrating heritage, creativity, self-love, balance with nature, and a commitment to dream beyond their limits for future generations (Cox, 2022; Givens, 2022). Racism, anti-Blackness, and discrimination in Black life stretches back to the institution of slavery and has had a consistent presence throughout U.S. history. Despite consistent efforts by their enslavers to eliminate any hope or opportunities for self-determination enslaved Africans often gathered in their cabins or secretly in the woods to maintain community (Anderson, 1988; Hannah-Jones, 2021; Zinn, 2017). These gatherings evolved into makeshift schools and places of religious expression. The irrepressible commitment to preserving culture and humanity was secretly nurtured through these community gatherings.

The line between preacher and staff began to exceed the limitations given by the purveyors of slavery and the founders of the modern United States. Black people began to reclaim access to their ancestral and humanizing connections by repurposing the tools of compliance and repression forced upon them by their oppressors. Learning to read and reinforcing a self-concept that exceeded what the oppressor expected gave them the ability to communicate, advocate, and demand the country and the world take notice of the violence and injustices defining their treatment and circumstances. Resistance and self-advocacy were occurring while also manifesting their own circumstantially uncultivated potential for greatness in every form of human expression and interaction. These aspirations for freedom and the reclamation of their humanity were then, and remain as of 2024, difficult to achieve and sustain when the prevailing message about Black people—and those of the African diaspora worldwide—remains one worthy of ineptitude; unworthiness; criminalization; fear; and, for Black women in particular, sexual promiscuity (Aguilar, 2014; Harris-Perry, 2014; Taylor et al.,
2019). For Black students in the United States, these messages start from the moment they encounter and recognize the contortion and inauthenticity their caregivers must sustain to keep them safe from persecution based on their racial identity (Harris-Perry, 2014; Minor & Alexander, 2020). Black students are then forced to learn the duality or “double consciousness” of their existence—the aspirational freedoms of being recognized as full participants in the human experience and the socioemotional terrors of attempting to live beyond the razor-wired norms of anti-Blackness and white supremacy (DuBois, 1904).

Early in the exploration of Black intellectual possibilities, violently enforced social guardrails of slavery and Jim Crow confined Black expression and creativity to the performing arts, physical or athletic prowess, or adulation of a higher power in secret (L. Jones, 1963). Music, dance, and feats of physical dominance in the practice of the glorification of God were spaces where Black people were allowed to express some degree of fullness and their own humanity. According to the Library of Congress (n.d.), these clandestine moments were “informal gatherings of African slaves in ‘praise houses [or] outdoor meetings called ‘brush arbor meetings,’ ‘bush meetings,’ or ‘camp meetings’ in the woods away from the eyes of whites” (para. 2). These places were the only ones in which enslaved Africans could almost fully express their humanity and collectively nurture hope for a better future for their children. Since the introduction of Africans to the Americas, cultural suppression and dehumanization were used as methods of control. Enslaved African and African Americans from the fields to the big house to slave quarters performed their compliance and remained productive under the threat of violence, family separation, and death (Kendi, 2017).

The societal pressures and acts of violence inflicted on Black people based solely on their race and assumed inadequacies as full human beings manifests as an ideology of white
supremacy, which L. Jones (1963) described as “fanatical and almost instinctive assumption that [white] systems and ideas about the world are the most desirable, and further that people who do not aspire to them, or at least think them admirable, are savages or enemies” (p. 8). Once dehumanized, a society that views Black people as savages can justify the ongoing denial of educating or nurturing any form of development that does not serve the specific economic needs of the dominant white culture. Black educators and caretakers carry a legacy of overcoming obstacles in the design and delivery of intellectual and cultural emancipation. These learning spaces begin with the unrecognized communal development common in the secret Black school gatherings of the 17th and 18th centuries, during and after chattel slavery, and span to the shared beacons of African heritage preservation of the modern era (Anderson, 1988; Givens, 2022). Following the desegregation of schools, leadership and intentional design of Black schools were displaced and ignored, which resulted in a new, ungrounded purpose for schooling in the Black community. Training for compliance, reminiscent of the days of de jure slavery, ensured Black people remained a permanent underclass instead of enlightening successive generations to infinite possibilities for their life’s expression (Anderson, 1988; Legal Defense Fund, n.d.; Shujaa, 1998; Woodson, 1933/2023).

Undoubtedly, the purpose of school has been tied directly to the racial identity of the group being educated; additional complications have included socioeconomic status and other aspects of identity such as ability, gender, religion and sexuality. The legacy of white supremacy (Okun, 1999) has left an imprint on every possible attempt by Unites States decision makers to answer the fundamental question of school’s purpose. Beginning with education as imagined by Horace Mann in the mid-1800s, the Unites States public education system has consistently provided inequitable opportunities leading to inequitable life outcomes for Black students.
(Kozol, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 2006). By the turn of the 19th century, tools such as standardized tests and biased IQ testing, the latter championed by Brigham (1923), justified inequity across racial and gender lines. With access to knowledge, understood as the most powerful and indisputable way to create wealth, self-sufficiency, generational opportunity, and sociopolitical safety, educated people of color were seen automatically as a potential threat to the inequitable economic status quo maintained by whites—a fear reminiscent of southern planters during the Reconstruction (Anderson, 1988; Wollenberg, 1975). The benefits from education for advancement and enlightenment were privileges reserved for white men in the pre- and post-colonial United States. Fear, manifested as racial discrimination, an unfounded bias based on fraudulent science, greed, and violence (Anderson, 1988; Wollenberg, 1975) fueled the efforts of white men in the United States to protect their ability to control content, access to education, and the legitimacy of certain knowledge. The result has been a monocultural, aspirational norm that defines success through proximity to whiteness (and maleness). For people of color (and women), this spurious definition of success, in turn, has severely limited access to social mobility and threatens harm resulting from empowerment through the legal mechanics of social justice. Specifically for people of color, social legitimacy as defined by proximity to whiteness translates as a “postcolonial reconfiguration of power . . . allowing social and political manifestations of power to remain unchallenged” (Bouchard, 2020, p. 144). Any attempt to address, discredit, or reverse the impact of these inequities through social resistance or legal channels were met with fierce, often violent, opposition or minor concessions that did not disrupt the systemic goal of reproduction. These minor concessions only offered the illusion of bureaucratic attempts at fairness.
According to Adkins-Sharif (2020) and Smith (2021), BSLs must demand, outline, and incentivize systemic changes in and outside the realm of education. At the core, the morality of U.S. people has still not reached critical mass in favor of a deep interrogation of the historical and current impacts of the U.S. education system on the Black community. Without this analysis and reckoning, Payne (American Educational Research Association [AERA], 2017) feared the warning leveled by Justice Thurgood Marshall as one of four dissenters in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) was still valid and warranted. In his opinion, Justice Marshall stated:

> Today’s holding, I fear, is more a reflection of a perceived public mood that we have gone far enough in enforcing the Constitution’s guarantee of equal justice than it is the product of neutral principle of law. In the short run, it may seem to be the easier course to allow our great metropolitan areas to be divided up each into two cities—one white, the other Black—but it is a course, I predict, our people will ultimately regret. I dissent. (N. Jones, 1992, p. 52)

As Marshall indicated, the justice intended by the Constitution to be equally accessible to all citizens has been denied systematically to Black communities (DuBois, 1904; Shujaa, 1998). From *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to the present, the negative impact this denial of equity had on Black students began the moment they stepped into schools that lacked intention, design, or personnel to foster their success and empowerment. With almost 70 years since *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Black people in the United States have continued to fight for and protect the promise of authentic, free, quality, culturally affirming, and universal education as a reality for Black students.
Contemporary Context

As the previous section showed, Black students and their communities have historically and consistently been underserved by the U.S. public education system at every level. This situation persists even within contemporary society (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Kozol, 1991, 2005). As a result, currently, when Black students arrive in prekindergarten or kindergarten, they may have already begun to internalize negative perspectives about their own capacity to learn based on stereotypical messages projected through all modes of social communication. These negative perspectives begin during the formative stages of their self-image, concepts of beauty, worthiness, good versus evil, and even body image, particularly for Black girls (Bohn, 2022; Chavis & Johnson, 2023; Madhere, 1991). In 1940, Clark and Clark conducted the doll test which demonstrated how children of all races as young as 3 years of age associated Blackness with negativity, badness, lack of cleanliness, laziness, and untrustworthiness (Legal Defense Fund, n.d.). Black children, in particular, had already begun to show signs of lowered self-esteem and internalized inferiority before they entered school, indicating the power of these messages to shape how Black children saw themselves. White children who made the same associations with Blackness and later became staffs, school leaders, and educational policymakers, then controlled the design and maintenance of learning spaces for Black students (B. L. Love, 2023). Black communities, historically and currently, risk sending their children to schools that do not acknowledge the early seeds of internalized inferiority in Black students and are routinely staffed with staffs and leaders who reinforce the damage that began before these students arrived at school.

The impact of an unjust white supremacist educational experience is unleashed on the unprotected Black student, which represents most of the educational experiences for Black
students in the United States. For instance, Black students have a higher high school dropout rate (5.6% versus 4.1%) and a lower college persistence rate (56.1% versus 69.6%) than their white counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2021; Toldson, 2019). Through their K–12 experience, Black students have been confronted regularly by adults and content that uphold false assumptions drawn from prejudicial and biased social messages (Dixson & Anderson, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2006; B. L. Love, 2019). These experiences have reinforced and justified the treatment of Black students as less capable, lowered expectations, and criminalized students’ attempts to avoid the pernicious nature of the miseducation (Woodson, 1933/2023) they receive. B. L. Love (2013) characterized this emotional, mental, and socially violent treatment of Black students by state-sanctioned institutions of learning as spirit murder. Black school leaders with a liberatory mindset are uniquely positioned to break this cycle and continued to seek ways to protect Black children and connect them to their inherited values and history of intellectual excellence (Foster, 2020; Givens, 2022; B. L. Love, 2019; Grant et al., 2016; Shujaa, 1998). This unique positioning is due to their shared history of experiences with an inequitable educational system with current Black students. The efforts of BSLs are intentionally conducted in alignment with the communities they serve, and often live in themselves.

The ability for critically conscious BSLs to use their liberatory mindset to inform the development of staff members in primarily Black schools is often accompanied by the need to address misalignment or inadequacies with curriculum that leader and their staff are tasked with implementing. The dilemma of eliminating elements of compliance, social mobility, or social reproduction in the curriculum and school culture is shared by several communities of color in the hegemonic, neoliberal U.S. education system (Royal & Gibson, 2017). BSLs with a
liberatory mindset must navigate through these negative social and professional risks to cultivate pedagogical alignment with their staff grounded in counternarrative as an alternative to the status quo. Beyond the desire to establish and maintain access to the knowledge presented and coveted by white hegemonic institutions, Black schools led by BSLs with a liberatory mindset help students navigate the path to safeguarding their own humanity, beauty, balance, and creativity in the schools that they staff and create (Okeke-Adeyanju et al., 2014). The desire to preserve the humanity and intellectual freedom of their Black students has required Black leaders to explore gaps in their own educational experiences and fill them with the nontraditional counternarratives about their own abilities and rights to express their brilliance. Encouragement and protection of this developmental requirement can often be a solitary endeavor.

Because Black leaders only made up approximately 11% of K–12 school leaders nationwide as of 2021 (Taie & Lewis, 2022), they have lacked adequate or accessible mentorship opportunities. Such guidance could offer alternatives to leadership archetypes that have continued to oppress and disenfranchise Black children and communities. Without these opportunities to explore and reconnect with models of Black educational excellence, BSLs can be seduced easily by conventional signifiers of their stereotypically accepted lower intellectual capacity and weaker potential for self-determined (Carter, 2008; Monroe, 2011). Without an alternative or opportunity to define success individually and for the Black community, some BSLs have been left with only a desire for recognition and acceptance by employers who champion the dominant narrative of Black student submission and compliance (B. L. Love, 2019; Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2021) This surrendering of expectations to the desires of the dominant culture has ensured BSLs maintain the educational and social status quo (Lyiscott, 2019). Through the exploration and interrogation of their own social conditioning, BSLs can
begin to imagine and visualize new versions of their leadership and different expectations for their staff.

When BSLs do not integrate a higher purpose for school beyond content mastery, there are several risks. Among these risks, there has been a high probability that Black students will attend a school that (a) criminalizes their behavior (Toldson, 2008; Wright, 2017); (b) has staff who do not share their cultural, ethnic, or racial heritage (Grissom et al., 2015; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Perry, 2020); (c) is housed in a system incentivized to overclassify students as requiring special education services (Gordon, 2017); and (d) lacks equitable access to advanced science, technology, engineering, arts, or mathematical educational opportunities (Morrison et al., 2022; Pottiger, 2023; Scott-Elliston, 2022). This legacy of damaged schooling has defined the educational experience for those students who stay enrolled. School has become a chore instead of an opportunity, a reminder of students’ inadequacy due to their racial/ethnic identity. L. Foster and Tillman (2009) noted it is the responsibility of the BSL to ensure Black students reframe their concept for the purpose of school by creating an empowering liberatory experience.

**Operationalizing Black Intellectual Thought**

For educational practitioners, a critical step in addressing inequities in Black students’ learning experiences and outcomes has involved building schools, regions, and districts led by people committed to dismantling systems of oppression and discrimination. This section describes the liberatory mindset approach and the role that BSLs can play in adopting this approach towards empowering Black students. These leaders aspire to understand and operationalize the lessons of the scholars who have illuminated connections between culturally responsive cognition and sociopolitical thought (AERA, 2017; Gorski, 2016; Hammond, 2015). Collectively, sociopolitical awareness and culturally responsive pedagogy can serve as building
blocks for the creation of a liberatory mindset leading to learning spaces that generate empowerment for Black students. For BSLs, merging these two traditions synthesizes theory with practice, and, ultimately, the conceptual with the practical. According to Payne (AERA, 2017), a set of additional understandings that align and support the development of a liberatory mindset in these leaders should include:

- Understanding “race interferes with the ability to see capacity” (39:43) and “giftedness [in students] is not being seen by some people when it comes in a certain racial package” (40:07);
- Understanding “you cannot get change at scale [for children of color] unless the lack of change hurts somebody else” (43:19); and
- Understanding “children need adults who will be ruthless on their behalf” (44:04) and who will overcome the “fear of using [not losing] power for change” (43:55).

Leaders of this caliber and acumen who subscribe to these guiding tenets and apply them can create schools and districts with agile, self-aware practitioners and liberatory cultures that decenter Americanization or assimilation while promoting cultural pluralism.

Black intellectual thought has provided a basis for understanding African Americans’ enduring intellectual and political responses to achieve social justice through education throughout history (Grant et al., 2016). This attitude of defiance and resistance has formed an ideological response to collectively experienced trauma and injustice. Defiance and resistance expressed by African Americans toward prevailing inequitable public education policy has initiated numerous steps toward racial justice through legal intervention and community organizing. From Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) to Brown v. Board of Education (1954), to the development of citizenship schools by Septima Clark in the 1950s and freedom schools in the
1960s by the student nonviolent coordinating committee, the equitable and affirming education of Black students has remained a necessary priority for BSLs. These events have represented the tradition of Black communities and leaders resisting the notion that their children were not worthy of access to high-quality and culturally affirming education. Such a tradition has extended into 2024 through boycotts, civil disobedience, the Black Lives Matter movement, and countless post-1954 work on the ongoing need for emancipated and locally controlled education in the Black community (Kincaid, 2024; Rethinking Schools, 2020). Dawson (2001) identified these responses in thought and action by BSLs and organizers as Black visions, asserting that any “analysis of Black thought or ideology must consider the wholeness of Black people’s humanity . . . and document the [historical] and ongoing efforts of resistance and transformation in a world imbued with white supremacy” (p. 88). The resulting cultural and sociopolitical schema of Black people, therefore, has been keenly responsive to the environments to which they are exposed, and the historical contexts that inform Black identity and existence.

**Theoretical Framework for Black Leader Self-Becoming**

To explore the factors that inform and influence the creation of BSL ideology, one must first understand the epistemological and environmental factors that precede theoretical frameworks (Gooden, 2012; Khalifa et al., 2016). Self-becoming is a process of self-actualization, in which one’s purpose becomes clearer through the critical examination of life experiences and aligns with one’s role, beliefs, and aspirations. These factors manifest as the ideology or mindset a BSL holds and the practices enacted with staff for students. When a BSL has adopted a liberatory mindset fully, their vision for student success and the staff they hire address the “systemic [and] racially dividing barriers to access and achievement” (Gustafson et al., 2021, p. 12).
By nature, a BSL’s epistemology is dynamic because it is confronted constantly with new stimuli attempting to disrupt its connection to professional decisions that impact and empower staff and students. As BSLs reveal more about the motives behind traditional educational opportunities for Black students, they uncover incongruence at the systemic, structural, and interpersonal levels that could lead to debilitating internalized inferiority in themselves, their staff, and their Black students. This ongoing process of self-examination and evaluation of practices guided by a liberatory mindset and vision requires BSLs to “examine their personal and professional beliefs [and] build skills for identifying inequitable policies and practices” (Gustafson et al., 2021, p. 13) that limit their ability to improve equity for their Black students (Bogotch, 2002; Gustafson et al., 2021). Waite (2021) stated, “The bold, radical, transformative experiences required to develop culturally responsive school leaders who are actively anti-racist and social justice-oriented are achieved through powerful, transformative learning experiences informed by critical theory” (p. 80). These learning experiences for the leaders reinforce the importance of their own practices and strengthen their desires to ensure students have similar transformative learning opportunities (Sealey-Ruiz, 2020; Singleton, 2015; Waite, 2021). These experiences also inform how these leaders approach the development of their staff through co-construction and constant reflection. This is in contrast of didactic compliance driven instructional mandates based on the regurgitation by some traditional educators of racist preconceived assumptions that Black students have a low potential to succeed (Lhamon & Clarke, 2023).

According to Khalifa et al. (2016), BSLs who ascribe to a liberatory mindset confront and overcome threats to their self-image to access the intellectual and emotional fertility necessary to nurture and imagine freedom, dreams, and new possibilities for themselves, their staff, and their
student’s futures. Defiance and resistance join with self-reflection and ancestral appreciation to drive BSLs toward a path of understanding the difference between schooling and education (Shujaa, 1998). Schooling is a process of social indoctrination intended to preserve the socioeconomic status quo; it is also a process that creates self-imposed restrictions on Black student imagination and assumed educability (Minor & Alexander, 2020; Shujaa, 1998). In contrast, education is a mechanism to support the development of sociopolitical awareness and ensure the “transmission from one generation to the next knowledge, values, aesthetics, spiritual beliefs, and all things that give a particular group its uniqueness . . . to prevent its demise and/or erasure” (Shujaa, 1998, p. 15). The creation of schools that possibly focalize compliance-driven socially reproductive schooling versus empowering and culturally affirming education is heavily influenced by the BSLs’ emerging liberatory mindset. The BSL begins to see their place in the lineage of Black agitators who were unpleased with the educational opportunities or resources offered to their children and unwilling to relent in the pursuit of better, more racially, culturally, and linguistically responsive alternatives.

Many current and aspiring BSLs go through this process of emerging from an ideological chrysalis to greater clarity in their purpose while employed by the very educational institutions that require their critique (Horn, 2016; B. L. Love, 2019). Alternatively, these revelations may have occurred during BSLs’ K–12 educational experience or as part of their post-K–12 awakening period as they explored the possibilities of becoming a professional educator. Furman’s (2012) social justice framework includes a component for personal work, defined as “deep, critical, and honest self-reflection in which [aspiring] school leaders explore their values, assumptions, and biases in regard to race, class, language, sexual orientation, religion, and
disability” (p. 119). This self-reflection becomes inescapable for BSLs as they work to dismantle oppressive beliefs and practices in themselves before attempting to guide other educators.

The personal work necessary for BSLs to continue to develop and nurture their own liberatory mindset also requires the fundamental pursuit of mastery of technical requirements related to teaching, learning, and leading. This holistic view of leadership development affords BSLs greater opportunities for influence. These opportunities for greater access and influence are then besieged by a growing ideology questioning the definitions of success that reinforce existing social order. The BSLs’ newly emerging ideology becomes anchored in the inheritance of Black intellectual thought sown and documented beginning over 400 years ago with the presence of enslaved Africans in the United States. This knowledge manifests as four primary Black traditions of intellectual thought and responses to colonialism and white hegemony: (a) Black liberalism, (b) Black nationalism, (c) BlackCrit, and (d) functionalism (Grant et al., 2016). As the aspiring or transforming BSL moves toward redefining the learning experience for their students, they must consider how these ideologies inform their own epistemology and are reflected in their school design.

**Black Liberalism**

Black liberalism attempts to critique, aggressively and severely, dominant U.S. educational institutions that continue to perpetuate inequity in opportunity and outcomes for Black students, yet it holds steadfast to hope that these very institutions can ultimately achieve justice for Black students (Grant et al., 2016). The overarching belief is that blaming and pressuring the educational system and illuminating the moral imperative for equity and justice for Black students will prove successful. These educators aggressively redirect the focus on disproportionality in Black student achievement from deficits in the students themselves to
deficits in staff expectations, cultural responsiveness, and negative perceptions of Black student humanity (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Will, 2022).

**Black Nationalism**

Black nationalism rejects any possibility of Black justice or empowerment in a system that was never designed to promote Black success, equity, dignity, or justice. Instead, Black nationalists have purported Black people can only solve their educational dilemma through completely separate educational institutions that are self-reliant and self-directed (Kharem & Hayes, 2005; Williamson, 2005), “independent of white-dominated social structures and epistemologies” (Grant et al., 2016, p. 18). The goal is for these institutions to thrive unaffected by hegemonic marginalization by focusing on solidarity and concretizing an African-centered alternative point of view on all forms of knowledge sourcing, transmission, and social phenomena (Rashid, 2012). These sentiments are echoed and supported in the early works of activist Malcolm X, Pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey, author Sam Greenlee, author–activist–lawyer Angela Davis, and countless others who were and remain a part of the Black nationalist movement.

**BlackCrit**

Critical theory seeks to understand how other social structures such as race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect to reproduce inequity in opportunities and outcomes for Black students in the school environment (Capper, 2015). However, this study drew from the Black intellectual tradition of BlackCrit and explored how it manifests as freedom dreaming, cultural intuition, and abolitionist pedagogy. BlackCrit specifically highlights the distinct experiences, perspectives, and challenges that Black individuals face within the overarching framework of CRT (Calderón, 2011; Calderón et al., 2012; Delgado Bernal, 2002). It involves a thorough exploration of
systemic racism, racial injustices, anti-Blackness, and the impact of legal and societal structures on Black communities (Dumas & Ross, 2016; k. Ross, 2019). D. Harris (2019) shared a rationale for the explication of BlackCrit used to magnify the dynamics experienced by Black people as opposed to solely relying on CRT for exclusive guidance:

BlackCrit is necessary because CRT cannot adequately analyze the specificity of the black, how anti-blackness is different from white supremacy, how it informs racist ideology and practice, how the counter stories of black experience construct black subjects and positions them in more detailed ways (para. 7).

BlackCrit scholars such as Dumas and Ross (2016) and Coles (2020) asserted that progress toward racial and educational justice cannot be made through efforts in the current system. Without confronting the hegemonic nature of current constructions of Blackness to ultimately dismantle capitalism and other oppressive systems, the despair of the Black community and its students in schools will continue as the definition and motivation for individual success. Through counternarrative named “liberatory fantasy” (k. Ross, 2019), BlackCrit reinforces the legitimacy of the Black existence absent of “tension with the neoliberal multicultural imagination” (p. 2a) or the endemic threat of anti-Blackness defined as the “broader antagonistic relationship between blackness and humanity” (p. 2b). By centering the unique necessities Black people have in pursuit of liberation, BlackCrit’s lens seek to ensure that the current design of schools be revamped to mitigate damage and conceptualize liberatory learning spaces for Black children.

**Functionalism**

In functionalism, “social justice occurs through African Americans’ ability to master the normative technical and linguistic codes of the dominant American culture” (Grant et al., 2016,
Better navigation of the current educational and sociopolitical systems will lead to the illumination of more opportunities for change in the pursuit of Black justice—an inclusive expression of liberation that uses the act of addressing and dismantling anti-Blackness as a model for combating all forms of marginalization, identity-based hate, and disenfranchisement. A functional approach seeks alignment and empowerment across all lines of difference and the roles these various identity groups play in maintaining the status quo or in building solidarity to combat all forms of oppression.

Although these four ideologies may appear distinct initially, they all spawned from a collective understanding by Black people that humanity and justice are rights they must pursue relentlessly. If left unaddressed, the experience of their children will never be better than their own. BSLs must determine which approach or combination of approaches fits best with their beliefs, can be navigated within the guardrails of their employment, and ensures the pedagogical experience for staff accurately aligns with their own ideological desire for the creation of liberatory learning spaces (Suarez, 2023). Suarez (2023) further shared “Black leaders have an unusual capacity for alignment and vision, development and implementation of strategic functions, and the ability to mobilize resources toward goals” (p. 3). The four ideologies emerged from an unwavering call in the Black community for a commitment to uplifting race, one generation at a time, and forming the foundation for more innovative manifestations and innovations for Black educational justice (Grant et al., 2016; Woodson, 1933/2023). These ideologies have continued to be employed at various magnitudes across the Black community in the United States.

In the next section, the instructional and pedagogical actions that exemplify the liberatory mindset: freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2002), cultural intuition (Calderón et al., 2012), and
abolitionist pedagogy (B. L. Love, 2019) will be explored. Clear connections will be drawn between the conceptual foundation of BlackCrit’s counternarrative with the instructional and administrative expectations of BSLs and their staff. The final section will describe the components of the aspirational liberatory learning space for Black children and a summary of the process of getting there.

**Tools for Black Critical Leadership**

As their critical consciousness becomes activated, BSLs begin to better understand the possibility of uplifting race from the historical efforts of Black educators such as Woodson, DuBois, and Coppin (Grant et al., 2016). This exposure helps the BSL calibrate and test their ongoing adaptation of the liberatory mindset to their own lived educational experiences from grade school through postsecondary school. The BSLs can then begin to understand and connect the seeds of their own liberatory mindset cultivation, and better illuminate their self-designed purpose for being educators.

How a BSL thinks about their own pedagogy reflects their understanding of the sociopolitical and historical factors that shaped the condition into which they were born and came to understand throughout their student and professional careers. In addition to preserving heritage, a BSL’s epistemology reflects how they have responded to their circumstances. This response is understood through a BSL’s counternarrative reflexivity, which informs how to nurture this process in Black students. As such, the cultural and sociopolitical schema of Black students is keenly responsive to the environments designed by their BSLs (Bazini, 2022; A. Ross et al., 2016). The development and refinement of a liberatory mindset in BSLs has historically been intended to preserve the integrity and cultural assets of the community through transmission to Black children (Lloyd et al., 2022; Shujaa, 1998).
Given the theoretical foundation of BlackCrit theory that forms the backbone of the liberatory mindset, ongoing co-construction with staff can occur through calculated pedagogical professional development decisions made by the BSL (Coles, 2020; Gooden et al., 2023). The BSL can communicate a vision for learning experiences and student success to be delivered to Black students through the efforts of their staff. The BSL can use tools and instructional approaches that honor their commitment to education as an act of liberation for Black students. Freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2002), cultural intuition (Calderón et al., 2012), and abolitionist pedagogy (B. L. Love, 2019) combine to provide a fabric of cultural assets, techniques, and habits that supports BSLs’ development and co-construction of theoretical and pedagogical perspectives (i.e., liberatory mindset) to students through their staff. Visioning, reclaiming nonhegemonic learning connections, and protecting Black humanity reflect the Black traditions of heritage preservation and resistance ideology, otherwise phrased as, “indignant, empowered responses to injustice” (Hayes & Robinson, 2021, p. 5). In addition, these techniques and perspectives support the synthesis of personal and communal experiences to inform recommendations for educational practices that impact Black students.

**Freedom Dreaming**

Through exploration and reflection on personal and professional experiences, BSLs can begin to confront and interrogate several options that potentially align with their blossoming liberatory approach to teaching and leading. The pragmatism driving a BSL is nestled in their ability to imagine educational possibilities that differ from their students’ current reality. The ability to imagine or freedom dream (brown, 2017; Kelley, 2002) about transformed learning experiences and outcomes for Black students is a central tenet of the pedagogical approach often explored and employed by BSLs. Freedom dreaming is a practice within the BlackCrit
framework that asks Black people to envision and collectively radically reimagine a future that is liberated from oppressive systems and structures, where all can thrive (Kelley, 2002). The first step in constructing these images and archetypes of Black student success is to understand deeply “the mechanisms that reproduce structural inequity” (B. L. Love, 2019 p. 103). BSLs may spend substantial time as learners themselves observing and reflecting on the response to injustices from all marginalized groups of people. These school leaders understand they must become familiar with the legacy of their own educational denial and marginalization to design an alternative for students with their staff.

The aspiration of freedom dreaming is to construct a reality in which those who have been historically denied can gain access to genuine opportunities for the expression of their humanity. In this manner, freedom dreaming is the foundational conditioning BSLs experience as a precursor to considering the application of any theoretical framework in their practice. B. L. Love (2019) further unpacked this conditioning as a necessary tool for any school leader who seeks to address the oppression and disproportionality experienced by marginalized groups of students:

Freedom dreaming gives staff [and leaders] a collective space to methodologically tear down the educational survival complex and collectively rebuild a school system that truly loves all children and sees schools as children’s homeplaces, where students are encouraged to give this world hell. (p. 102)

She emphasized the process of deconstructing and reimagining a vision of educational excellence through freedom dreaming as essential for staff and leaders before they move to action. B. L. Love’s (2019) emphasis on the creation of “homeplaces” also signified the importance of infusing learning environments with elements of safety, cultural familiarity, affirmation,
sociopolitical relevance, love, and joy, which are consistently and intentionally missing for marginalized students in unexamined hegemonic school environments.

To make freedom dreaming possible and inform school design, BSLs must apply knowledge gained from their own educational experiences and new leads drawn from traditions of Black intellectual thought to guide them to the theoretical frameworks that best serve their purpose. Unlike the traditional, dominant research practices of defining the problem first and then seeking solutions, freedom dreaming pushes the BSL to imagine the conditions for a reality in which the problem never manifests and then create those conditions through the examination and refinement of the current reality (Brown, 2017; Kelley, 2002). Freedom dreaming allows the BSL to embrace the shared goal of liberation from the four traditions of Black intellectual thought while giving space to blend and iterate on the interpretation of their approaches.

Freedom dreaming provides a filter for BSLs’ analytic processes to help them situate pedagogical approaches affirming their critical ideology while remaining vigilant to false interpretations of Black student humanity and potential.

BSLs, as practitioners and not researchers, interpret the critical theory embedded in each tradition and often land in a space of abolitionist pedagogical action. Abolitionist pedagogy draws from (a) the aggressive and necessary critique of white supremacy culture in the United States central to Black liberalism; (b) the rejection of white-dominated social structures and epistemologies (Grant et al., 2016) by Black nationalism; and (c) the need to dismantle capitalism and the hegemonic nature of current constructions of race, gender, and class illuminated by critical theory. B. L. Love’s (2019) synthesis of these elements described an approach to educating Black students, and leading educators who teach them, that combines the responsibility of uplifting race while also remaining resistant to any infraction or evidence of
injustice or dehumanization. By giving the world “hell,” B. L. Love (2019) asserted, as did Payne (AERA, 2017), Black educators must equip their students with context and culture of resistance and also highlight historical examples and current opportunities to apply this knowledge. BSLs then focus on creating schools that operate as spaces for critique, rallying, healing, heritage preservation, solidarity promotion, and an ongoing practice of liberatory humanism.

**Cultural Intuition**

Cultural intuition, based on Chicana feminist epistemology, explains how a researcher can use the synthesis of their “personal experience, collective experience, professional experience, communal memory, existing literature, and the research process itself” (Calderón et al., 2012, p. 516) to inform their analysis, conclusions, and resulting recommendations. Delgado Bernal (2002) defined the personal experience component as an aggregate of “ancestral wisdom, community memory, and intuition” (p. 567). Cultural intuition provides an opportunity for a community of scholars to incorporate “politics of spirit into the research process” (Calderón et al., 2012, p. 516). The connection to community among Chicana feminists exposed a shared influential experience that had not been recognized by academia. Calderón et al. (2012) stated “cultural intuition requires Chicana/Latina scholars to understand ourselves in relation to our bodies, sexualities, place, communities, current sociopolitical realities, and a commitment to social change” (p. 535). Once a name is given to the importance of recognizing and reclaiming the influence of personal experiences and collective memory on the study of academic literature, the research process has encouraged an expansion in the ways to address Chicana feminist challenges. Cultural intuition became a tool of reflexivity that allowed researchers to, “theorize alternative methodologies for [social] educational research” (Calderón et al., 2012, p. 9) such as
the usage of *testimonios* (i.e., first-person narratives within the context of social activism) or fully participatory action research as alternative educational methodologies (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

BlackCrit and CRT scholars alike have exhibited and practiced the process of cultural intuition as a vehicle for engaging multiple sources of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Dumas & Ross, 2016). Cultural intuition also closely resembles critical spirituality as “way of naming a desire to work with what is meaningful in the context of enabling a socially just, diverse and inclusive society” (Dantley quoting Gardner, 2011, p. 77). Dantley (2010) expanded on this definition of critical spirituality as a framework that:

- dares to challenge leaders to serve as organic intellectuals and civil rights activists who have engaged in the spiritual exercises of critical self-reflection, deconstructive interpretation or hermeneutics, performative creativity and transformative action, and the four components of critical spirituality. (p. 214)

Although both frameworks share connections in the realm of personal awareness, identity, and the human experience, cultural intuition offers additional cultural dimensions, beyond spirituality, as factors that contribute to personal development and self-awareness (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Cultural intuition’s dimensions of cultural context, identity, heritage, knowledge of social norms, and immersion in Black spirituality support the process of critical self-reflection necessary for the liberatory mindset to begin to emerge.

BSLs use cultural intuition to support the design of developmental opportunities for their staff. The BSL’s responsibility is to ensure their staff embraces the BlackCrit tenet of liberatory fantasy or counternarrative to understand “[the] significance of the ideology associated with Antiracist Pedagogy” (Blakeney, 2005, p. 125). Professional development, which may include
formal sessions, co-observation, focus group, and racial caucus meetings, must also “[avoid] reduction of critical theory to method and technique” (Blakeney, 2005, p. 127). To attempt changes in behavior without fully excavating beliefs and bias would lead to perfunctory improvements in the learning experiences for Black students. Schools and their leaders best serve Black students when they create a level of consciousness capable of creating a community of learners based on fluid and equitable interactions, making it indicative of antiracist pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994; B. J. Love, 2000).

A culturally intuitive approach to research centers equally valued knowledge from conventional text sources and lived experiences in the creation of a framework to guide research design and analysis. BSLs use this practice in their establishment of liberatory professional developmental opportunities for staff. Few school leadership development programs have not required aspiring leaders of any racial identity to draw from their lived experiences in substantial ways when honing their emerging leadership skills (Edeburn, 2022; Gooden et al., 2023; Moorosi, 2020). Cultural intuition justifies and professes the absolute necessity for researchers and school leaders to integrate their values, heritage, and somatic knowledge into their analysis and design. BSLs may improve their ability to create successful liberatory spaces only if they can ignore the limitations or expectations of the traditional white heteronormative school leader archetype. Leadership development conceived in this way has given researchers and practitioners permission to incorporate politics of spirit into the research, design, and growth processes.

Cultural intuition also ensures the affirmation of identity and reinforcement of self-love of the researcher and the leader. These two phenomena are rarely acknowledged as an integral part of the research or staff development design process. However, without such recognition, the researcher or designer may internalize a positionality outside of accepted forms of the academic
process and expression. This intellectual marginalization can invalidate the research or prevent
the designer from pursuing solutions outside of the dominant perspective. Cultural intuition, once
embraced, fuels the motivation and rationalization that solutions to challenges faced by
marginalized groups require their leader’s full presence and participation. Full presence for the
BSL exceeds the requirements outlined by traditional educational expectations and spans into the
realm of spiritual inheritance and possibility. If the proverbial “master” has complete control
over the mindset of the leaders, then it becomes impossible to rebuild or create a new “house”
using the “master’s tools” (Lorde, 1984). BSLs with a liberatory mindset, historically and
contemporarily, promote resistance in the minds of their Black staff, leading to newly aligned
and affirming learning environments for Black students.

However, before digging deeper into the Black leader’s responsibilities, challenges for
Black students in their liberatory learning spaces must also be examined (Givens, 2022).
Classroom design and educator expectations impact the aspirational goals, academic experiences,
and sociopolitical awareness of Black students significantly (Johnson, 2022; Orum & Cohen,
1973). Without Black leaders who possess a liberatory mindset, Black students are subject to
“persistently racist environments” (Johnson, 2022, p. 52) that hinder their ability to develop
healthy self-concepts and critique the systemic and institutional factors designed to promote their
demise.

**Abolitionist Pedagogy**

Abolitionist pedagogy focuses on the restoration of humanity in all children (Blakeney,
2005; B. L. Love, 2019), and BSLs draw upon this set of practices and approaches to teaching to
unite their ideological intent with the developmental needs of educational practitioners—their
staff—and create truly liberatory learning spaces for Black students. This pedagogical practice
draws from the abolitionist theory—an extension of BlackCrit—which asserts many systems and structures need to be destroyed and invites us to create new networks and communities of freedom (Blakeney, 2005; Cabral, 2023; Thompson, 2012). Aligned with the perspective of Black Nationalism, abolitionist educators recognize the despair experienced by Black children under the current model of *schooling* and conceptualize alternatives that eradicate the school-to-prison-pipeline while redesigning learning environments that promote the overall success of Back children (and all children; B. L. Love, 2019; Miller, 2020).

Abolitionist pedagogy anchors the inquiry of this study in the developmental praxis of BSL instructional ideology. Abolitionist pedagogy also adduces from BlackCrit the compounding impact of race on Black children across gender, class, sexuality, geographic location, and ability. Despite legal solutions sought throughout educational history, abolitionist pedagogy seeks to respond to the negative impacts of racism and capitalism that have persisted in schools and school systems. BSLs begin to develop the ability to interpret the best applications of abolitionist pedagogy in their given geographic contexts. These leaders employ various modes of resistance in their own development while designing schools that protect Black aspirations and share Black familial wisdom and heritage (Pham, 2021; Shujaa, 1998; Smith, 2021). Additionally, these Black leaders seek to equip Black students with the tools of resistance and navigation to maneuver hostile spaces, and to be successful despite being unsupported (Yosso, 2005). BSLs, as abolitionist pedagogues, understand traditionally designed and federally or state-controlled public schools were never intended to affirm the needs of or provide developmental opportunities for Black students in these areas of resistance and self-determination (Marsh, 2016).
The power of imagination is crucial for BSLs as they design and maintain liberatory learning spaces for Black students. This imagination (i.e., to imagine something better and new for the next generation) allows BSLs to freedom dream and originates from the cultural heritage of Black resistance and Black excellence in education. Moving from dream state to active state, BSLs also draw on their own synthesized and curated instincts that originated in survival and evolved into a desire to thrive.

**Understanding the Possible Solution: The Black Leader’s Response and Responsibility**

Royal and Gibson (2017) stated, “Students from historically marginalized communities need education that will develop their critical thought processes related to those issues that are impacting their current and future lives, homes, and communities” (p. 10). The question regarding the purpose of school has directly influenced the socioeconomic, political, educational, and liberatory direction of both people of color and other marginalized groups since the inception of the United States. The history of education in the United States must also include an intentional examination of social science, political evolution, economic influence, and limits of human morality. Given the options of social mobility, social reproduction, or social justice as answers to the question of purpose, the U.S. education system has historically been confined to social reproduction “of the American racial, cultural, and socioeconomic caste system which only strengthens the white, wealthy power structure” (Royal & Gibson, 2017, p. 2). This explanation was exemplified in the historical, political debate between Washington and DuBois, with Dubois (1904) concluding that anyone against, “the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds . . . must be unceasingly and firmly oppose[d]” (para. 4).

Shujaa (1998) defined schooling as the “indoctrination into the dominant culture (social reproduction)” (p. 18); in contrast, education “involves learning that transmits the cultural
uniqueness of non-dominant groups to the next generation [learning for social justice]” (p. 343).

Despite this perspective of traditional schooling as a tool of control (Anderson, 1988; Wollenberg, 1975), educational decision makers for more than 150 years have failed to consistently confront the consequences.

In the next section a more wholistic description of liberatory spaces will be shared in addition to the connections to critical special theory. Following, the tension between school as place to reinforce the social and economic status quo versus school as a place to empower Black students to be self-determined will be presented.

**Description of Liberatory Learning Spaces**

As of 2024, in public schools, “Eurocentric standards, values, and traditions are imposed on students of color as a barometer of their deservingness for full humanity” (Lyiscott, 2019, p. 30), and BSLs are expected to design schools and hire staff that preserve this expectation.

Liberatory learning spaces defy the notions of rugged individualism as the cornerstone of individual success and the path to achieve the highest expression of happiness, individual power (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Paris & Alim, 2017; Shujaa, 1998). These liberatory spaces embrace the notion of self-empowerment through reconnection with the power of the collective (Hammond, 2021; Myatt, 2022). An individual is not successful if another individual of the same origin remains ignorant or resistant to their own enlightenment and reject the continuing tradition of self-fulfillment through cultural sustainability (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Liberatory spaces are not welcome in social, political, and economic structures anchored in the need for a dominant group and an oppressed class. Humanity, harmony, and mutual respect are the antithesis of white supremacy. Equity, then, becomes the conceptual foundation for Black educators and school leaders to understand the transition from domination to liberation.
(Freire, 1972). The goal for a BSL with a liberatory mindset is equity, not in the form of diverse representation, but as fully inclusive access to opportunities for self-reliance and agency. Equity allows BSLs to use their own developmental experiences, form a pedagogical approach to their school design, and execute an emergent plan for Black student success (Brown, 2017).

Black educators take the lessons from their own lived experiences and maintain the momentum toward personal liberation begun by caregivers in the homes and communities of their Black students. Moore, a Black educator of over 30 years, explained, “Black [educators] in the South—including many of [Moore’s] mentors—had played a key role in seeding the civil-rights movement by helping their students in Black, segregated schools develop pride in their intellect and a sense of collective responsibility” (Rizga, 2020, para. 2). These educators adapted to the ever-evolving manifestations of white cultural and political dominance and exclusion to ensure a path toward empowerment for their students, their staff, and themselves. These school leaders are “mechanisms for advocacy for African American school children” (Walker, 2019, p. 8). They maintain hope for the next generation of Black children to gain greater access to their own expression of fully realized humanity. These educators equip their students with access to their own brilliance, beauty, and right to joy and love, while relentlessly preparing them to navigate the world without their guidance.

For those individuals who are “living while Black,” the techniques of resilience and rationale for resistance are essential concepts to carry and employ as regularly as calculating personal finances or contemplating the totality of Earth’s biomass (DuBois, 1904; B. L. Love, 2019; Shujaa, 1998; Woodson, 1933/2023). In the liberatory spaces BSLs and their staffs create, curiosity and contempt of systemic injustice drive intellectual exploration and critique. The concept of self is emboldened and permitted to invade all aspects of knowledge consumption.
The combination of sociopolitical awareness and the desire to acquire personal and collective freedoms Black people are continually denied define the liberatory consciousness of BSLs. The full exploration and expression of this mindset as an educator and a sociopolitical influencer is a reality exemplified by Black educational leaders like Woodson, Locke, and Cooper (Grant et al., 2016).

The ability of critically conscious Black leaders to share and refine their ideology (i.e., liberatory mindset) with Black staff members while addressing the undeniable misalignment of inherited white dominant pedagogy (i.e., compliance or social reproduction) has been a reality in the hegemonic, neoliberal U.S. education system. Merolla (2010) stated “the educational system plays a role in the reproduction and perpetuation of social inequalities” (p. 4). Other researchers have echoed this sentiment. McNeil (1986) reinforced the “two conflicting purposes of school” (p. 3) as either preparation for economic production or simply to educate. Gooden (2012) more acutely stated when Black students enter schools that seek to control them, the “goal or mission to educate . . . leads the school into a conflict with itself” (p. 19). BSLs must navigate this tension and form a rationale for learning experiences for Black students that promote a narrative counter to labor preparation and intellectual control.

**Summary**

Black parents and caregivers are the first messengers of history, values, joy, love, and norms of survival for Black children. When Black children arrive at school and are fortunate to have Black staff and leaders who embody the liberatory mindset, these messages of cultural significance and intellectual empowerment can be amplified (Gershenson et al., 2022; Grissom et al., 2021; Hobbs, 2020; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). These educators reveal to Black students their collective power and right to communal freedoms. This reclamation of generational humanity in
Black schools is only possible if the designers of those schools recognize the importance of its pursuit alongside intellectual development. These learning spaces permit Black students to understand the circumstances they have inherited without feeling powerless to change them (Shujaa, 1998). As a result, these learning spaces become liberatory spaces for Black students, where they can continue to dream of more wholistic freedoms that have been mercilessly denied and courageously rediscovered over more than 400 years of U.S. history (Anderson, 1988).

This literature review highlighted historical and contemporary perspectives on Black educational realities, the elements of liberatory mindset development BSLs may experience and the unique and significant role that Black school leaders with this mindset can play when creating schools that can build Black student success. As BSLs gain greater insight into the challenges experienced in their own educational journey, they can better equip themselves and their staff to thrive on their own journeys. For a BSL, the integration of their liberatory mindset into the pedagogy of how they recruit, select, develop, and galvanize their staff strengthens the capacity for intellectual, emotional, cultural, and spiritual safety for Black students. However, there is little research on Black school leaders’ own journey towards this ideological development and even less conducted on the process by which they transmit this mindset and co-construct liberatory pedagogy in schools.

For BSLs and their staff to establish a collective liberatory mindset leading to abolitionist pedagogical engagements with students, they must continually participate in self-reflection and communal refinement rooted in the synthesis of theory, practice, concept, and manifestation. Without a clear understanding of this praxis through collective learning and self-reflection, untrained staffs and novice leaders are unable to examine their own practice. This critical self-reflection initiates and propels the arduous ongoing process of decreasing the impact of
oppressive and disempowering educational and social conditioning based on racial identity. The purpose of this study was to gain greater clarity on epistemological development of the liberatory mindset in BSLs. In addition, the alignment of epistemological perspectives on the liberatory mindset between BSLs and their staff directly affects their pedagogical meaning-making and connects to decision on instructional approach, curricular exposure, disciplinary practices, student engagement techniques, and overall school ethos. For this reason, this case study sought to answer the following research questions:

- How do BSLs interpret the liberatory mindset as they seek to create empowering learning environments for Black students?
  - To what extent does this interpretation effect their selection of staff and collective professional development?
- How do BSLs and their staff align their understandings of the liberatory mindset to co-construct empowering learning environments for Black students?

For BSLs and their staff to establish a collective liberatory mindset leading to abolitionist pedagogical engagements with students, they must continually participate in self-reflection and communal refinement rooted in the synthesis of theory, practice, concept, and manifestation. Without a clear understanding of this praxis through collective learning and self-reflection, untrained staffs and novice leaders are unable to examine their own practice. This critical self-reflection initiates and propels the arduous ongoing process of decreasing the impact of oppressive and disempowering educational and social conditioning based on racial identity. The purpose of this study was to gain greater clarity on epistemological development of the liberatory mindset in BSLs. In addition, the alignment of epistemological perspectives on the liberatory mindset between BSLs and their staff directly affects their pedagogical meaning-making and
connects to decisions on instructional approach, curricular exposure, disciplinary practices, student engagement techniques, and overall school ethos.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The nurturing and protecting of African-American children has historically included authoritative and direct ways of interacting, guided specifically by explicit, ethical, social, and cultural rules and expectations.

—Cynthia B. Dillard, Leading with her Life: An African American Feminist

(Re)Interpretation of Leadership for an Urban High School

Many scholars of Black school leadership development have critiqued programs and frameworks for ignoring or undervaluing the uniqueness of the Black diasporic experience. Scholars have suggested more research is needed on the interpretivist abilities of Black school leaders (BSLs) to address the academic and sociopolitical needs of their teaching staff to ensure a stronger holistic experience for Black students (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Gooden, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Paris & Alim, 2017; Walker, 2020). BSLs who have committed themselves to empowering Black students accept the responsibility of recalibrating their own mindsets and the mindsets of their staff regarding goals beyond academic achievement for Black students (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Lomotey, 2019; Smith, 2021). These leaders guide fellow educators toward developing liberatory learning spaces for Black students. School leaders also design learning and self-reflection opportunities for staff to further explore how their beliefs about Black student potential impact their instructional and interpersonal decisions (Lomotey, 2019). The co-construction of social awareness that occurs between staff and student in a classroom is guided heavily by the beliefs of that staff and how those beliefs inform pedagogical decisions. These beliefs and pedagogical habits are nurtured, developed, and influenced by the individual(s) responsible for their selection and development—the school leader (Pollard, 1997).
Using qualitative research methods including semistructured interviews with school leaders, staff community circles, and a researcher reflective journal, this instrumental case study explored the origins and refinement of the liberatory mindset among BSLs and staff at one school site. There is a distinction here to include staff and not only teachers because all members of the school staff were hired and developed by the BSLs to support students on their academic and social journeys regardless of role. However, educators comprised the majority of the staff involved in the study. The BSLs’ focus at this site was on co-constructing and enhancing the liberatory mindset of staff members and their overall pedagogical practices. The professional development of staff followed traditional patterns of adult learning; however, this study examined decisions made before and after adult professional development learning experiences, from both the staff and leaders’ perspectives. Ultimately, these responses were collected and analyzed to detect any patterns that impact or influence BSL planning as they continue to refine their co-construction approach with staff.

I used a case study research design to examine how BSLs bring their liberatory mindset “into a place of centrality” (Reilly, 2010, p. 2) through the selection and ongoing professional development of their school staff. This case study explored current understandings of Black school leaders’ epistemological development of their liberatory mindset, and how this mindset influences their administrative behaviors. It also examined how Black school leaders identify alignment with staff on-pedagogical decisions manifested through the liberatory mindset. In the following sections, I discuss the study’s significance, my role as the researcher, rationale for the research design approach, participant profile, data collection methods, data analysis, and study credibility.
**Research Design**

BSLs who embody a liberatory mindset seek to fortify Black students with the tools and perspective to sustain their success once they have left school (Dey, 2021). BSLs who are most successful at this task warrant deeper attention, specifically an analysis of their methods and beliefs. A case study approach allowed me to examine the efforts of two BSLs in one school as they co-constructed and cultivated their liberatory mindset with their staff. The BSLs at this site sought to “produce knowledge about the world . . . the world of educational practice” (Merriam, 1998, p. 3), with their staff to develop a better communal understanding of what was needed to enhance their effectiveness with Black students.

This study examined the factors that influence the development and refinement of the liberatory mindset BSLs and staff at one school site. This focus on perspective formation and synthesis between the BSLs and the staff serves as the bounded activity satisfying Merriam’s (1998) definition of a case by being (a) particularistic (i.e., it focuses on particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon), (b) descriptive (i.e., it yields a rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study), and (c) heuristic (i.e., it illuminates the reader’s understanding of phenomenon under study). Through the triangulation of multiple qualitative sources of data, I was able to “capture the case under study in its complexity and entirety” (Yazan, 2015, p. 142). These sources of data included semistructured school leader interviews, staff community circles and a researcher reflective journal (Yin, 2002).

**Researcher Positionality**

I shared several identity markers and experiences with the two BSLs in this study. I identify as African American and served as a school leader in an urban school in the northeast region of the United States. My student body was over 90% Black (primarily African American
and Caribbean American). I spent 11 years of my school leadership career pursuing personal and staff developmental opportunities to create liberatory learning opportunities for my students. Because I could not teach every one of my students personally, I used professional development as the primary vehicle for change and found collaboration of thought led to more effective strategies. Success at my school led to opportunities to develop and coach school leaders in other schools on how to recreate the same environmental changes for Black and Brown children across the country. My greatest accomplishments in this part of my professional career were (a) the sense of teamwork and alignment in which everyone moved in the same direction, toward a common goal; and (b) the sense of safety and hope that came from meeting with every family and their child once they came to my school.

As scholars researching the power Black staffs have regarding the educational outcomes for Black students have asserted, BSLs have a responsibility to create these academic opportunities across multiple grades in the same school building (Egalite & Kisida, 2017; Grissom et al., 2017, 2021; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). This study was conducted in a school that, in many ways, mirrored the profile of schools I have led. As a Black man, I was a BSL that worked in a community of over 90% Black children and had a staff of over 90% Black educators for over 8 years in an urban demographic in New York City. My ethos of liberatory practice aligns with the commitment of the BSLs in this study to the empowerment of Black children, and counternarrative to school design. In the role of school leader, I, too, shared the responsibility and methods to push against the historically lowered expectations of schools for Black children and the compliance driven policies and practices I was expected to execute. I realized these methods were fundamentally disenfranchising. By probing BSLs and sharing in their pursuit of liberatory spaces, there was an implicit encouragement and desire in myself to see them be
successful in their efforts. I did not consider my sentiment or perspective to be researcher bias, rather a relationship of supportive co-conspiracy (Hood, 1998; B. L. Love, 2019). Our shared racial and cultural heritage supported me as a researcher since I embodied the response to the provocation posed by Hood (2001) which asks, “Is it not more likely that those who have a shared lived experience within the context under evaluation can more accurately provide a critical analysis and evaluation of African American education?” (p. 37). My cultural and experiential resonance with the BSLs in this study enhanced my ability as a researcher to “provide the audience with a “vicarious experience” that comes closest to a “direct experience” (Hood, 2001, p. 38).

The alternative to my success and the efforts of the BSLs in this study is a persisting deprivation of access to basic human rights and connection to cultural heritage as evidence of racial excellence for Black students. The premise and possibility of liberation for Black students as a prerequisite for school design and execution was not the focus or question researched in this study—it was assumed. Instead, the focus was on the approach of BSLs to achieve this goal.

This study did not compare the efforts of the Black leaders to my own efforts, but rather isolated and analyzed the practices employed by these school leaders to co-construct a liberatory mindset with their staff. To provide a space for my internal cogitation, I kept a reflective journal throughout data collection, data analysis, member checking, and findings synthesis. This journal was a place to record my actions, thoughts, and feelings throughout the research process. Journals can be a place to balance personal experiences against their ability to possibly bias data interpretation. To minimize gaps in interpretive rationale and increase trustworthiness of analysis and conclusions, the journal entries were combined with other sources of data to generate categories and themes that were member checked by study participants (Russell & Kelly, 2002).
These biases and presuppositions were inevitable based on the experiences I shared with BSLs in this study, and I acknowledged and recorded them using a reflective journal. This journal was also a place to record my reactions to emerging themes and member-checked revelations offered by the BSLs and their staff, while also serving as a “transparent audit of the research process” (Choi, 2020, para. 5).

**Participant Selection**

Prior to initiating the study, I fulfilled my CITI training requirements regarding research involving human subjects (see Appendix A), and my institutional review board provided approval. To participate in this study, the school’s leaders had to meet the following criteria: (a) be a member of the African diaspora; (b) currently work as a K–12 school leader in an urban setting; (c) serve a student population of over 90% African-America, African-Caribbean, Afro-Latino, or native African students, or some combination therein; and (d) have a staff that reflected the racial and cultural identities of their student population. The term staff is inclusive of any adult that worked in the school building and interacts with children and families. This could include teachers, teacher aides, special educators, extracurricular directors, office employees, mental health professionals, counselors, nurses, and any other role that directly influenced student development. This inclusive staffing criteria allowed a more wholistic perspective on staff development by the school’s leaders to be understood, as reflected in the notion that every adult students interact with in school impacts their development. Interested school leaders were offered an opportunity to hear more about the research purpose, time requirements, and my background before agreeing to participate. Three sets of school leaders from three different school participated in these initial phone screen.
One school (led by two co-leaders) agreed to the timing and terms of the research. These leaders were then sent a formal recruitment email (see Appendix B). If they agreed to all of the terms of participation and scope of research, they were then sent a consent form for their participation (see Appendix C). I also then requested permission to use their school as a site of data collection and received permission both from the school leaders (see Appendix D) as well as my institution (see Appendix E). The school leaders were then asked to identify 16 staff members to participate in the study based solely on interest in the topic regardless of their role. Once identified, these staff member were sent a formal recruitment email (see Appendix F). If they agreed to the terms of the research and time commitment, they were then sent a consent form (see Appendix G). All 16 staff members consented and participated in the study in addition to the two school co-leaders.

**Setting and Participant Demographics**

I conducted this research at an independent charter middle school (i.e., Grades 5–8) in an urban neighborhood of a large metropolitan city in the northeastern United States. This school sought to support the development of a holistic growth mindset in all students through culturally responsive and affirming practices rooted in empowerment and agency. The student population was 99% Black (defined as African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latino, American, or native African born), with 95% of staff identifying as African American, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latino, American, or native African born.

The school was co-led by two African American leaders, one cisgender male (referred to as Kofi) and one cisgender female (referred to as Ada) who collectively had almost 50 years of teaching experience using an African-centered liberatory approach. The pseudonyms were only chosen for the school’s leaders because they were the main study participants. These names are
of African cultural origin and symbolic of strength, nobility, and peace which well represents the demeanor of both leaders (Behind the Name, n.d.). The staff members were assigned sequential numbers. The school leaders were carefully selected based on their school’s focus on infusing B. L. Love’s (2000) liberatory consciousness framework of (a) awareness, (b) analysis, (c) action, and d) accountability, related to eradicating anti-Blackness and affirming Black student achievement, into all aspects of their operation. In their former professional lives, these two leaders had independently sought alternatives to traditional hegemonic approaches to leadership development, staff training, and the creation of learning environments for Black students.-The school leaders in this study exhibited key characteristics contributing to the foundation of a liberatory mindset: “(1) a strong commitment to African-American student education; (2) a deep understanding of, and compassion for, their students; and (3) a sincere confidence in African-American children’s ability to learn” (Lomotey, 1989, p. 77).

These participants were not simply objects in glass jars to be studied; rather, they were respected colleagues and powerful Black educators. These BSLs were worthy of praise for attempting to educate, not school, Black students in a climate where Black history, critical consciousness, and Black bodies have remained under attack by the dominant hegemony. Teaching and leading Black students through the creation of liberatory spaces is an act of defiance in the tradition of Black resistance ideology. The BSLs in this study sought to do what my parents did for me, and perhaps their own parents/caregivers did for them: to empower the next generation. Tables 1–3 illustrate participant demographics.
Table 1

*Study Participants: School Leader*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant ID</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kofi</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ada</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

*Study Participants: Staff Community Circles Group 1*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant ID</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #1</td>
<td>Fifth grade reading staff</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #2</td>
<td>Sixth grade reading staff</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #3</td>
<td>Seventh grade reading staff</td>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #4</td>
<td>Eighth grade reading staff</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Afro-Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #5</td>
<td>Dance staff—All grades</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #6</td>
<td>Business education staff—</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All grades</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #7</td>
<td>Office manager</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Afro-Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #8</td>
<td>Fifth/sixth grade science staff</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Afro Caribbean</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

*Study Participants: Staff Community Circles Group 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant ID</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #9</td>
<td>Fifth/sixth grade physical education staff</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #10</td>
<td>Seventh/eighth grade physical education staff</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #11</td>
<td>Fifth grade math staff</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #12</td>
<td>Sixth grade math staff</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Afro-Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant ID</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Years of experience</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #13</td>
<td>Swahili staff—All grades</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #14</td>
<td>Fifth/sixth grade history staff</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #15</td>
<td>Seventh/eighth grade history staff</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Afro-Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Member #16</td>
<td>Parent liaison/Dean—All grades</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Afro-Latinx</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

**Context of the Setting for Data Collection**

All data collected was after a series of professional development sessions led by the school’s co-leaders, held in a classroom with seating at the perimeter so all participants could see each other, and attended by all staff (including staff members not participating in this study). The session took place over a consecutive 4-week period during the fall of the academic school year. The sessions were 3 to 4 hours each, and occurred every Friday afternoon when students were dismissed early. Each session opened with general announcements that were open to any staff member to share. That day’s topic (sometimes new, in some case a continuation of the previous week) was then presented by the school’s co-leaders. Both leaders were on site for three of the four sessions observed. During the final session only one school leader was present. For the duration of the professional development period that staff was broken down into either grade-level teams or subject areas teams for deeper processing and discussions on application. At each professional development session staff members were invited to share reflections on how they were thinking about applying what they had learned, and how it connected to their goals around empowerment and liberatory practice. This period of the meeting was free-flowing and
multidirectional as staff members and school leaders both responded to each other instead of all on responding to the school leaders.

**Sources of Data**

There were three sources of data employed in this study: semistructured school leader interviews, staff community circles, and a researcher reflective journal. Table 4 describes the methods of data collection.

**Table 4**

*Methods of Data Collection*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data collection tool</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semistructured “front porch” style interviews (McTighe, 2016; Mock, 2016)</td>
<td>Two school co-leaders</td>
<td>Borrowing from lessons on the connection between Black feminist resistance and geography, this approach to interviewing is “nonlinear, iterative, interdisciplinary, and liberatory” by pushing the participants to “struggle with what they know and where they know from” (McKittrick, 2015, p. 122, commenting on the work of Wynter, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community circles following observation of professional development sessions</td>
<td>16 school staff member (not leaders)</td>
<td>This group conversational set-up requires participants and the researcher to practice (a) situated relatedness, (b) respectful listening, and (c) reflective witnessing (Barkaskas &amp; Gladwin, 2021).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fieldnotes in researcher reflective journal</td>
<td>Researcher reflection</td>
<td>Provides descriptive detail of participant’s words and behaviors that illustrate and support researcher interpretations, analysis, and the trustworthiness of the findings. Further, “reflective journals consciously acknowledge the values and experiences of the researchers rather than attempting to control their values through methods” (Choi, 2020, para. 2).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection tool</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Rationale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member checking</td>
<td>All study participants</td>
<td>By inviting research participants to review categories and themes emerging during data analysis member checking (or respondent validation) remains, “a technique for exploring the credibility . . . accuracy and resonance with their reported lived experiences (Birt et al., 2016, p. 1).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Semistructured School Leader Interviews**

I interviewed each leader before and after the professional development session to maximize the ability to verify and reinforce the perspectives of the school leaders. I used a “front-porch style” (McTighe, 2016; Mock, 2016) approach to the interactive interviews as the BSLs constructed their planning documents so they could share their ideas, their justification for choosing various pedagogical components, and expectations for outcomes. With deep roots in southern Black feminism (T. Harris, 1996; McTighe & Haywood, 2018; McTighe & Ritchie, 2019), front-porch strategizing, and trust building involves the sharing and exchange of ideas, feelings, and challenges and is an integral part of African American culture. The interactive sessions with school leaders were not bound rigidly by a ping-pong style dialogue or cadence. Without formula or boundaries, this approach was familiar and comfortable to participants and me due to shared cultural values of collective power and resilience. This style of discourse is a common and familiar component of communication in the Black community (Hecht et al., 2003; Morgan, 2002). The metaphor uses the physical porch to represent a place where exchanges are authentic, challenging, personal, and defiant to the establishment and accomplishments are celebrated. Lincoln and Guba (2006) would call this approach a naturalistic interview because it complements the naturalist inquiry paradigm, which appreciates how elusive human truth can be to uncover without knowledge of the necessary culturally rituals that promote trust.
The semistructured interviews were held separately and lasted approximately 60–90 minutes each. I interviewed the school leaders separately to ensure their answers did not influence each other’s responses. This strategy also promoted the credibility of answers as being reflective of individual thoughts and minimized any group thinking or confirmation bias. I interviewed school leaders during the course of their fall semester. During each interview, I asked leaders to reflect on whether they thought the outcomes of their staff development efforts were being met and how they might modify future opportunities (see Appendix H).

**Staff Community Circles**

Although community circles (also referred to as focus groups) have been traditionally linked to restorative justice and community building, they are rooted in indigenous practices and “ways of knowing” (Calderón et al., 2012, para. 1) that recognize and promote the “physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual” (Cull et al., 2018, “Section 2: Summary”) connectedness of people to land, family, community, and each other. This connectivity is an essential component of building liberatory learning spaces aligned with the goal of empowering Black students. Community circles offer a promising adaptation for creating a supportive and inclusive environment in qualitative research that is more nuanced and authentic to staff populations when compared to traditional focus groups. This inventive approach prioritizes open dialogue, active engagement, and community spirit among participants and enhances the richness of insights gained in these sessions (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021; Bohanon, 2005). Prior to the community circles, I was able to observe the participants during their professional development sessions led by the BSLs in front of the entire staff. Once the session ended, the study participants remained in the room, and rearranged the seating into a smaller circle. There were two groups of eight staff members, randomly chosen from the staff roster, regardless of role. The two groups met on
different days. There were never more than eight participants in a group at one time. In this method, eight participants were arranged in a circular formation to symbolize equality and encourage open communication. The circle served as a secure, nonhierarchical space that valued every participant’s voice. As the primary investigator, I acted as a participant to ensure participants’ perspectives took precedence. Though participant driven, I guided the conversation with open-ended questions related to the research topic (see Appendix I). This approach to responsive facilitation maintained focus while permitting the exploration of emerging themes and dialogue among and between participants.

Study participants (i.e., staff and leaders) often collaborated with school leaders and each other in the planning and refinement of instructional activities. As such, this collaborative spirit was a prime motivator in selecting community circles as the data collection methodology used with staffs. Participants engaged in reflection and shared their thoughts, emotions, and candid responses post discussion, which added depth to their perspectives. This reflective phase was integral to the community circle and unearthed profound insights. Such an innovative approach, which departed from traditional focus groups, championed inclusivity and equal participation, and created an environment that fostered trust and candid responses.

**Credibility and Dependability**

Creating a sense of trust and reassurance with my presence in the interviews and in the community circles was crucial to promote authenticity and vulnerability from school leaders and staff. To truly excavate mindsets and motivations, I ensured participants did not feel judged nor intimidated by my previous professional experiences. I initiated these conversations by sharing my “story of self,” an intimate picture of my professional journey and mindset evolution. I had used this exercise in the past to help newly formed teams gain greater insight to individual
perspectives. Although I did not ask or require school leaders to reciprocate this gesture, I asked if it made them feel more comfortable to share and expose their thinking to me throughout the data collection process. A set of sequential numbers, one to 16, was used to identify staff members.

**Data Analysis**

Once the transcription of all interviews and community circles was completed, a three-stage coding cycle of data was completed. These initial open codes were then organized into a categorical framework through axial coding. The axial coding stage permitted the identification of connections between the initially coded concepts that were worthy of grouping and identifying collectively (Miles et al., 2020). In this cycle, the emerging categories continued to inform an ongoing review of the open codes until a saturation point was reached. At this point the analysis progressed to selective coding, and a set of emergent themes were identified that captured the trends of evidence necessary to adequately address the research questions. I employed secondary-cycle coding until data saturation was attained and further coding was no longer necessary. Figure 1 illustrates the complete coding and meaning-making process. Open coding combined participants’ responses to interview and community circle questions (and each other during the community circles) with indicators identified in the literature. Axial coding followed to result in the coding categories in the first column. In the left column, these categories were then reexamined to identify relationships with participant responses that supported synthesis into emergent themes.
Table 5 outlines the process and inductive relationship between study group participants and the emergent themes. The quotes in the right column represent examples of the participants’ responses that directly communicate emergent themes and justify their creation. The full codebook can be found in Appendix J.

Table 5

Relational Matrix Defining Theme Generation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synthesized themes</th>
<th>Coding category</th>
<th>Related participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Liberatory and responsive education systems | • Cultural awareness and identity  
• Student outcomes | • “Let the children just be children, perfectly imperfect . . . no longer teaching children to fit into a box.” (SM2)  
• “Developing cognitively and being able to explore different things in different ways.” (SM11)  
• “A rise in consciousness, where they are in space, in time, and not only how they are impacted by society, but also the impact that they can have as well.” (SM3) |
<p>| Resilience and personal growth          | • Self-determination     | • “We endeavor to spark a certain thought pattern in this attention to study and |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synthesized themes</th>
<th>Coding category</th>
<th>Related participant quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Personal and social development</td>
<td>attention to certain details, where the person becomes a student . . . self-love and a real level of confidence to overcome fear, they’d be good to champion through anything.” (SM10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Well-being and trauma-informed approach</td>
<td>• “I can become more precise in my own designing of my purpose . . . get a clear picture of why I should dedicate myself in this way.” (SM7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• “Excuse me, it was taught to me early on that there was a real purpose, and mission and duty for Black Americans to take hold of in this country, to set up stuff for ourselves, to be self-determined. So, the capacity was limitless with that understanding.” (SM4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociopolitical awareness and advocacy</td>
<td>• Self-advocacy despite fears</td>
<td>• “I do not believe that the original creators of school in this Americanized/Europeanized approach, Western approach, what it was is what it is now, or what it can be to be the most effective for us.” (Ada)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Legacy of resistance</td>
<td>• “The ability to have integrity and some dexterity around pushing through their fears and challenges is a big push for me to see them be able to develop and speak on.” (SM9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Access and vantage point</td>
<td>• “I think about being in the hood and my vantage point was so limited and skewed around even the things that I liked and enjoy, but if I just see things from a different vantage point, now I got the world in my access.” (SM13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• “It’s like the liberation of being able to share this access to our children in an educational space, an educational institution allows them to have such a wide vantage point, which is funny because sometimes I don’t think that they realize they have it.” (SM12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-determination and courage as outcome drivers</td>
<td>• Student outcomes</td>
<td>• “self-love and a real level of confidence to overcome fear, they’d be good to champion through anything.” (SM5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Purpose of school</td>
<td>• “to infuse, enhance, and modify what we do in service of liberation as it relates to being an independent critical thinker.” (Kofi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Academic preparation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synthesized themes</td>
<td>Coding category</td>
<td>Related participant quotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “We want our students to be self-determined, and again, creative, innovative, critical thinkers, and those who put their heart and this idea of what it means to be kind, this empathetic approach as well.” (Ada)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “a very firm belief in self around how they view the world, the ability to question, and I would say the confidence and I guess forthrightness and persistence to discover and unpack what others may say is true.” (SM16)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One round of member checking of the coded data was conducted after the emergent themes were identified. I presented the emergent themes to the participants so they could member check together and give any feedback, including if there were any gaps, misinformation, misinterpretations, or missing components of the data from their perspective (see Appendix K). This increased trustworthiness and credibility by providing an additional opportunity for the participants to ensure the researcher’s interpretations were clear and aligned with the pedagogical beliefs expressed during the community circles and interviews (Birt et al., 2016; Chang, 2014). Including the school leaders’ perspectives helped me “gain the needed confirmation, to increase credence in the interpretation, to demonstrate commonality of an assertion” (Stake, 1995, p. 112) and generate an analysis that held more confidence in its “depiction of the holistic, multi-dimensional, ever-changing reality” (Merriam, 1998, p. 202). Trustworthiness of the data was also increased by the practice of maintaining a primary reflective journal throughout the data collection and analysis stages (Choi, 2020; Jasper, 2005). My thoughts, opinions, and initial feelings during data collection were then captured and revisited throughout the analysis process, both before and after coding, meaning making, and thematic construction. This was particularly important to share with the study participants along with the initial codes during member...
checking. Study participants were able to support my calibration of their coded responses with my interpretive impressions. The participants were able to provide greater context in response to my journaled research impressions which minimized subjectivity during the analysis and strengthened credibility and confirmability in the finalized themes. The triangulation of multiple qualitative sources of data was intended to ensure that the data “capture[d] the case under study in its complexity and entirety” (Yazan, 2015, p. 142).

The comparison between staffs and leaders on key terms and concepts shared during data collection provided evidence to support and substantiate responses to my research questions. These responses also uncovered additional factors impacting the co-construction and refinement of the collective meaning of liberatory mindset. The respective interpretations of the liberatory mindset by each group provided greater clarity of potential alignment, valuation, and impact on instructional practices. The school model within this study operates under the vision, guidance, and support of the school leaders, who define these parameters for their staff. The analysis of collected data offered clarity on how the school leaders’ pedagogical beliefs impact staff perspectives and practices.

Throughout data collection and both cycles of data analysis, I applied a combination of Merriam’s (1998) and Stake’s (1995) approach to meaning making. I consolidated, reduced, and interpreted what school leaders observed and heard (Merriam, 1998) while also fully incorporating their impressions and intuition into the analysis (Stake, 1995). Due to my close positionality to the roles of the school leaders, analysis combined my impressions from moments of personal engagements through interactive observations with “empathic neutrality” (Patton, 1990, p. 55). These two processes occurred simultaneously; however, data analysis continued after all data had been collected (Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015). The goal of analysis was to
better understand the elements that contribute to the individual and collective co-construction of a liberatory mindset with school leaders and their staff. In addition, this study sought to capture and illuminate how the ongoing professional development affected staff pedagogy, both individually and collectively. Finally, this study sought to clarify how school leaders defined success in the co-construction of their liberatory mindset with staff.

Summary

This chapter summarized the process involved in methodological rationale, sample selection, data collection, and data analysis. This study acknowledged the unique underlying the dynamics and epistemological continuity between myself and study participants regarding Black student success. However, the specific efforts, rationale, pedagogical implementations, and expectation setting of BSLs and their staff in this study remained the sole focus of the inquiry. Through member checking my journaled research impressions and the coded data collected, study participants minimized possible researcher bias that could encourage a desired or specific set of outcomes. This study intended to reveal more about BSLs’ truth about their own pedagogical expectations for themselves and their staff that shape the experience for Black children when they enter school. The findings are presented in the next chapter. These findings illuminate the factors that impacted BSLs’ epistemological development and how this influenced staff recruitment and their professional development. The final chapter builds on those themes and presents a set of implications, and potential recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Without a strong sense of self-respect in the context of school and society, it is virtually impossible for a person to engage in the praxis of self-realization.

–Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell, The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools

This chapter provides an overview of the context in which BSLs created the conditions to co-construct and refine a liberatory mindset with their staffs. BSLs with a liberatory mindset find innovative ways to (a) co-construct a pedagogical alternative to white supremacy culture with their staff, while seeking to support their Black students in; (b) curtailing the development of internalized racial inferiority; and (c) nurturing the growth of a positive self-image to thrive (B. L. Love, 2019; Shujaa, 1998). This study endeavored to understand how a liberatory mindset informed BSLs’ staff recruitment and development plans. The analysis gives insights into the areas where shared meanings of a liberatory mindset arose and areas where BSL praxis directly informed the development of new and more critical understandings of a liberatory mindset among their staff. Data are presented according to themes that emerged during and after analysis.

The setting for this study was an urban charter middle school. The school has a student population that is 99% Black and a staff that is 99% Black or Afro-Latino. The research participants were split into two separate groups. There were two Black school co-leaders that were interviewed separately. I conducted conversational (i.e., front-porch style) interviews with each BSL, identified using the pseudonyms Ada (cisgender female, Black co-leader) and Kofi (cisgender male, Black co-leader). The staff community circles consisted of a group of 16 staff members (identified as SM1 through SM16) that were split into two groups of eight for their
circular focus group sessions. In addition, each research participant was invited to member check the data after the initial open coding and again following the sensemaking that led to emergent themes. During the process all research participants were given access to my researcher journal to gain further context on my research impressions and experience. With this research auditing step, I gained greater confidence that my research interpretations were accurately reflective of participant’s truth and experiences.

This study began as an examination of the transfer of liberatory mindset from BSLs to staff. The intention of the original research design/questions of this case study was to examine how BSLs seek to cultivate a liberatory mindset in themselves and how they influenced the pedagogical practices of their staff through guidance and in professional development sessions they led. The original questions read as follows:

- What experiences (personal and professional) have the greatest impact on the development of critical consciousness and sociopolitical awareness (liberatory mindset) in Black school leaders?
- How is a school leader’s vision for critical consciousness and sociopolitical awareness in their students actualized in the development of their teaching staff?

The observations of the BSLs and staff community circle revealed some unanticipated shifts in dynamics in the development of liberatory mindset in both research groups. The original questions focused on examining liberatory mindset development in BSLs, and how their vision was actualized in professional development sessions for their staff. The original questions were pruned or sharpened to eliminate the focus on the professional development sessions and attempted to better understand how the liberatory mindset alignment manifested in case study participants (Vandenbroucke & Pearce, 2018). This new focus was aimed at gaining a better
understanding of (a) how BSLs interpret the liberatory mindset as they seek to create empowering learning environments for Black students, and to what extent this interpretation effects their selection of staff and collective professional development; and (b) how BSLs and their staff align their understandings of the liberatory mindset to co-construct empowering learning environments for Black students. My own researcher intuition was confirmed by engaging with participants at the member-checking stage. On the value and interpretation of unexpected findings, Kennedy et al. (2022) shared:

In this research, we describe *serendipity* as a happy finding by the researcher and the recognition and use of this finding of something that is vital to the Research, and which the Researcher did not know beforehand would be found. It is often an *unknown unknown* which is found. (p. 2)

Although this trend in the data was essentially serendipitous, it further bolstered the inquiry into understanding BSL development and refinement of the liberatory mindset with their staff. Through inductive analysis, or “allowing the data to speak for itself” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 54), responses uncovered unanticipated factors and trends, leading to evidence of a synthesis process between the groups rather than a unidirectional transfer from leaders to staff. A new dynamic influencing the interpretation of the interaction between staff and BSLs emerged. Although the initial hypotheses that the liberatory mindset existed in BSLs as a guiding perspective on school design and staff development were valid and aligned, initial inductive coding uncovered stronger patterns of alignment in the development of a liberatory mindset in both research groups, despite their roles. Each group’s interpretations of the liberatory mindset provided greater clarity of origins, potential alignment, valuation, and potential impact on instructional practices. The school model in this this study operated under the vision, guidance, and support of the school
leaders, who defined these parameters for their staff. Analysis of collected data offered clarity on how the school leaders’ pedagogical beliefs impacted and complemented staff perspective.

Emerging themes from both selective coding and member checking further justified adjustments to the research questions to focus on the factors informing the individual and collective liberatory mindset refinement and the synergetic commitments defining an aligned set of Black educators. The study became an examination of a shared set of beliefs—a liberatory mindset—between staff and leaders and how both groups collectively reflected and refined their shared understandings into pedagogical presumptions.

The BSLs in this study spent most of their preprofessional and professional lives refining their beliefs about their own self-worth, self-determination, identity development, and the purpose of schools and learning how to recognize resonance with these beliefs in others. In seeking to understand how the liberatory mindset operated in BSLs and their staff members, this study revealed critical elements of team building and community engagement (i.e., community was defined here as a community of educators in one building). In addition, the analysis presented opportunities to expand the conceptual understanding of how the liberatory mindset is developed and shared among all research participants. Regardless of role, the research participants in this study also used counterstorytelling or counternarrative in ways that reimagined, magnified, co-constructed and nurtured new possibilities for their Black students’ wholistic development. The research participants believed collective counterstorytelling that informed pedagogy could be used as a strategy to curtail the possible eventuation of internalized racial inferiority development in their Black students. The data revealed that the inclusion of multiple perspectives on the development and manifestation of the liberatory mindset was central to the school’s design and ideology. The magnification of what was possible was informed and
guided by freedom dreaming (Kelley, 2002) and cultural intuition (Calderón et al., 2012) and manifested through abolitionist teaching approaches (B. L. Love, 2019). Much like B. L. Love’s (2019) conceptualization of abolitionist teaching, whereby educators are pedagogically centered at the intersection of race, liberation and BlackJoy, abolitionism is a common theme that surfaced in the counterstories of the research participants. Freedom dreaming, cultural intuition, and abolitionist teaching overlap as pedagogical practices all connected to the legacy of Black resistance ideology and define the instructional aspirations of the participants.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, Black resistance ideology (Dixson et al., 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), rooted in the counterstorytelling tenet of critical race theory (CRT), combines with abolitionist teaching, cultural intuition, and freedom dreaming to create opportunities for BSLs and their staff to share truths related to their individual origins and co-construction of the liberatory mindset (Calderón et al., 2012; Kelley, 2002; B. L. Love, 2019). In response to the first research question, this chapter reports on the thematic domains that describe how BSLs interpret the liberatory mindset and use it to influence their staff selection and collective professional development. These domains are: (a) Liberatory and Responsive Education Systems, (b) Resilience and Personal Growth, (c) Sociopolitical Awareness and Advocacy, and (d) Self-Determination and Courage as Outcome Drivers that emerged from the data gathered through semistructured, “porch-style” interviews (McTighe, 2016; Mock, 2016) with BSLs, community circles with staff, member checking by all participants, and a reflective researcher journal. Within these domains, and in response to the second research question, the greatest alignment on foundational beliefs and pedagogical decision-making occurred in the Self-Determination and Courage as Outcome Drivers theme, and this was achieved through synthesis of the counternarratives of the BSLs with their staff. However, all the themes were shared across
participant roles (i.e., staff member and BSL) in varying degrees and were met with extreme appreciation and resonance. Although not completely comprehensive of the team’s total pedagogical presumptions, all study participants agreed the themes accurately described the synthesis of their own life experiences into the foundational beliefs of their pedagogy and scholarly practices. The four sections of this chapter detail these themes and provides a descriptive explanation of how the data supports their formations.

**Liberatory and Responsive Education Systems**

A primary element of liberatory schools, according to the participants in this study, was that they be culturally responsive to the needs of their Black students holistically. This involved (a) developing counternarratives which subverted the historical purpose of schools whereby Black students were tracked into factory jobs and instead empowered them to dream beyond these boundaries; (b) developing a sense of community among the school staff through the careful hiring of like-minded educators who were committed to these educational and cultural counternarratives based on their own experiences of schooling, and (c) developing a sense of community and belonging among the Black students to give them a sense of self-worth and pride in their own racial identity as Black students.

All the study participants, staff and school leaders alike, emphasized the need for schools to be unwaveringly responsive to Black students to counteract the oppressive, uninspiring, and dehumanizing historical public school experiences many of the participants had undergone themselves. One staffer described how their school’s current expectations exceeded that of the historical racist and classist developers. As they put it:

No longer teaching children to fit into a box, even though at first school was a place so that the factory workers had a place for their children to go once child labor laws
changed. And they were basically teaching them to eventually grow up and be factory workers also, although no one will clearly articulate that, would blatantly say it. (SM16)

This staff member referenced the original intent of the public school model in the United States as disempowering, exclusionary, and oppressive, based on both race and class distinctions. According to the Segregation Index launched in 2020, “American schools remain highly segregated by race, ethnicity and economic status” (Owens et al., 2020, p. 1) despite lofty aspirations of federal interventions from Brown v. Board of Education (1954) to recent attempts of intentional integration. Recognizing the need to create alternative experiences for their Black students, the participants described wanting to ensure their school was one of empowerment, promotion of a positive self-image, and affirmation of cultural heritage. For this impact to be possible throughout the school building, the BSLs described the intention they exercised when recruiting and hiring new staff members. They shared how their role was not to convince other educators about the worthiness of Black children. Rather, these BSLs described focusing on increasing their own effectiveness (and that of their staff) as liberatory educators and creating educational spaces that defied hegemonic expectations “rooted in the perspectives and knowledge” (Blaisdell, 2021, p. 1558) of Black educators. Creating this alternative learning environment as an act of counternarrative to the experiences Black students typically encounter was a central focus of the participants’ vision of a liberatory and responsive school.

Developing Counternarratives

The ability to resist internalizing the biases and diminished expectations of dominant culture and instead develop a self-determined antithetical sense of self-worth and community value is central to the CRT tenet of a counternarrative (Roberson, 2019). Research shows that society has dictated and expected the reverence and exaltation of symbols and values that are not
reflective of the intuitive intellectual, cultural, creative, interpersonal, institutional, systemic, and
global brilliance of the Black mind (Arnett, 2022; A. Jones, 2022; Udofia, 2020). Without a
foundation of self-love and a deep belief in one’s own worthiness for existing, attaining access to
that version of empowered Blackness becomes nearly impossible to realize (Lane, 2014). Staff
members and BSLs in this study asserted their connection to empowered Blackness through
individual accounts of self-realization and by (re)affirming their own identity development; in
turn, they also identified how this realization affects their pedagogy. An Afro-Latinx staff
member, SM11, recounted:

I grew up with my mom straightening my hair, relaxing my hair. I didn’t even know my
hair was curly until I was 16 and things like that. So, it wasn’t until I went to college that
I started to explore or even think about actually, I can consider myself Black, but it still
makes me uncomfortable to even say it because I grew up thinking I’m not, and then in
college, I went and did a Black studies minor. I went studied abroad in Jamaica and all
these other things that I chose to do for me to just open up my perspective on the other . .
. I don’t know how say it. Just open up to this idea of I am also Black and I can consider
myself Black.

Many study participants described the hazards of ignorance about their own cultural heritage and
habits of excellence that may have only been discovered after they had left the K–12 system and
gone to college or beyond. Kofi shared, “There are some things that I’m realizing that are being
lost. Even Black authors, certain history that they are being reacquainted or never heard of before
until they engage.”

In addition to the risk of lost history, participants spoke of the constant bombardment of
dehumanizing judgment and negative biases Black students may experience based solely on
assumptions due to their racial identity, which they believed may lead Black students to develop lowered self-esteem, internalized self-doubt, and potential disengagement toward school in general. As Kofi put it, “people who don’t look like us, that’s not what their constant fear is every day for their biological children, or the children that they teach.” One participant acknowledged this dilemma and spoke about their desire to develop a counternarrative with their students:

People are going to look at you and have these assumptions embedded about how you’re supposed to show up, and so what do we do with that? Do we let it push us or do we let it shrink us and the ideas push us and make us bigger and more of a motivation to actually engage in this work of developing cognitively and being able to explore different things in different ways. (SM14)

Negative external messages or toxic racial stress received at school can have a profound impact on how Black students view themselves and their physical and mental health (Pumariega et al., 2022). Dumornay et al. (2023) noted “early-life adversity can have lasting negative consequences on mental health in adulthood” (p. 127). The toxic stress of racism, if left unchallenged, will begin to be internalized by Black children as a self-image of unworthiness, uneducable, laziness, dangerous, incompetence, and ultimately predestined for struggle without any hope of success in school or life. Graham et al. (2016) shared, “internalized racism may be an avenue through which clinicians can target the anxiety elicited by racist experiences” (p. 374), meaning there are clear social and medical implications to undetected or addressed internalized racism. Black students begin to believe this inferiority about themselves at an early age in schools that do not provide a counternarrative to the greater society’s messages about their humanity (Chavis & Johnson, 2023; Clark & Clark, 1950; Graham et al., 2016). As DeCuir and
Dixson (2004) asserted, “counterstorytelling is a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes” (p. 27). Fully aware of the pernicious effects of this internalized inferiority, establishing a personal counternarrative became a firm anchoring value and practice they all held and a key component supporting their development and refinement of the liberatory mindset. Ada shared:

And that is another huge outcome that when you leave this space of people who tell you that you are excellent because you are richly melanated and you exist in this space, you are just Black excellence. You are about to step out in a world that is nothing like that. You’re not going to walk down the hall of all and see, I mean, pictures of people who look like you and have been successful. You’re about to have staffs [professors, colleagues, supervisors] who do not look like you, who are afraid of you, who are afraid of that Brooklyn energy and spirit, or just that Black energy and spirit. And they’re going to say stuff to you, about you. They’re not going to think that your beautiful natural hair is beautiful.

Combined with the possibility of negative assumptions and other socioeconomic challenges, Black children become even more susceptible to disproportionally low school outcomes, impaired brain development, posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety (Dumornay et al., 2023). For the leaders and staff at this school, understanding the potential negative impact of an oppressive school experience was a factor that related with their own individual school experiences. Their shared understanding of their individual “cultural intuition” contributed to a group ethos of the need for a counternarrative (Calderón et al., 2012). This synthesis of intuition was not accomplished through rehearsed mantras of a school vision or shared professional development opportunity; rather, the entire group of adults in the building had lived a significant
portion of their lives exposed to oppressive schools and practices. Through caregiver support, empowering educators, and relentless self-determination, the data revealed that participants overcame their own obstacles and discovered different pathways to personal freedom not offered in their traditional educational exposures. A participant shared:

    So, growing up as a young Black American male in this country, basically, there was a strong effort on my parents’ heart to let me know I could do anything, in that I come from greatness and the original people, the earth. (SM9)

Likewise, Kofi added, “I had children, and I realized there’s nowhere that I wanted to put them that I would trust that individual like I trust myself.” These educators came together in this school to synthesize their stories and truths into a co-constructed set of pedagogical guidelines for themselves to inform how they engage their students. The two BSLs in this study were the first to blend their visions with one another and then sought to hire and develop a cadre of educators who shared their perspective. During the semistructured interviews, BSLs noted they spent 2 weeks off-site each summer during the preplanning period before the school officially opened to share their individual stories with each other and other senior leaders in their network. This time allowed them to refresh and update their shared approach to pedagogy, staff recruitment, and staff development. Kofi shared:

    Well, everything that we deliver in the form of professional development stems from the frameworks we’ve chosen . . . and the leadership index, which is infused with a liberatory mindset and cultural elements. The core elements of the index are mindfulness, trauma informed care, and cultural responsiveness.

The leadership index referenced here is a set of leadership behaviors that the school leaders in this network of school use as a resource when developing professional development sessions for
their staff and when evaluating their own performance. Although, the liberatory mindset is not explicitly mentioned within the leadership index, the practice of counternarrative is highlighted as best practice for leaders’ self-reflection. BSLs in this study shared their own personal counternarratives of success during the professional development sessions. Through the sharing of personal narratives, the BSLs guided the process of incorporating staff into the development and maintenance of a counternarrative for students to adopt and continue. This was evidenced in the observation of teacher manifestos posted on the entrance of every classroom. Each staff member was asked to write a short summary of an obstacle they had had to overcome to defy the pressures of racism or discrimination in their professional lives. A participant shared:

> When my students ask me about my manifesto, I feel like they are really trying to find themselves in it because they know me. They want to know more, and it helps them know that they have so much power, and to not be afraid to ask for help. (SM3)

These manifestos of triumph are present for any passerby (e.g., other staff, students, parents) to see and read and ask questions on. The written statements are intended to provide models of success, hope and inspiration to the students specifically, and to build a tighter community of educators overall.

Having benefitted directly from developing their own counternarrative, they were inspired and even felt duty bound to do the same for their Black students. As one participant shared:

> It’s like vantage point. You’re in a forest though, but you can’t see nothing. You can’t see nothing in the forest at no ground level, you know what I’m saying, but if you climb the trees, you start to realize with that vantage point, you have access points and advantage having this bird’s eye view and it’s really about perspective. I think about being in the
hood and my vantage point was so limited and skewed around even the things that I liked and enjoy, but if I just see things from a different vantage point, now I got the world in my access. (SM8)

This participant believed that by providing access to this wider perspective to their students it offered them access to more imagined possibilities of their own potential. It was therefore important to them to convey these vantage points to their students. Another staffer commented on how an expansion of perspective has impacted their thoughts on pedagogy:

I think that being able to teach in this particular way and not with the, “this is what you got to teach.” It’s like the liberation of being able to share this access to our children in an educational space, an educational institution allows them to have such a wide vantage point, which is funny because sometimes I don’t think that they realize they have it. (SM6)

With this widened perspective about what had become possible in their own lives, the participants enjoyed and loved providing their students with wider curriculum from different vantage points.

Through engaging in counternarrative the participants described a greater understanding of how racism and anti-Blackness operated to undermine self-hood in Black children (Stanley, 2007). These educators focused on using counternarrative as a tool to “disrupt the fictions of master [dominant or hegemonic] narratives” (Roberson, 2019, para. 3) while reinforcing and preserving a positive self-image in their Black students. The BSLs specifically understood the practice of counternarrative as important to seek out in potential staff members because of the impact it could have on their ability to empower Black children.
Building the Community of Educators

School leaders of any race often do not adequately understand the social reality and cultural nuances that shape Black lives and subsequently neglect to design, hire, and develop a staff to support their success (Ahébée, 2021; Hines & Hines, 2020; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Perry, 2019). The BSLs in this study worked to ensure their school was liberatory and responsive to the needs of Black students through careful consideration of who was recruited to work in the building. The BSLs shared that, after aligning their own pedagogical beliefs and instructional resources, they hired staff to execute on that vision in their classrooms and throughout the school in every interaction with their Black students. Their liberatory mindsets directly informed and reinforced the expectation of student empowerment as a targeted student outcome through the staffers they hired and how they were developed. This manifestation of conceptual understanding into pedagogical beliefs is a direct example of the liberatory mindset in action, and the resulting actions of BSLs reinforced research on the success of Black children in school.

Kofi shared, “Research shows that Black children taught by Black people do extraordinarily well.” He referred to multiple studies showing how Black students taught and led by Black staffs and leaders have improved outcomes compared to their counterparts who do not share that experience (Gershenson et al., 2022; Milner, 2006; Perry, 2019). Kofi asserted that recruitment was more than a question of representation. Although 90% of staff at the school in this study identified as part of the African diaspora (i.e., African American, Afro-Latinx, Native African, or Afro-Caribbean), representation alone was not the goal for BSLs in this school when making hiring decisions. Recognizing that potential Black staff members can be unaware of the full set of risks Black students experience, Kofi noted, “There are some that may show up from the Black experience, but don’t know with depth the Black experience, like a true grasp and
understanding of the stories in America.” This leader looked for staff candidates who understand the Black experience and show empathy, flexibility, and coachability. These characteristics may sound standard, but they are rarely linked to deep cultural and racial intuition and cognizance when determining employment readiness in school staff candidates (Ellison et al., 2018; Simpson, 2020). Kofi continued, “I do not believe that the original creators of school in this Americanized, Europeanized approach, Western approach, what it was is what it is now, or what it can be to be the most effective for us.”

Therefore, beyond simple cultural or racial representation among their staff, BSLs in this school pursued potential staff members who shared core beliefs about Black student potential, the needs for culturally affirming and sustaining pedagogy, and the commitment to liberation for the Black community (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). On the desired learning spaces for Black children Ladson-Billings (1995) shared “(a) students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order” (p. 60).

The school leaders identified alignment with these perspectives between staff and themselves as critical for the desired outcome of creating liberatory learning spaces for Black children. Potential staff members were also required to have an understanding or firsthand experience of the Black, urban, mixed-class history and reality of the school’s surrounding community of African diaspora. Knowing that their staff had lived through these experiences allowed BSLs in this school to begin at a different starting place when recruiting their staff and refining the collective liberatory mindset. When asked about the purpose of school, all study participants consistently described molding their Black students into critical thinkers,
strengthening their students’ connections to their community (i.e., local and global), helping them nurturing self-love, and bolstering their self-determination. This alignment of purpose among all the participants reinforced their collective commitment to empowering their Black students. BSLs in this school talked about listening for evidence of the potential to support the holistic development of Black students during their first encounters with prospective staff members in the recruitment process. Ada shared:

[I’m] listening for some type of commitment that speaks to ‘there’s a problem in our community and I want to be a part of the change’. So, asking questions to try to unearth that. And that’s not always there. Sometimes I will listen for how they empathize around them, and how flexible they are and how coachable they are. And if those are green lights, then that lets me know that maybe if they didn’t have an experience where they were infused with certain African American studies, education, that we can give that.

The BSLs shared some examples they use during their recruitment and interview of perspective staff candidates:

- Why do you want to teach here specific to this urban school with almost 100% Black students and families?
- What are the most important outcomes for our students in your opinion?
- What would be your connection to our broader community besides this school?
- What are some assets our Black children bring to school every day?
- What beliefs about your own competence have been challenged during your educational or professional career? How did you deal with those challenges?

These questions show how the BSLs intend to gain a greater understanding of the candidate’s intent, and how they have been impacted by the experiences in their own lives. The
BSLs are also probing for the candidate’s connection to community and any signs of deficit-thinking, which both can be indicative of a savior mentality (Sondel et al., 2022). Ada shared, “I’m looking for is to see if there’s some type of commitment beyond themselves that speaks to community, especially in the Black and brown experience.” As Ada continued, she shared that last question was intended to:

Give me and us a better idea of their understanding of hard work, discipline, and commitment. Struggle is a requirement, but we need educators and staff that know what it means to be a coach and a cheerleader to help our students get through the trials and tribulations of this age. And to prepare them with pride and strength to face and overcome any challenges they may have in the future.

Ford (2020) noted Black children are routinely, “expected to learn and persist in traumatizing, hostile, culturally assaultive learning environments on the one hand or culture-blind school settings on the other hand” (p. 4). According to the Center on the Developing Mind at Harvard University (2017), negative conditioning can manifest as uncontrollable emotions, aggressive behavior, and significantly lower cognitive scores. If an individual succumbs to the belief that these oppressive forces and messages are accurate in creating a degraded definition of their existence, authentic functionality becomes impossible. The individual never fully develops an immutable sense of self-worth, nor can they assert their human right to self-determination.

The dominant society has continuously presented this narrative of self to Black children and the Black community, expecting them to believe it (Bailey et al., 2019; L. Garvey, 2019; McCoy-Wilson, 2023). This story was also one that all research participants in this study rejected. These Black educators, BSLs and staff, expressed an understanding of the need to tie the intellectual pursuits of students in the classroom to the liberating exigencies in the broader social and
political community (Dantley, 2009). The BSLs were committed to creating a community of Black educators in their school who work to ensure the highest probability of holistic success for Black children while also decreasing their chances for the development of internalized inferiority. The BSLs’ intention behind creating a community of like-minded educators pushed the limits of the liberatory mindset beyond the expectation of only being held by the BSLs alone. These leaders asserted ownership and refinement of the liberatory mindset as part of the collective responsibility of all who worked in the building.

Aware of the ongoing risk of their Black students’ existence being diminished socially, emotionally, mentally, physically, and culturally in culturally assaultive learning environments (Ford, 2021), the BSLs in this study desired to create a sense of community among their staff in the hope that this would, in turn, create an affirming community for their Black students. In reference to the way BSLs must lead, Modan and Himmel (2021) shared an anecdote from Jason Grissom: “Black principals are leading differently. . . . They’re creating different environments for Black staffs that in turn impacts their work experiences and creates a school that they are more attached to, and that’s what creates the turnover difference” (p. 4). The school leaders recognized that the success of a liberatory school could easily be dismantled or lead to high staff turnover if there were staff members who doubted the importance of the school’s unified approach to educating Black children. One way they did this was by carefully recruiting educators and staff members for their school who shared their beliefs on the need for developing self-worth in Black students as well as the lived experiences of the Black, urban, mixed-class history and reality of the school’s surrounding community. As they saw it, this was crucial both in creating a community among the educators who would be willing to share collective responsibility for their students’ liberation and empowerment, and in strengthening their Black
students’ connections to their community towards molding them into becoming critical thinkers, nurturing their self-love, and bolstering their self-determination. The next section describes the staff’s commitment to creating this sense of community and belonging among their students and the ways they sought to implement this vision.

**Recognizing the Need to Build a Vision of Personal Liberation in Black Students**

The current and historic public education system has consistently failed to meet the unique needs of Black children with respect to their racial, cultural, often class-based, behavioral authenticity, interpersonal norms, and sociopolitical differences from their white K–12 counterparts during the developmental period between pre-K and 12th grades (Grissom et al., 2015; Weir, 2016). One reason is the tendency in school systems to address Blackness and the Black experience as monolithic, despite research that indicates otherwise (Asare, 2022; Ray, 2020). Another is that schools have historically offered inequitable resources and opportunities to Black children, leading to substantially and statistically lower academic and life outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Morsy & Rothstein, 2019). In terms of discipline, Cokley (2016) shared, “While black kids make up 18 percent of preschool enrollment, they represent 48 percent of students receiving one or more suspensions. Getting suspended matters because it is correlated with being referred to law enforcement and arrested” (p. 4). Woodson (1933/2023) offered a critique of schooling almost 100 years ago for its inability and unwillingness to provide an effective education that would not only teach Black students to recite information but would enable them to ask difficult epistemological and ontological questions about life and political systems, both social and economic. BSLs and staff in this study aspired to make Woodson’s vision a reality through love. Using the term “client” interchangeably with “student,” Ada noted:
[School] is a place for children to come to make sure that they have warmth, food, people who will listen to and talk to them to make sure to check in on them, and make sure that they are safe in the most professional manner possible. People who can support them and, in some instances, support their caregivers in the effort of supporting them also. So, serving our clients as if they were our own helps us feel confident in supporting them to understand the world and community around the, the history, and the political and economic realities of today.

Aligning with Royal and Gibson’s (2017) warning that “neglecting emancipatory pedagogies [such as culturally responsive pedagogy] risk students from historically marginalized communities [continuing] to appear as standardized failures” (p. 1), participants in this study strived to create environments where resources and opportunities were equitable and plentiful for Black children. All the participants agreed that their own early learning experiences with schools and caregivers, whether positive or not, had contributed to their own personal liberation as adults and given them a sense of purpose to show up for each other and their Black students. Participants described life lessons and experiences that impacted their desire to create a different school community and environment than what they lived through or saw others live through. For example, Ada shared:

I was brought up to take pride in myself, community, and my race, regardless of what happened in school. My parents knew how dangerous—imagine that school dangerous to my mind and body—but they sent me and armed me as best they could. And they were talking K–12 and college, not just K–12.

Similarly, SM16 noted:
It was taught to me early on that there was a real purpose, and mission and duty for Black Americans to take hold of in this country, to set up stuff for ourselves, to be self-determined. So, the capacity was limitless with that understanding.

Each excerpt provided detailed a negative personal experience. The reality for several participants included anecdotes of how “Black people’s suffering . . . has helped inform teaching that counters all roadblocks to Black Freedom” (Coles & Stanley, 2021, p. 4). Other participants shared viewpoints on how lessons on the legacy of Black resistance, starting at the preschool stage, contributed to their resilience despite repeated exposure to oppressive learning environments (American Psychological Association, 2008; G. Foster, 2020). In both perspectives, the end result was the same: joining a group of other liberatory-minded educators to support developing Black youth in their own navigation of self-discovery and sociopolitical awareness.

Study participants reflected heavily on overcoming fear and messages of unworthiness in their own lives as primary motivators to create spaces that promoted self-love and self-determination in their students. Participants reported the ability of their school to differentiate itself based on the needs of Black children as central to the design and staffing of the school. According to study participants, part of this differentiation began by countering the negative and violent messages they had received from society about their own potential as students. As one participant shared:

No one really took school too seriously when I was growing up. It was not the type of place where we went to dream. We watched TV and played with our friends and thought that one ever really talked to me about dreaming and life, not really. They did their job and left. (SM8)
A responsive school takes into account the differing social and cultural realities of Black students and creates learning opportunities to ensure equitable opportunities for success (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Naman, 2009; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2016). This study’s school leaders and staff worked to create an environment where Black children could thrive.

Recognizing the concept of liberation as a school value in support of community values is a realization prolifically absent among many schools that educate Black children (Darder, 2015; Fanon, 2016; Tejada et al., 2003). BSLs in this study collaborated to develop this liberatory concept as a school value and operationalized it in the ways they developed themselves and their staff. BSLs in this study described how they worked with their staff to embed the liberatory concept in every aspect of their school ethos. Kofi shared:

So, typically, we like to begin in CRP and ERP, economically relevant pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, and then some of the foundational frameworks being an inquiry-based approach, a critical design thinking. And then last but not least, the leadership index. [and in terms of student outcomes] I want you [the student] to be whatever it is that you choose to do and that they have those opportunities. And that’s freedom, that is liberation. We practice pedagogy that is founded in cultural relevancy and fundamental beliefs that speak to empowerment.

Kofi’s vision of liberation aligns with that of scholars who describe it as a guiding concept extended from instruction to economic relevance to using an inquiry-based approach that encouraged critical thinking, creativity, self-reflection, and a greater interest in STEM areas of study (Henríquez Fernández et al., 2021; Paris & Alim, 2017). Similarly, in reference to liberation as purpose through self-determination, Ada added:
To foster the ability to be able to reach those children in that particular lane with the liberatory actions of my full practice . . . educating with the purpose of preparing students, preparing human beings to gain control of their lives in response to whatever ecosystem they are navigating at the time.

Speaking as if they were a Black student going through this process of personal liberation, Kofi also shared, “The more I’m aware of what I can access, the more other steps I can take to liberate myself in different domains of my life.” Both Kofi and Ada echo the sentiments of scholars such as B. L. Love (2019) and Kelley (2022) that personal freedom to dream and self-determination to manifest those dreams has been historically denied to Black students.

Recognizing the concept of liberation as a school value in support of community values is a realization prolifically absent among many schools that educate Black children (Darder, 2015; Fanon, 2016; Tejeda et al., 2003). Ada’s, Kofi’s and the staff members’ description of liberation for their students is congruent with Harro’s (2010) cycle of liberation (see Figure 2). The core of the cycle of liberation model contains self-love, self-esteem, balance, joy, support, security, and a spiritual base. In alignment with the centrality of these values, staff members shared their purpose:

- “to impart love and kindness through education” (SM7);
- “[to foster] a high level of self-love” (SM4);
- “I got to think about them having love for themselves” (SM14);
- “self-love and a real level of confidence to overcome fear, they’d be good to champion through anything” (SM9); and
- “self-worth and how they feel about themselves without all of these additional things” (SM15).
The cycle of liberation presents a visual representation of the “coming to realize the nature of oppression and seeking new paths towards social change” (Harro, 2010, p. 452). Of note, in alignment with the concept of liberation cycle, the push for awareness through self-reflection (i.e., waking up), gathering a coalition of like-minded educators (i.e., building a community and coalescing), and developing alternative strategies for Black student success that are not culturally oppressive (i.e., creating and maintaining change) is a summary of the charge.
the BSLs in this study accept. Personal liberation as an explicit necessity for calibration on each participant’s purpose, and a contributing factor toward efforts to support the development of Black children, represented an additional expansion of the original actions associated with manifestation of the liberatory mindset. Each study participant’s story of growth contributed to their collective synergy of purpose, and perhaps their effectiveness as educators.

Making a conscious effort to consider the differing social and cultural realities of Black students while creating learning opportunities to ensure equitable opportunities for success (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Naman, 2009; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2016), this study’s school leaders and staff envisioned an environment where Black children could thrive. The shared desired outcome was to strengthen the sense of self-love and self-worth of Black students through the messaging and supportive actions of the research participants. Such a stance, the research participants believed would lead to a cycle of liberation (Harro, 2010) that would give students the freedom to dream. The data revealed the connections between the individual and communal understandings of empowerment and purpose as a rudder for collective action. The individual mutually benefited from, and contributed to, the collective efforts to empowering Black children. The collective group of research participants at this school their expected to fortify their effectiveness by calibrating on and committing to a clear definition of purpose.

In conclusion, the Black school leaders and staff identified three main components for their vision for creating liberatory and responsive educational systems for Black students. These included (a) developing counternarratives, whereby based on the adults’ own experiences of schooling, they were determined to build experiences that negated or reduced the pernicious effects of the pervasive anti-Blackness messaging from society, (b) developing a community among the staff through deliberate and careful hiring practices to ensure that Black students
would interact only with adults in the school who shared similar liberatory mindsets, and (c) recognizing the need to emphasize self-love and self-worth among their Black students to help them thrive.

**Resilience and Personal Growth**

Another major element of liberatory schools the participants identified was resilience and personal growth. There were two aspects to this. One, it was important, specifically for the Black female students, to experience a school environment that affirmed and protected their Black femininity. Black girls were highlighted, due to their intersectional identity, as requiring specific and consistent messaging that would reinforce their ability and resilience in combatting negative messages, just as the women research participants had done themselves. Two, aware of how stereotypes for all Black students played out in society, the participants emphasized the importance of “unlearning” traditional approaches to disciplining Black students using punitive and humiliating disciplinary measures and instead making them teachable opportunities for the students.

**Effects of Intersectionality on Black Femininity**

The data also revealed targeted attention to the desired experiences for Black girls in the school, as they related to the lived experiences of the Black women in the research participant group. The cisgender woman BSL commented on the unique nature of her intersectional life experiences, and how they impact her concept of Black womanhood. Ada shared:

I realized especially with young Black women, this whole thing about being superwoman and being able to handle everything, that’s not liberating for them. For me, that was important to me. I needed to be strong, I needed to be independent. They’re like, “I want to be soft. I want to be treated a certain way. I want to be seen as delicate so that people
are not dumping everything on me.” And I respect that. That means check on me sometimes, but that’s not how I was raised in thinking. So, things need to be ever alive, and adaptive, and adapting and liberating, not us forcing thinking on them unless they are trapped in some type of stereotypical box.

Ada’s sentiment was another example of the danger of stereotype threat, which she had to navigate through her adulthood to determine how to support young Black girls who faced the same pressures (Harris-Perry, 2014). Ada described how the stereotype of being seen as strong and independent was often accompanied by having her humanity ignored and being “dumped on” physically and emotionally. Ada explained how permission to be “checked on” was not how she was raised, but through her personal growth and resilience, she had adopted a new perspective. Ada was pushing herself to get out of the “stereotypical box” of Black womanhood to move more towards a liberated sense of being, fully emotional present and deserving of care and supportive attention.

Black women and girls specifically have been targets of both systemic racism and systemic sexism, that when combined, have a compounded and unique impact. This type of compounded discrimination is based on race and gender is defined as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013; Crenshaw et al., 2015). Intersectionality describes how the race and gender discrimination Black women experience in society differs from that of Black men. According to Morris (2018), “Black girls have been subjected to harmful stereotypes about Black femininity that have at least shaped and at worst defined their experiences in classrooms and schools around the country” (p. 8). The lethal combination of gender and racial discrimination in the forms of adultification (i.e., being seen and less innocent and more adult-like then their white peers), disproportional suspension, race-based hair bias, and oversexualization, create more
opportunities for Black girls to succumb to negative messages about themselves (Allen & Hilliard, 2022; Carter, 2021; Morris, 2016). The Anglo-Saxon Protestant norms that serve as the foundation of public education in the United States have not evolved to include or tolerate the fullness of Black femininity (Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2016). With this understanding as part of their own experience in schools, Ada and the other research participants endeavored to create a fully inclusive and affirming environment, that embraces the complexity and diversity of Black femininity. One staff member, who identified as an African American woman, shared:

If I am confident enough in what we do here to bring both my daughters, that means I think their spirits and identities will be safe. They will also know that anyone who tries to violate or discriminate against the here will be dealt with. Out on the street, they have to know how to protect themselves, but doing that all the time can be exhausting. Here, I know they can relax enough to receive blessings and praise from their teachers, because that they way we teach here. (SM9)

Again, here the staff member repeated an earlier sentiment about feeling confident to send their own children to the school they work in. The difference here, the staff member was very specific about the unique, often ignored needs of Black girls, and how the school (and its staff) aimed to provide countermessaging and protection for their intersectional identities. This collective act of protectionism among the research participants was described as the schoolwide ethos and represents the nurturing aspect of the liberatory mindset. The internalized messages of Black female stereotyping are directly challenged with the desire to give Black girls in this school empowering messaging about themselves. It is also important to note, the male and nonbinary research participants did not withdraw from this portion of the focus group conversations, but rather were observed as affirming and agreeing with these truths of their Black women
colleagues nonverbally. The absence of their voices, opinions, assertions, and commitments could be interpreted as an area of gender self-reflection they have engaged (and continue to engage) in to use their awareness of male privilege to act in supportive and affirming ways with their Black female colleagues and students. This possibility did not explicitly appear in the data, but the comment, “that’s the way we teach here,” provides a hint that there was some degree of positive gender affirming and nurturing among the research participants (and perhaps the entire staff).

**Identifying Mistakes as Opportunities**

Participants believed that using mistakes that students might make as teachable opportunities rather than as occasions to discipline. The data showed participants felt this shift in approach was an essential part of building self-confidence and worthiness in their Black students. Therefore, staff and BSLs at the school in this study described an environment where students were constantly given opportunities to reflect on their choices, take ownership, and self-correct when mistakes are made.

During one of my many visits to the school for community circles, while waiting in the main office, I witnessed an expression of love, understanding, and accountability between one of the BSLs, several staff members, and a seventh-grade girl who had made a mistake and was waiting for her parents to come to talk with her and one of the BSLs. When I arrived in the office, the student’s body language was one of defeat. Her head was down. She did not make eye contact with anyone in the office, not even her younger brother, who kept trying to get her attention to play catch with a small football—I found out later he was only 6 years old. She was not crying but was quiet. I assumed she was dreading having to face her parents and the BSL and receive whatever consequences she had earned. As a former staff and school leader, I had seen
this scene many times. The image of a child defeated and waiting for their punishment. I chronicled this scene in my researcher reflective journal, writing:

(4:34 pm) Still waiting in the office and the student in some sort of trouble is still there. As office staff members begin leaving one by one each one speaks to that child with uplifting affirming language and a supportive tone. Each adult gently tilts her head up from its bowed position with their hands in order to see the child’s eyes. The student never breaks eye contact after they all repeat this gesture, but does not appear to feel threatened, afraid, or uncomfortable with the interaction with the various adults. They all assert lovingly that they don’t want to hear about this student getting into this type of trouble (or any) ever again. None of the adults raise their voices or stand over the students as they are speaking. None of the adults use a condescending tone, as I am close enough to hear tone, but not every word. I can see the child’s head repeatedly nod after every exchange. Each adult either crouches next to the student as they sit or sits directly next to them on the couch in the office. They each independently wait for a response from the child as they leave. The child responds softly but directly to each adult. All adults feel responsible and show evidence of relationship and trust with this student (I wonder if/how that extends to all students in the building?) I count seven adults total who interacted with this child over a 22-minute period.

I was inclined to believe this was a rare or unique encounter if it involved one or two adults; however, seven different adults interacted with the student over a 22-minute period. This type of alignment in tone, approach, care, and discipline was not the norm in the schools I had experienced, led, and read about in existing literature describing the Black student experience in K–12 public schools in the United States. Staff members and the BSL in this exchange did not
humiliate the child due to the mistake, the nature of which I was never made aware but was serious enough to hold the child until their parent arrived. Ada was the BSL who ultimately talked with the parent. During my interview with Kofi later that same week, I mentioned this exchange. I shared my reflective notes with them and my appreciation for being able to see the liberatory mindset in action. Ada responded:

It’s not easy to bring people into that, especially when the actual university training. It is not that. The graduate training is not that. And if they were at another charter school, it’s not that . . . it’s really hard to find . . . people who are willing to do the work and who really care about, and love our children, and believe in our children.

This school leader referred to the common practice of zero tolerance in many charter schools that requires students to be suspended or expelled for violating rules. Zero-tolerance policy enforcement often involves the police in minor misbehaviors and results frequently in arrests leading to juvenile detention referrals (B. L. Love, 2019; Ramsay-Smith, 2016). These policies disproportionately impact Black children and contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon. The American Civil Liberties Union (2008) defined the school-to-prison pipeline as the combination of “policies and practices that push our nation’s schoolchildren, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems . . . [by] prioritizing incarceration over education” (para. 1). Ada acknowledged their commitment to finding and supporting potential staff members who show their support for Black children through empathy and understanding instead of overly harsh disciplinary policies and criminalization of Black student choices and behaviors.

The expectation that adults discipline and support Black students without disrespecting, humiliating, or dehumanizing them, is in direct contrast to the research on the surge of hostility
many Black students face in traditional public school settings that are not understanding, empathetic, or responsive to their reality (Fergus, 2019; Peterson, 2023; U.S Government Accountability Office, 2018). Several participants mentioned that as students they had themselves experienced such hostile responses from schools and that, had it not been for interventions from caregivers or models of success outside of the schools they attended, they would have left school before completing the compulsory 12th grade or become enforcers of the same policies to which they were subject as students or taught as aspiring educators. Many study participants, such as SM5, attempted not to, “[lose] the warfare of the mind. If you can break down someone’s mental, then they’re defeated.” Participants claimed that a loss in this psychological, cultural, and spiritual battle for self-preservation would represent the failure of the school and not the student, since this failure was usually followed by dropping out, suspension, or expulsion from systems whose approach to “schooling” and discipline never truly served them or their community equitably. The style of discipline participants had received in these spaces as students, they noted, was often punitive and not restorative or intended to preserve self-respect or humanity (Fergus, 2019; Finn & Servoss, 2015; Peterson, 2023), and they were conscious that if these negative messages of self were left unaddressed, they could become internalized by Black children who grow into Black adults still afflicted.

Unlearning Oppressive Approaches to Disciplining Black Students

Kofi commented on the necessity of unlearning oppressive teaching and classroom management practices unleashed on Black children to show empathy and render discipline without humiliation:

Some people have a really set mindset around what school should look like and how it should function. And even us, it’s hard for us to step outside of that. Still, if I was raised
in this way, when a child shows up like this, the consequences are this. And that’s how I was raised. And it takes time to step away from that. Not to say that there are never any consequences but one, the consequences need to make sense and be tied to the choice that was made. . . . And that’s not easy because that’s much harder, and much more involved, and much more complicated than just saying, “You didn’t do your homework so you fail and don’t go to the next grade.” Or, “You hit somebody,” instead of having to ask yourself and then discuss with them what was going on in the house that you did not do your homework? How could you plan differently so that you have time and space? How can you set your house differently so you have time and space to do your practice work?

Here, Kofi described the default adult behaviors expected in nonresponsive schools that may contribute to challenges to Black student success. The shift toward a more empathetic, trauma-informed approach indicates a humanizing or liberatory approach. He also described a missing component of the liberatory mindset, or the potential for developing and aligning around it: unlearning. Personal and professional experiences contributed to the development of this mindset and resulting pedagogical actions; however, this leader also described and interrogated the capacity for change in their staff members. The “people” referenced in the previous quote were current employees, which means, even after vetting for the alignment around the three pillars of the liberatory mindset (i.e., co-construction, curtaining internalized inferiority, and nurturing the growth of a positive self-image in Black students), there was still a degree of unlearning necessary for true alignment of purpose. Traditionally, the notion of developing as an educator implies the adoption of new skills and frameworks to enhance effectiveness. However, the school leader clearly identified the need to “step away” from some of the practices personally experienced as expressions of care and accountability and replace them with a new
understanding of empowering discipline and maintaining student humanity. This approach is
exemplified in the interaction observed in the main office between one student who violated a
community norm. Several staff members interacted with this student during this period. Not all
the adults described in the following observation were research participants; hence, they are not
given participant designations.

The participants were acutely conscious of the cultural milieu of anti-Black racism and
intersectional justice experienced by Black women. The Black women participants specifically,
through reflecting on their own experiences, emphasized the importance of developing resilience
to combat these stereotypes within themselves and their Black female students. The participants
were also aware that, as microcosms of these societally defined deficit frameworks, schools had
become incubators for harsh and humiliating disciplinary practices against Black students, and
that it was their role to subvert this phenomenon by instituting humanizing, nonpunitive
approaches that used care, concern, and empathy instead to help students learn from their
mistakes.

**Sociopolitical Awareness and Advocacy**

The third theme that emerged as a major element of liberatory schools after data analysis
was the importance of sociopolitical awareness and advocacy. This theme highlighted the
importance of developing critical thinking as a guiding principle for liberatory schools. This
involved study participants describing how they develop curiosity and facilitate self-discovery in
their Black students through supporting their exploration of self-worth. The participants also
shared how their communal feelings of personal commitment to the empowerment of Black
children were inextricably bound to their sense of purpose, personal fulfillment, and a welcomed
ancestral obligation.
Your Black Life Matters

BSLs and staff members at the school in this study wanted their students to develop the curiosity and intellectual courage to ask, “Why does my life matter?” They were aware that although this question may seem benign or even ridiculous to others, Black children are confronted with daily. These leaders know that once Black children discover how the world responds to their racial identity they may settle on incomplete or incorrect self-definitions without support or guidance in their development. This question fueled the commitment of BSLs and staff at this school to make learning reflective of the sociopolitical realities of their students’ lives (i.e., education) and not simply exposure to sterile, disconnected facts and procedures (i.e., schooling; Shujaa, 1998). A collective approach rooted in self-discovery and acknowledgment of innate limitless potential drove the counternarrative of worthiness and confidence the BSLs and staffers envisioned instilling in their students. By dissecting and critiquing the dynamics of their own sociopolitical reality, participants worked to free themselves from feeling totally victimized and helpless. Victimization and helplessness are two states of being that are strong indicators of internalized inferiority and can serve as justification for weakened self-determination and feelings of unworthiness in Black children (Williams, 2012; Willis et al., 2021). Awareness, followed by analysis, promotes action (B. L. Love, 2019). BSLs and staffers in this school spoke about working to convince students that they had control over their own lives and yearned to inspire them to claim it. As Kofi shared:

Gain[ing] control of their lives so that they have the freedom to live the life that they want, but also the education to change what needs to be changed in the world for them, for their people, for the community, for the world.
The thematic questions of this subsection represent an expansion of the original notion of the liberatory mindset; for example, there are clear parallels between asking why one’s life matters and the Black Lives Matter movement. This question reified the connection between research participants and a shared cause as one expression of their liberatory mindset. Of the several alignments with the 13 Black Lives Matter principles (Black Lives Matter at School, n.d.)—in this case, the principle of collective value (i.e., none of us are free until all of us are free)—was echoed in the exercise of engaging students with a question that positioned them to define why they matter and how they matter to others like them.

Collectively, this team of educators expressed the importance of posing the “why my life matters?” question early and often to Black children. Participants shared how this creative self-reflection allowed their Black students to unpack sinister messages of inferiority they may have received from various outlets. Ada referred to this process as “deconstruction” and again highlighted the importance for adults to continually go through this process with their students. As she explained, this deconstruction process represented an expansive liberatory action similar to “unlearning” in staff members, mentioned earlier with regard to “unlearning” traditional approaches to discipline; however, the target audience was Black students themselves. Although both processes represented aligned activities related to the shared racial identity between research participants and Black students, deconstruction probed deeper than the excavation of learned behavior, such as expectations around Black student behavior or academic potential. In deconstruction, the coached participant—in this case, Black students—entered into a process of self-examination of their philosophy of self or self-knowledge. Ada described the process and the potential beneficial parallels for students and adults:
Guiding someone into deconstructing themselves. Any engagement with another human being or group of human beings, I think the best place to start is with self. And to really investigate, what are my assumptions and how do I know what I know is true? How do I really know what I think I know is true? And then to really trace that. What are my beliefs about children and growth? What are my beliefs about trauma and people’s potential?

Because “African American students don’t leave their issues at the schoolhouse door” (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009, p. 119), this shared process of (re)conditioning allows the Black student to rebuild their own self-image on their own terms and with guidance and support from others who understand their identity development journey (i.e., BSLs and their staff; Brittian, 2012; Jerome, 2022). The adults understand the journey and how to support their students because they’ve lived it themselves. Ada echoed this point and reinforced the importance of beginning this curiosity conditioning with the leader and continuing it with staff, noting:

We endeavor to spark a certain thought pattern in this attention to study and attention to certain details, where the person [here referencing themself] becomes a student. And then as a student, they begin to dive deeper and deeper and ask questions. The irony is, is that this is the same thing we want them [staffers] to do with our students.

Curiosity alone is a vital component of critical consciousness, one of the pillars of the liberatory mindset (Eglash & Bennett, 2023; Hammond, 2021). This group of educators described the importance of igniting critical consciousness in their students, in turn, through facilitating self-reflection and supporting their own exploration of their purpose. Creating curiosity in their Black students to ask questions about themselves, their racial identity, their self-worth, and their place within the larger context of society and the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement was an
important component of the adults’ efforts towards advocacy for their students and developing a sociopolitical awareness in their students.

**Duty and Personal Responsibility**

At the school in this study, BSLs and staffers described their own personal responsibility as both a strong motivator for working there and a significant component in aligning the liberatory mindset with supporting academic and holistic success for their Black students. Participants saw themselves as advocates for their students’ well-being and achievement. The tradition of service described was not to the profession but to their community directly and the children it produces. There were no researchable records of this duty being a prerequisite for employment at any current traditional public school. Information about this feeling of personal responsibility is neither requested nor tracked for any educator deemed qualified or certified to teach in the United States. Not to be confused with mission alignment, which is often an organizational statement reflecting organizational goals, the feelings of duty described here differed.

Research participants shared sentiments centered around a deeply personal connection to their community and its children. Coles (2020) described this sense of obligation as “a responsibility of urban educators to explicitly engage in examinations of how structural systems of oppression facilitate social hierarchies and thusly social interaction with their students” (p. 9). This sentiment was reinforced by the fact that 1 out of every 4 staff members had a child who attended the school or one in their network, including Kofi’s two children. These participants described how the notions of safety, identity affirmation, and advocacy are magnified when a parent–staff member works in the building or network they trust to nurture and develop their own child. SM9 shared, “That’s a big responsibility to be around children and be a level of
influence on them, and I think that school in its true form is that.” Kofi shared, “I thought that I could serve the world and my people best if I worked to create a place where I would have left my children.” This duty was described as both personal responsibility and an aligned response to an ancestral and inherited legacy of resistance through action. One participant shared:

Very clearly, we [Black Americans] have or should have a responsibility to take care of our children the best way we know how. To protect and care for their body and soul in a way that no other people can. Like a parent taking care of a child. It’s like my mother telling me that I have a limitless future ahead of me. I want to make sure our students feel the same way. (SM2)

What was striking in this quote was the use of the word “limitless” because it referenced the capacity for self-determined outcomes of Black children (and people) to be unbound in the United States, which was one of the intentions of the colonizers who disenfranchised enslaved Africans over 400 years ago. There is messaging beyond the words to imply reclaiming power was an additional motivator for the research participants to embrace the responsibility of teaching Black children. The participants explained the success of their Black students was not expressed simply as a goal but rather a requirement of their duty-bound commitment to preserve and expand their own self-determination and liberatory purpose.

My reflection notes on this comment also described the most potent affirmations and agreements participants gave following this comment during data collection. Reminiscent of a choral amen or um-hum during a moment of shared undeniable truth among African Americans conversing on the proverbial front porch, the circle of staff participants cheered, affirmed, seconded, and internalized the comment, all without making direct comments to the speaker. Yet, the speaker revealed their understanding of the response by simply placing their hand over
their heart momentarily and then gesturing as if they were giving it to the room while briefly and slowly nodding their head. Such a gesture appeared to be a shared cultural salute of understanding and appreciation, a cousin to a bow but not as formal as a call to arms. An exchange of this magnitude, one of engagement and acknowledgment, was only observed once during both community circles, and participants easily recalled the moment during their opportunity to member check the categories and themes. The moment supports the notion that the sense of allegiance to the liberatory community grows and strengthens in purpose and resolve by encouraging unlearning, facilitating student deconstruction, and accepting their duty as advocates for their students as Black educators.

The research participants shared their intent to ignite awareness in their Black students through facilitating opportunities for self-reflection, shared meaning-making, and nurturing their natural curiosity. These actions by the research participants, were described as integral to their own assessment of self-worth and personal responsibility in support of their students and the Black community.

**Self-Determination and Courage as Outcome Drivers**

Participants in this study identified student outcomes as the most significant factor relating to educational equity and access. State tests, SAT/ACT scores, and college acceptance were not outcomes explicitly identified by any study participant as targeted student outcomes; rather, the measure of a student’s worth and potential exceeded these commonly referenced goals. The absence of standardized tests as the primary motivator for the research participants did not mean the team did not value the college experience; instead, they focused on equipping students with the tools and intellectual courage to make decisions about their future by employing a larger range of successful pathways. The participants hoped to inspire their students...
to develop intellectual courage and a sense of self-determination as the main drivers toward their outcomes. By self-determination, as Kofi explained, they meant “the opportunity to define what success (and liberation) looks like for them instead of other people doing that (for them).” They believed these outcomes would help to combat any sense of internalized inferiority in their students that might affect their academic and social success beyond school. As SM9 shared, “We want them to go out there and be courageous intellectually . . . I think part of what we’re playing is not only the disruption game, but the inspiration game.” When questioned about the nature of the most desirable outcomes BSLs and their staff have for their students, they consistently mentioned characteristics such as positive self-image, curiosity, and preparedness for self-determined success. Ada shared, “We want our students to be self-determined, and again, creative, innovative, critical thinkers, and those who put their heart and this idea of what it means to be kind, this empathetic approach as well.” Kofi added:

And so, then that self-confidence and that willingness to stand up . . . That self-confidence in themselves to stand up and advocate for themselves in the most combative situations would be a really excellent outcome for me also. That their time with us has strengthened them in this way or in that way.

Similarly, SM3 noted, “Empathetic, but at the same time, being grounded or level-headed enough to ask those questions or explore or dig into a situation that’s occurring. Those critical thinking skills.” Lastly, several participants in the community circle shared their desire to inspire students to be courageous, reflective, grounded, and disciplined while possessing a high degree of self-love.

However, during a community circle, one staff member contended the school was not doing enough to address the fears apparent in their students:
Fear sucks. Yeah, it’s like it’s a destroyer of dreams, and we live in a fear driven and fearmongering culture, and the fear isn’t necessarily scariness. It’s like, hey, it’s fear not being beautiful, fear not being strong, fear not identifying as being masculine, fear being this, fear of sickness, fear of plague. So, it’s a lot of fearmongering. (SM13)

SM14 added, “Fear of what you don’t know,” and several participants in the community circle agreed with this sentiment, raising the concern of how to address it in their pedagogical design. According to the Cleveland Clinic (2022), atychiphobia—the fear of failure—can be directly related to diminished self-worth, lack of confidence, and overall hopelessness. These are also indicators of internalized inferiority. It is reasonable to assert fear was being addressed but not explicitly identified as a factor Black students are confronted with and left to navigate on their own. Fear of the possible negative outcomes that may result if their students weren’t adequately prepared to defend their selfhood was revealed in the data through testimonials by research participants of the demise of their own childhood friends. One staff member shared:

I had plenty of friends growing up and in college that I knew were smarter and more motivated than I was. But they got caught up chasing money because they thought that was the definition of success. And they didn’t care how they got it; they just wanted it fast. The risks they took, I think were because they didn’t believe they were ever going to be seen if they didn’t show how much money they had. It was all for a rep, a fake rep. That’s not who they were on the inside. (SM5)

Another staff member noted:

If you don’t feel like nobody out there got your back, and is protecting you, then you gonna either be scared all the time or find protection, or what you think is protection in the wrong places. That’s why these gangs are still going strong. Our kids feel like they
have no alternatives, and the gangs prey on their self-doubt and fear. And once that happens its almost inevitable that they will get caught up in the system of police and juvenile so-called justice. Once that happens it becomes even harder to recover a real life of freedom. We trying to make them strong enough and give them the tools to figure out another way to live. We trying to keep their bodies and spirits safe from that stuff.

(SM10)

The vulnerability necessary to openly identify and confront fears had unquestionably been a part of each participants’ evolution toward a liberatory mindset. Perhaps there were opportunities for educators in this study to be more transparent regarding their own struggles with fear and self-doubt to encourage stronger feelings of safety and self-assurance in their students.

Summary

This study identified key factors that describe how the BSLs interpreted the liberatory mindset and used it to influence how they selected staff members. Once these staff members were in place the BSLs used shared understandings of the liberatory mindset to co-construct empowering learning environments for Black students. Four themes were identified through data analysis as shared values of both BSLs and their staff that define their manifestation of the liberatory mindset. The first was a unified desire to create liberatory and responsive learning environments that support the often-ignored developmental needs of Black students. Through reflecting on their own experiences as students, the research participants created a counternarrative for the vision of Black student support and success in schools. The BSLs specifically focused on recruiting and hiring staff members that shared in their vision for Black student success, and the realities of the social challenges that can accompany the Black experience. The research participants also defined the importance of experiencing their own
personal growth and resilience to contribute to the collective ethos of the school building. Through the shared cultural experiences and resonance, the research participants were able to be more deeply aware of students’ needs and how to support them in their identity, cultural and academic development. In addition, building sociopolitical awareness and the capacity for self-advocacy were also themes among all research participants. The BSLs and their staff expressed feelings of personal responsibility and duty to be advocates for the achievement and well-being of their Black students. Lastly, the need to develop intellectual courage and self-determination in their students was the final shared theme. These two components were described by participants as the most significant levers to Black student success. When developed in their Black students, the participants envisioned intellectual curiosity and self-determination helping them overcome their fears and define their own path to success no matter the obstacle.

The final chapter explores the implications of these finding, both for sitting and aspiring educators, analyses the significance of the findings, and potential recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

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

–Robin D. G. Kelley, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination

Black school leaders (BSLs) and staff members in this study provided a plethora of indicators that can be used to construct a learning environment that will be both intellectually challenging and culturally empowering for Black students. This chapter summarizes the main findings and then analyzes the significance of these findings, which are: (a) giving communities and families choices for education including ethnoculturally autonomous schooling, and (b) developing possibilities for allyship with non-Black school leaders and educators by adopting community of color epistemologies and team cultural intuition. The chapter ends with recommendations for potential future research and possible limitation of the inquiry.

These research participants represented a diverse group of life experiences, identities, ages, tenure, and places of origin. However, they shared a collective commitment to using their personal experiences to help shape a collective effort to safeguard the essential right of self-determination in their Black students. This safeguarding combined with the educators’ ability to co-construct a pedagogical alternative to white supremacy culture with their staff, curtail the development of internalized racial inferiority in their Black students, and nurture the growth of a positive self-image in their Black students defined the liberatory mindset and approach to pedagogical approach.
The study analyzed how BSLs interpret the liberatory mindset as they seek to create empowering learning environments for Black students with aligned staff members. Using data from individual semistructured interviews with two Black school leaders, observations of a professional development activity, two community circles with 16 staff members and a researcher journal, this inquiry gained contextual and in-depth knowledge about the developmental experiences and liberatory perspectives of two BSLs and their ideological coalescence with the staff they hire and develop. Although the initial research design was intended to examine how BSLs developed and transferred their liberatory mindset to their staff through professional development, the active epistemological and interpretive thinking that drove the data collection and analysis revealed a deeper alignment between the Black school leaders and the school staff that originally expected. There was no evidence indicating that this alignment arose solely through the effort of the BSLs. Instead, I concluded, both groups of participants shared individual life experiences and developmental pathways that brought them to the shared space of understanding and accepting their responsibility to liberate themselves and Black children through education.

The following themes emerged after selective coding and member checking by study participants for accuracy and resonance with their experiences and perspectives: (a) Liberatory and Responsive Education Systems, (b) Resilience and Personal Growth, (c) Sociopolitical Awareness and Advocacy, and (d) Self-Determination and Courage as Outcome Drivers. The research participants collectively strived to establish enlightening and responsive educational environments tailored towards the often-overlooked developmental needs of Black students. The BSLs and their staff recalled their own student experiences, which motivated them to envision an alternate narrative encompassing support mechanisms for Black students’ success in schools. In
addition, the research participants also supplied evidence highlighting their personal evolution and resilience as a cardinal component for understanding the need to celebrate cultural heritage and identity without compromising individuality or academic growth. Furthermore, creating awareness about sociopolitical issues was another shared objective among all research participants. They expressed candid feelings centered around upholding collective responsibility tasked at fighting tirelessly as advocates for Black student empowerment. Finally, fostering intellectual fearlessness coupled firmly with self-determination were key ingredients unanimously selected by all research participants as tools deemed most impactful in enabling Black students to define and achieve their success.

This chapter discusses the implications of these findings for developing liberatory mindsets in educators and liberatory schools towards ensuring academic success in Black students. This chapter will also discuss possibilities for applying the lessons learned in future research, implications for policy, and the potential to impact how other service providers to the Black community can be better equipped for success.

The “Right People”

The (re)humanization of Black children in the face of oppressive school policies and practices in the United States was an intentional process described by the research participants as providing opportunities for Black children to develop a sense of worthiness and self-love that can withstand any attempts of being diminished by the words or actions of those who may not share their hue or cultural identity. In addition, the (re)humanizing efforts of the research participants were part of a legacy of actions by Black educators who have had to respond to the “animalistic dehumanization” (Perillo et al., 2023, p. 36) of their students in schools and society. This dehumanization of Black children can lead to them believing in negative messages decreeing
their own inferiority, criminalization of their behavior by staff, and removal or rejection from school by administrators (Morsy & Rothstein, 2019; Williams, 2012; Willis et al., 2021). The research participants have experienced these factors in some way themselves, and that awareness bound them to the goal and necessity of a counternarrative. This community of educators strove to create a learning atmosphere where their Black students could receive what they have been historically denied—an equal opportunity to determine their own version of success and to pursue it uninterrupted by self-doubt or fear. This group of aligned educators shared personal and communal responsibility to their own community. There was an alignment of purpose that supported the transmutation of individual cultural intuition into a collective “team cultural intuition.” The expressed desires for the school atmosphere and the adults in it focused on the success of the students, the classes, and the community they all lived in. The legacy of resistance and the cycle of personal liberation expressed by research participants was intended to have a compounded effect on their collective ability to help Black children preserve and nurture their own self-determination and development of critical consciousness.

The alignment of purpose for the BSLs in this study began at the recruitment stage. These leaders were looking for candidates who were committed to the upliftment of the Black community through the empowerment of Black children. They were looking for school staff, not classroom staff, who were willing to take full responsibility for every child in the building. These types of staff expanded their scope of interest beyond what is going on solely in their classroom or even in the school. They understood that their efforts were connected to the health and future of the community—geographically and sociopolitically. The research participants here are here to protect the children’s and the Black community’s future. In some ways, as developing souls themselves, they were safeguarded from or triumphed over mental and cultural colonialization
that can lead to internalized inferiority (Mariska et al., 2019; Yosso, 2005). The BSLs firmly believed that their envisioned learning environment would be impossible without the right people on their team.

**Implication of the Findings**

The shared pedagogical beliefs evidenced in this study among educators has implications for multiple communities of leaders and caregivers that serve and support Black children. In this section three of these implications are presented. The first discusses how the act of developing counternarrative can promote the cohesion and effectiveness of aspiring Black educators seeking to empower Back children. The second describes how the ethos of the school in this study, if more widely known, could influence how Black parents and caregivers investigate and evaluate potential school choices for their children. The final implication presented shares how non-Black educators of Black students can explore some potential pedagogical adjustments to be more aligned with a liberatory approach.

**Counternarrative Formation for Aspiring Black Educators**

The findings in this study could be applied to current and future practices in several ways. In addition, there are opportunities for future research and expansion on the community of focus. With counternarrative as a pillar of the liberatory mindset, we first examine the possibilities for leadership development programming. The content and experiences in these programs profoundly affect how aspiring Black leaders define their own success. Rarely in these programs are aspiring BSLs given a chance to share their own story of self, personal narrative and begin crafting a communal one with other BSLs. However, this practice was commonplace with the BSLs in this study, contributing to their overall effectiveness and connection to the greater goal of Black empowerment. In addition, these aspiring BSLs may benefit from tracking their own
personal liberation using Harro’s (2010) cycle of liberation tool. Exposure to these types of self-reflective activities is vital for aspiring BSLs to hone a critical analysis of the school and system they are attempting to enter and lead. These aspiring BSLs may never have an opportunity to form healthy and necessary critiques of the traditional structures and system they are entering to guard against reinforcing the oppressive impact schooling has had and continues to have on Black children. This expansion of the formation of the liberatory mindset was phrased as unlearning by one of the school leaders in this study. This assertion of unlearning acknowledges the ongoing miseducation many aspiring educators are still undergoing must be accounted for and removed to be aligned with a liberatory approach. Unlearning also justifies the application of experiential forms of knowledge gained through cultural intuition, that are rarely acknowledged as valid or pivotal to the success of aspiring educators of Black children (Hawash, 2021; Paul, 2019). Instead, these aspiring leaders are instructed that best academic and administrative practices remain exclusively in the annuls of hegemonic anti-Black school models and practices that have consistently denied Black students the tools to access their greatness (Marsh & Croom, 2016). Leadership programs could evolve to integrate opportunities for aspiring BSLs to unlearn the negative conditioning they may have been exposed to as learners themselves and aspiring educators. This necessity for aspiring Black educators is often ignored or seen as counterintuitive or unnecessary differentiation without connection to state licensure requirements. However, without this opportunity to discard false, tainted, or diminished expectations for Black children, these Black educators may become or remain agents of the oppressive system.

Leadership programs could also adopt the approach of igniting and cultivating more significant curiosity in aspiring BSLs. Curiosity is the foundation of the ability to perform social critiques that are the foundation of critical consciousness, one of the pillars of the liberatory
mindset. Allowing aspiring BSLs to balance their technical and administrative training with a deeper examination of their purpose reflects one of the driving components of the study participants’ desire to be successful in their roles. The conversation of purpose with research participants revealed their strong sense of duty and personal responsibility. Once identified, personal responsibility also served as a binding factor for the staff. This realization would not have been possible without space and opportunities given by the BSLs in this study for the staff to continually reflect on their purpose and practice. Duty and personal responsibility are aspects of the liberatory mindset that help strengthen the connection between educators, and aligned educators can support and reinforce an empowering educational experience for Black children more consistently.

Lastly, aspiring BSLs need the opportunity to engage with the question, “Why do Black lives matter?” For the study participants, this question facilitated a conversation on worthiness, self-determination, and personal liberation for students through adult experiences. In addition, it provided clear justification for the research participants to pursue an alternative to oppressive white supremacist pedagogical practices through the adoption of abolitionist instructional beliefs that seek to restore the humanity of Black students (B. L. Love, 2019). The study participants shared opportunities in their own lives when they engaged with this question themselves. The staff and BSLs’ life experiences allowed them to further help students combat messages they may internalize as their own inferiority. These conversations also helped study participants and their students fight the victim mentality, offset the toxic stress of racism, and sharpen their critical critique of schooling and their potential. Without being given these opportunities aspiring BSLs may never realize the aspect of the liberatory mindset that dictates that their own story (and the stories of their staff) as crucial for their Black students as they navigate their own self-
discovery and ability to freedom dream about self-determined options for their futures (Kelley, 2002). The aspiring Black educators’ accounts of personal liberation and resilience can serve as models that Black students need to counter the negative messages of self-worth they may (and have historically) be receiving.

All of these exercises could potentially not only benefit aspiring BSLs in their leadership training, but also serve as practice and modeling for goal clarification, community commitment, and team building once they have their own staff. Whether these aspiring BSLs are successors or founding new schools, they could have greater clarity of vision and feel connected to the network of other aspiring BSLs they trained with, knowing they are not alone in their efforts.

**Community and Family Choice**

Almost 70 years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, U.S. public schools remain segregated along lines of race and class across the United States (Owens et al., 2020). Bonastia (2023) shared, “Due to underfunding and other structural issues, the majority of segregated schools are put at a pronounced disadvantage in serving their students—affirming the Supreme Court’s ruling that ‘separate education facilities are inherently unequal’” (p. 4). Among the lingering results of that decision, BSLs were immediately disenfranchised, and black staff found it incredibly challenging to find employment (D. Bell, 2004; Guinier, 2004; J. Martin & Brooks, 2020). As we work collectively to try and disentangle and solve the problem of separate but unequal, Black parents and Black communities need more excellent choices to send their children to school. In an effort to find effective alternatives to offer failing local schools, Black parents have to spend extra time and resources in pursuit of safe, rigorous, affordable, and culturally affirming schools for their children. Rarely can many Black parents find all four components in the same build, and often must make sacrifices to get some acceptable
combination (Farrell & Mathews, 1990; Posey-Maddox et al., 2021; Shapiro, 2020; Simms & Talbert, 2019). This may lead Black parents to leave their own neighborhoods and their children required to abandon their social and cultural support systems. This may also mean a great chance of exposure to toxic racism from staff and other students who do not share some aspect of their heritage (Simms & Talbert, 2019). Not surprisingly, the same type of burdening with additional efforts is experienced by Black educators who teach or lead in schools where they and their students are the numerical minority. These educators are often tasked with dealing with all of the issues, students, family, and community members that are Black as if they solely hold the ability to solve and support Black needs (Pottiger, 2022). This is done without consideration or acknowledgment of the inherent stereotyping behind the ask. This often leads to burnout and silent frustration among these Black educators (Pottiger, 2022; Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Recently, there has been renewed interest in the strategy of intentional integration in public schools. However, these attempts in cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and countless others across the United States are not reminiscent of the busing of the 1950s to 60s. Rather, these attempts at integration are focused on ensuring more diversity among students in the classrooms, on the teaching staff, and in policies and practices. However potentially successful, these practices are driven by the notion that proximity to affluence and whiteness is a primary benefit for Black or other BIPOC children. Since these recent experiments with intentional integration do not include any equitable redistribution of resources or economic empowerment of the communities, many have failed in attempting to achieve a goal of educational equity for all students involved (Shapiro, 2020). Sonya Douglass Horsford, in her examination of integrated schools, found that these “desegregated spaces can create hostile environments for children of color . . . [and] Integration is no longer the most important issue for
Black families. Today, Black parents are worried about whether or not their children will be safe” (Shapiro, 2020, p. 2).

Black students in these environments continue to underperform their white and Asian colleagues and experience cultural isolation despite progress in promoting racial diversity in the student pool (Cameron & McCall, 2022). Cameron and McCall (2022) explained, “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” (p. 5). This statement is a paraphrase of research done by Nieto (2017), who described the achievement gap in outcomes for students in the United States as a result of a sociopolitical context that “has for generations favored and privileged students of the majority culture, that is, White, middle-class, English speaking, and able students and those who live in the ‘right’ zip code” (p. 5). When segregation is compounded with educational inequity, the academic outcomes remain as predictable as they were 70 years ago for Black children. These factors lead to statistically depressed health and life expectancy outcomes “comparable to the life expectancy loss associated with cigarette smoking” (Hahn, 2022, p. 273). There is much more at stake for Black children than grades when schools fail them.

In an intentionally integrated school setting, the risks for Black students remain ever present. These risks include how the hegemonic paradigm that dictates and controls hiring influences school design, curricular choices, and promotes meritocracy as the only acceptable defining dynamic of success. The themes uncovered in this story of personal liberation, a legacy of resistance, sociopolitical awareness, and holistic identity development tend not to be centered in these integrated spaces (Douglas Horsford, 2020; Kharem & Hayes, 2005). Therefore, this places Black caregivers in the same position of inadequate school choices. Black parents and
caregivers are again forced to either make trade-offs or sacrifices with full knowledge that the school experience for their children may not be completely affirming and supportive of their development.

As the conversation of school choice and school reform continues to evolve, the possibility of creating spaces for another alternative emerged from the examples in this case study. The BSLs in this study already acknowledged that representation was not enough and targeted potential staff members who shared their core beliefs about Black students’ unique and specific needs and the empowerment of the Black community. The study participants aimed to reclaim the excellence possible for Black students when identity affirmation and cultural heritage join academics as definitions of school success.

In the pursuit of excellence in education for Black children, they saw an opportunity for a return to some of the lessons of black nationalism, specifically cultural autonomy. Given the chance to conceptualize school design and staff development, the BSLs in this study had created another option for Black education. The staff and leaders at the school in this study embraced the opportunity to engage Black students and their unique set of needs as they prepare for options in their young adult life and for challenges to their self-image in the greater hegemonic society. The BSLs in this study understood the potential harm of “separate but unequal” but, given equitable school resourcing, offered an alternative to the traditional learning options in their community. The BSLs and their staff educated under the notion from their website that they “acknowledge the nationalist stance that change will not come using the model of traditional public schools” (Ember Charter Schools, n.d., para. 8). Without the label or classification, the BSLs in this study were operating a school that acknowledges the cultural and identity developmental needs of Black children. The BSLs were then using self-reflections on their own liberatory journeys (and
that of their staff) to adequately prepare Black children for a racially and socioeconomically hostile society. The BSLs and their staff were intentionally seeding disruptors for the larger hegemonic society, and heritage preservers for the Black community. The school in this study was focused on better life outcomes, character reinforcement, and promotion of self-love and love of community in their students, in addition to strong academic performance. The students at the school in this study have consistently outperformed the students on their district state exams for the past 6 years (New York State Education Department, n.d.).

**Ethnoculturally Autonomous Schools**

This type of school option is not frequently present in Black communities for parents and caregivers to consider, or there is misinformation about the program’s intent or practices (Associated Press, 2023; Dei & Kempf, 2007; Rotenberg, 2020). Black caregivers deserve better choices in where to send their children to school, and the BSLs in this study have created a school that may be very attractive to Black parents if given the opportunity to learn more about them.

With the experiment of intentional integration still moving very slowly and producing inconsistent results for Black children, perhaps an alternative target for funding is more investment in ethnoculturally autonomous options. Similar to a traditional charter school, federal and state educational policymakers could allot a small percentage of schools in Black segregated areas as pilots for the ethnocultural autonomous approach. There is some evidence of this happening already in states like New Mexico. The NACA [Native American Community Academy] Inspires School Network (https://www.nacainspiredschoolsnetwork.org) has been committed to providing ethnoculturally autonomous educational opportunities to the historically marginalized indigenous communities of New Mexico and the greater southwest United States.
This network has worked with 15 tribal-led schools across three states, with an enrollment of approximately 94% indigenous students. Similar to the school in this study, their leaders train and develop staff together, have different leadership and teaching standards for prospective staff candidates, and are unapologetically committed to the preservation and empowerment of their indigenous ethnocultural community.

Ethnoculturally autonomous school options could be seen as a form of federal reparations and an acknowledgment of the ongoing failure of the U.S. public education system for Black students. Similar to the acknowledgment by the New Mexico Public Education Department, the U.S. federal government may consider examining school options in areas with high Black populations and mandating a percentage of the schools available be ethnoculturally autonomous. Like charter schools, these ethnoculturally autonomous schools would be subject to the same state operating mandates and measures of student outcomes. The difference would be in the school’s designers’ intentionality and vision for success. These parameters of the school creation would be grounded in the approach and meaning making that reflects the manifestation of the liberatory mindset exhibited by this study’s participants.

**Connections to Allyship**

The primary audience for this study is sitting and aspiring BSLs; however, not all Black children have or will be in school led by BSLs with a liberatory mindset. For those non-Black leaders of color or white leaders, there is an opportunity to co-conspire (B. L. Love, 2019) and support efforts of rehumanizing Black students in their schools. And any efforts to focus on the unique social, emotional, and identity development needs of Black children by their staffs and leaders will benefit children of all racial identities (Perry, 2019). There are several examples of non-Black co-conspirators or allies who have dedicated themselves to the empowerment of
Black children and the exposure and elimination of the oppressive practices of traditional public school systems. In 1970, Jane Elliott, a white woman, conducted a blue-eyed, brown-eyed experiment to illuminate how racism affects people of color with a group of third graders (Elliott, 2020). Similarly, in the 1960s and 1970s, Grace Lee Bogg, an Asian woman, sought educational and community justice through cross-racial coalition building (Smith, 2021). During this same time period the Young Lords, a Latinx group, fought for better education and employment options in Black and Brown communities New York and Chicago (Morales, 2020). There are also more recent examples, like Mark Kistner’s group White Voices Against Racism, which has been fighting for environmental and educational justice for Black and Brown communities in North Carolina (Brown, 2023).

These cross-racial educational activists rarely get sustained attention because they provide a meaningful alternative to the current school system’s capitalist ideals and machinery. It is not now, nor has it ever been, in the best interest of any dominant hegemonic force to allow, support, or even acknowledge the potential for change hidden in the unexplored relationships among those who are oppressed or marginalized (R. Jensen, 2006; Stefaniak & Wohl, 2022). Examples of efforts like those previously mentioned can begin to help non-Black educators who teach and lead in Black schools bridge the cultural gap of understanding the holistic needs of Black children and communities. These educators also need support on their own racial identity and racial justice learning and unlearning. This type of support may also be absent from their training programs.

If the assumptions made by non-Black educators are left unchecked, they also can become internalized as fact. These unchecked judgments can then become justification for the perpetuation of oppressive practices and lowered expectations for Black students. Too often, the
desire for schools is to control Black children and, by doing so, limit their internal growth and capacity for self-determination. In an interview, Chris Emdin, Associate Director of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Columbia University, shared:

Teaching [and leading] differently is free. Going into the communities and finding out how to do things better is free man! It’s not an issue of finance or an issue of wealth. It’s an issue of identifying that what we’ve been doing before just ain’t working. (Downs, 2016, “What Are The Risks” section, para. 2)

Participants in this study represent a significant alternative to the current reality of schooling for Black children. Meritocracy, control, and compliance have been replaced with egalitarianism, activation through inspiration, and empowerment. Black communities deserve more options like the school in this study for their children.

Understanding the ability to address an educational and social need without initializing or justifying a savior mentality is a unique obstacle to overcome for white educators seeking to gain a greater understanding of a pedagogical approach anchored by the liberatory mindset (Dixson et al., 2006; Yosso, 2005). Without the visceral benchmark of a racially marginalized or oppressed experience to reference, perhaps white educators can begin to bridge the gap of understanding by exploring the concept of community of color epistemology (Matias & Liou, 2015) as an entry point to the liberatory mindset. There is no substitute for a lived experience. However, the community of color epistemology may serve as a scaffold for aspiring white educators because it is “forged in a remembrance of racial struggles, persistence, and strength found in the survival of urban communities of color” (Matias & Liou, 2015, p. 608). The analysis of the community of color epistemology by aspiring white educators may support their plans to teach Black children.
Matias and Liou (2015) go on to suggest as an opportunity and necessity that these white educators aspire to:

- See and feel the world through the eyes and hearts of their low-income Asian, Black, Latino/Latina, and Native American students (p. 606);
- Emotionally invest in a mutual project of racial justice with urban students of color and their communities from within the community (p. 606);
- Critically interrogate the normalcy of their ideology of White superiority and how it impacts how People of Color experience race on a daily basis (p. 606);
- Have a critique of racial hegemony and commit to working toward systemic change as an activist through teaching and learning (p. 606).

These expectations for aspiring white educators align with the efforts of the BSLs for their staff, with the added cultural capital of a shared non-white racialized experience. Full participation in team cultural intuition may not be able to be achieved by aspiring white educators. Still, the attention paid to the other aspects of the liberatory mindset, with the deep analysis of the community of color epistemology, may reduce their capacity to harm Black children.

**Study Limitations**

Through sharing their experiences, the school’s leaders and staff were able to create a narrative of their own journey toward understanding the liberatory mindset, however, the perspective of how it was being received in the classroom from students was absent in this study. The expectations, engagement, and feedback from students is paramount when attempting to understand if their intentions of the research participants are being received with fidelity. This could be achieved by examining attendance, grades, and college acceptance data, but also observed behaviors of students in class (among themselves and with staff members). Without the
student’s perspective, any efforts of the staff and their leaders may not yield the impact on student academic and identity development hoped for. This study did not directly engage with students, so is limited in its ability to fully endorse any findings as reported leading to intended student outcomes with complete confidence.

A second limitation of the inquiry was that only one site and set of leaders and staffs were interviewed. This study could be expanded to multiple sites and groups of Black educators because “one person or group cannot be representative of all similar people or group” (Donmoyer, 2009, p. 51). Implementing this research design across multiple schools may yield more varied and valuable factors that impact BSLs and their conception of the liberatory mindset.

A third potential limitation was researcher bias due to my shared racial and cultural identity with research participants. As shared by Thomas and Campbell (2021):

Shared life experience could and should be accepted as important and valuable, and researchers of color doing inquiry with participants of color spend less time deciphering cultural nuances and non-verbal behaviors that go beyond what quantitative/qualitative behaviors appear to be. (p. 360)

My shared racial and cultural identity with the research participants is a definite strength as long as I consistently differentiated between building rapport and overinfluencing responses. However, there was an opportunity to reframe my researcher racial and cultural bias as an asset to solicit more authentic responses from research participants due to increased trust, shared cultural intuition, and the common goal of positive and liberated student outcomes for Black students.
Bias can often be assumed as negative, but when it enhances self-reflection and authenticity in research participants, it can improve participant responses’ complexity, thoroughness, purity, and credibility. Bias against hegemony begins by “guarding against the implied or explicit assumption that white is the normative, standard, or default position” (Andrews et al., 2019, p. 10). An absence of this bias or ontological hypervigilance would have placed hegemonic norms and practices (i.e., white cultural supremacy and the pursuit of complete objectivity) as the guiding rationales for data collection and analysis. My shared racial and cultural identity was a definite strength as I consistently differentiated between building rapport and negatively influencing responses. I also worked to avoid hindsight bias during reflective journaling and data analysis by preserving the discovery process during the primary reflective journal stage. Then, during the second stage of reflective journaling, I continually noted the progression of thought throughout the primary journaling process and highlighted changes in interpretations and intuitive reasoning that led to the final synthesis of themes and reporting of findings (Rehm & Gadenne, 2013).

Next, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and class may be factors that impact BSL ideological and pedagogical development. All facets of human identity have been targeted by dominance as justification for a caste reality—the legitimization of subjugating certain groups over others based on power, greed, and intolerance (Wilkerson, 2023). Race plays a significant part in the educational experiences of Black students. Anti-Blackness remains praxis for sustained inequity, discrimination, criminalization, and psychological violence in schools against Black students (Dumas, 2016; Sexton, 2008). This study examined how BSLs co-construct a centralizing liberatory mindset with their staffs, which can influence the experiences of Black students. The study did not investigate a wider spectrum of intersectionality which can include
gender, sexuality, class, geography or religion and they effect the dynamics between BSLs, their staff, and their students. The research questions did not focus on identities other than race, although there were multiple other identities represented in the staff community circles, and the pair of BSLs (one male, one female).

The final limitation is in examining and understanding how the systemic challenges of operating a school focused on Black empowerment and community liberation within an oppressive social landscape impacts the beliefs and pedagogical decisions made by the BSLs in this study. The overall tone of the responses received during the research process describe an intense desire to protect and nurture the humanity and possibility of Black children. The intentions shared by the research participants focused heavily on the experiences their Black students were having in their building.

Possibilities for Future Research

In the area of teambuilding, educators are constantly looking for ways to galvanize their team in an effort to support their students. This study’s participants shared evidence that their shared cultural intuition was in large part the result of taking time to reflect on their individual epistemological development and use those experiences to find resonance in pedagogical decisions and desired outcomes for their Black students. This section presents possibilities for future research on building team cultural intuition and the impact counternarrative may have on the perception and quality of service from agents (i.e., health care providers and law enforcement) who work in Black communities. Lastly, and argument for continues research on the sustenance of the liberatory mindset in the Black children that experience it in their teachers and leaders is offered.
Building on Cultural Intuition

The leadership programs for aspiring BSLs could also foster a greater sense of personal responsibility by helping them make stronger connections between cultural intuition and the Black cultural heritage of excellence in pedagogy. Put simply, aspiring BSLs need to know more about the legacy of Black resistance in education and culturally responsive pedagogy in its original untainted ethnocultural form. These components are often omitted from leadership preparation programs, and aspiring BSLs are left to believe that the answers for their Black students and community are attained through using the hegemonic colonizing practices of traditional public schooling and leadership training. Once reintroduced to the legacy of Black resistance in education, aspiring and sitting BSLs may begin to consider the possible integration of those practices and pedagogical decisions that have supported Black student identity development and communal connection. With exposure to an educational and epistemological alternative to meritocracy and white supremacist educational practices, aspiring and sitting BSLs may find greater cultural connection with their own story of personal liberation. These aspiring Black educators may also benefit from opportunities to discuss these alternatives with other Black educators that have a perspective different than the default norm of meritocracy and color-evasiveness in schools. Once ignited, this process of activating cultural intuition in Black educators has promise as an area for further research and exploration. In addition, an examination of the process of guiding these newly exposed Black educators to the positive potential of a shared story to strengthen team alignment and effectiveness is a possible extension of this inquiry.
Other Identities and Intersectionality

There is also an opportunity to examine the impact the liberatory mindset in BSLs has on staff according to gender and other identity markers. Future research can analyze how the liberatory mindset impacts the development of factors of self-love, self-determination, and critical consciousness while curtailing the growth of internalized inferiority by identity factors beyond race. In addition, the interpretation of the liberatory mindset according to gender would also be worthy of exploration with the co-leaders in this study—one cisgender Black woman and one cisgender Black man.

There are also potential research opportunities in the training for law enforcement, health care professionals, and anyone who serves and works in the Black community. Through storytelling and the cocreation of a counternarrative for the members of the Black community they serve, these service providers can begin to develop more empathy and personal connection to their experiences. This is especially true for white servants in Black communities. In the instances there are statistical differences in policing (i.e., criminalizing Black people and communities) and health care—implicit bias leading to disparate delivery of care—when services are rendered across lines of racial difference (Boddie, 2022; Brucato, 2020; Gillispie-Bell, 2021). Similarly to the delivery of substandard education, the delivery of biased healthcare or policing directly impacts Black children’s quality of life and ability to live. Seen as a possible intervention, the crafting of a shared counternarrative about the Black communities these agents serve may have an impact on the perception of care and quality of service provided.

Sustaining the Liberatory Mindset in Black Children

Lastly, this study has sparked curiosity about how Black students may sustain the efforts of their teachers, leaders, and supporters outside of school. The overall tone of the responses
received during the research process describe an intense desire to protect and nurture the humanity and possibility of Black children. The intentions shared by the research participants focused heavily on the experiences their Black students were having in their building. They shared the negative experiences they themselves have had both in the school and in their lives outside of school. However, for their Black students to ideally achieve their own form of liberation, they need to be prepared for the threats to their psychological safety outside of a school setting. Preparation for the potential impact of systemic racial and intersectional pressures on Black students that have received consistent affirmation of their identity and humanity, have embraced their right to self-determination, advocated for their community, and celebrated their heritage could be seen as a threat to the hegemonic expectations of Black behavior. The research participants are working diligently on creating an environment that will nurture the development of Black children to become their full, liberated selves. The question of how to ensure that spirit persists once their Black students leave their care is a subject for future research.

**Conclusion**

The initial provocation of this study was predicated on the reality that Black children and Black communities are receiving opportunities for a universally quality education. This qualitative case study began by attempting to examine how BSLs in one school transfer their understanding of the liberatory mindset to their staff. Through the analysis and member checking of the transcript data, an unexpected shift in the manifestation of the liberatory mindset emerged. The BSLs were in the process of constant refinement and co-creation of liberatory pedagogical solutions with (instead of delivering to) their staff to be fully responsive to the holistic needs of their Black students. This synergy led to a collective team intuition on ways to best support the development of self-love, self-determination, and identity affirmation, all in support of academic
success and somatic vitality. The BSLs and staff in this study felt duty-bound to critically care for and protect their Black students. Without this preparation, the participants believe their Black students are left vulnerable to the pressures of structural racism and the formation of internalized racial inferiority from resulting from hegemonic anti-Blackness. The participants in this study are part of a growing list of schooling alternatives for Black communities.

According to Cherry-Paul (2023), the liberatory mindset centers on the development of critical consciousness; sociopolitical awareness; and self-realization in BSLs themselves, their staff (directly), and their students (through the development of their staff). This study provided greater insight on what factors inform the development of a liberatory mindset in BSLs, to uncover and illuminate the professional and personal experiences that directly influence the pedagogical beliefs and values of BSLs and result in a liberatory orientation to educating themselves, their staff, and their Black students.

The messages received by Black children are impacted directly by the staff with whom they interact daily in school (Essien & Wood, 2023). Students and early professionals are offered and experience several differing notions of their own potential for academic success and failure based on their racial identity. Modan and Himmel (2021) asserted:

Shifting to this [liberatory] mindset meant shedding systematic disciplinary practices they had seen and internalized over the course of their own education career, but which ran perpendicular to what was experienced as a student growing up in housing projects and attending a majority Black and low-income school district. (p. 15)

The BSLs in this study shared various ways they were successful in preserving the lessons of their own limitless potential from caregivers and other empowering life events, despite societal and institutional attempts to disempower them. These leaders also remained committed to hiring
staff members who shared their pedagogical beliefs, had lived experiences that reflected that of their Black students, and were authentically aligned with the same desired outcomes for their Black students. The BSLs in this study and their staff members all had personal journeys toward their own liberation that informed their pedagogical beliefs and practices.

This case study established a clear justification for the recruitment, training, and retention of greater numbers of BSLs with a liberatory mindset. The BSLs and their staff in this study prove success is possible outside of the constraints of traditional public schools when there are thoughtfully and culturally aligned educators willing to commit themselves to operate as a collective support force. Are Black students able to be academically successful, culturally affirmed, and psychologically safe without this type of school team working to support their growth and development? The educators in this study say no. More Black caregivers and comminutes need the opportunity to hear and see why.
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APPENDIX A

CITI Certificate

This is to certify that:

Orpheus Williams

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

**Responsible Conduct of Research**
(Curriculum Group)

**Social and Behavioral Responsible Conduct of Research Course**
(Course Learner Group)
  1 - Basic Course
    (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of San Diego

Generated on 17-Mar-2024. Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w30baa2fe-bc5e-44a4-a57c-b811abc24a6d-34265049
March 7, 2024

Greetings School Leaders:

My name is Orpheus Williams, and I am a doctoral student in The University of San Diego’s Social Justice in Education program. After extensive research, I have discovered the mission and vision of Ember Charter School as being deeply aligned with my desire to highlight and study school models where Black educators lead and Black children thrive. I’d love to visit the middle school and see if there may be potential for partnership and participation in my study.

A little background on me, I am a Brooklyn native and former school leader and developer of principals across the country. I’ve managed learning opportunities for founding school leaders, successors, and leadership team members that are focused on creating liberatory learning environments for their students.

Project Description: Black School Leader Truth: An examination of how Black School Leader epistemology develops and influences the sociopolitical awareness of their Black students.

I want to do a case study on Ember Charter school where the focus will be on the ethos of its Black leaders and their pedagogical beliefs. I plan to do my colloquium and petition for IRB this fall and will start formally looking to collect and analyze data this fall. I’d love to get a chance to get to know you as Ember’s leader and your staff. Ideally, we will discover that my interests and your practice are a good fit. If you agree, I’d like to conduct a 45-minute interview with each of the school’s leaders via Zoom. In addition, after the interview (within 30 days), I will invite each school leader to participate in a 45-minute member checking session. In these sessions the school leaders will be able to review the initial themes I’ve identified and give any additional feedback or comments on the categories presented. The total ask for research participation is 90 minutes. Participation is totally voluntary, and participants can withdraw from the process at any time. The interviews and member-checking sessions will be audio recorded (no video) within the Zoom platform and stored privately on the researcher’s computer. The school leaders will not be offered any compensation for their participation.

I look forward to your response.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact me directly or my faculty advisor:
1) Orpheus Williams, Primary Investigator, USD Email: XXXXX@XXX.XXX
2) Dr. Maya Kalyanpur, Faculty Advisor, USD Email: XXXXX@XXX.XXX

Best,
Orpheus Williams
PhD student, University of San Diego
APPENDIX C

Consent Form for School Leaders

University of San Diego Institutional Review Board
Research Participant Adult Consent Form

For the research study entitled:
Black School Leader Truth: How Black School Leader Epistemology Influences Liberatory Mindset Development in their Staff

I. Purpose of the research study

Orpheus Williams is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES) at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to explore how Black school leaders nurture a liberatory mindset in their staff through professional development.

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

As a school leader:

Participate in a 45-minute semistructured interview. You will be asked seven questions. The questions will provide insight into your pedagogical beliefs, what informs them, and how they are communicated to staff through the professional development sessions you design and deliver. Your responses are optional for each question. The interview will be recorded (audio only). Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time.

Within 30 days of your participation in the interview, you will be asked to engage in a 45-minute member-checking session. In this session the school leaders will be able to review the initial themes I’ve identified and give any additional feedback or comments on the categories presented.

The interviews will take place via Zoom. To protect your privacy and to ensure that only audio recording will take place during the interview, you will be asked to have your camera turned OFF before the audio recording takes place.

Participation in this study will take a total of 90 minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day: 988 is a free, confidential help line for New York City residents.
IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand how to ensure that the liberatory mindset of Black school leaders positively influences the pedagogical development of their teachers, and leads to greater, more equitable, and empowering outcomes for Black children.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher’s office for a minimum of 5 years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will not be reported individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may be used in future research.

VI. Compensation

You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary nature of this research

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Contact information

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:
1) Orpheus Williams USD Email: XXXXX@XXX.XXX
2) Dr. Maya Kalyanpur USD Email: XXXXX@XXX.XXX

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant

______________________________________________________________________________
Name of Participant (Printed)

______________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator
APPENDIX D

School Site Approval Letter

Date October 17, 2023

Dear Members of the USD IRB Committee,

This letter is to document that Orpheus Williams from the University of San Diego has permission to conduct their research entitled Black School Leader Truth: How Black School Leader Epistemology Influences Liberatory Mindset Development in their Staff.

We have been informed of the scope of this research and have discussed the related activities of the study with Orpheus Williams. He will interview the school’s two leaders separately. In addition, he will conduct a focus group with a small group of our teachers on campus. We will also give permission for Orpheus Williams to contact our teachers directly through their school email addresses.

We understand that this site’s participation will only take place during the study’s active IRB approval period, and that all study related activities must cease if IRB approval expires or is suspended.
Date October 9, 2023

Dear Members of the USD IRB Committee,

This letter is to document that Orpheus Williams from the University of San Diego has permission to conduct their research entitled Black School Leader Truth: How Black School Leader Epistemology Influences Liberatory Mindset Development in their Staff

We have been informed of the scope of this research and have discussed the related activities of the study with Orpheus Williams.

We understand that this site’s participation will only take place during the study’s active IRB approval period, and that all study related activities must cease if IRB approval expires or is suspended.

Printed Name ______________________________ Title __________________

Signature ______________________________
Greetings Teachers:

My name is Orpheus Williams, and I am a doctoral student in The University of San Diego’s Social Justice in Education program. After extensive research, I have discovered the mission and vision of Ember Charter School as being deeply aligned with my desire to highlight and study school models where Black educators lead and Black children thrive. I’d love to visit the middle school and see if there may be potential for partnership and participation in my study.

A little background on me, I am a Brooklyn native and former school leader and developer of principals across the country. I’ve managed learning opportunities for founding school leaders, successors, and leadership team members that are focused on creating liberatory learning environments for their students.

Project Description: Black School Leader Truth: An examination of how Black School Leader epistemology develops and influences the sociopolitical awareness of their Black students.

I want to do a case study on Ember Charter school where the focus will be on the ethos of its Black leaders and their pedagogical beliefs. These beliefs shape teacher development, I am deeply curious about how your Black school leaders share their pedagogical beliefs through professional development. I’d love to get a chance to get to know how you experience development from your leaders at Ember Charter School. If you agree, I’d like to conduct a 45-minute focus group in-person and the school site. In addition, after the focus group (within 30 days), I will invite each member of the focus group to return and participate in a 45-minute member checking session at the school site. In these sessions the teachers who participated in the focus group will be able to review the initial themes I’ve identified and give any additional feedback or comments on the categories presented. The total ask for research participation is 90 minutes. Participation is totally voluntary, and participants can withdraw from the process at any time. The focus group and member-checking sessions will be recorded with an audio digital recorder and stored privately on the researcher’s computer. The participants will not be offered any compensation for their participation.

I look forward to your response.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact me directly or my faculty advisor:
1) Orpheus Williams, Primary Investigator, USD Email: XXXXX@XXX.XXX
2) Dr. Maya Kalyanpur, Faculty Advisor, USD Email: XXXXX@XXX.XXX

Best,
Orpheus Williams
PhD student, University of San Diego
APPENDIX G

CONSENT FORM FOR STAFF MEMBERS

University of San Diego Institutional Review Board
Research Participant Adult Consent Form

For the research study entitled:
Black School Leader Truth: How Black School Leader Epistemology Influences Liberatory Mindset Development in their Staff

I. Purpose of the research study
Orpheus Williams is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences (SOLES) at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to explore how Black school leaders nurture a liberatory mindset in their staff through professional development.

II. What you will be asked to do
If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

As a teacher or staff member:

Participate in a 45-minute focus group or guided discussion. You will be asked seven questions. The questions will provide insight into your pedagogical beliefs, what informs them, and how they are impacted by professional development sessions designed by your school leaders. Your responses are optional for each question.

Within 30 days of your participation in the focus group, you will be asked to engage in a 45-minute member-checking session via Zoom. In this session the teachers who participated in the focus group will be able to review the initial themes identified and give any additional feedback or comments on the categories presented.

The focus group will be recorded with a digital audio recorder. The member-checking sessions will be recorded via Zoom (recording audio only). Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time. The information shared in the focus group session will not be shared with anyone outside of the group.

The focus group will take place in-person on the Ember Charter School campus in a private room, with a round table seating structure with the Primary Investigator present. Only current staff members will be asked to participate in the focus group.

Participation in this study will take a total of 90 minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts
Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a
day: 988 is a free, confidential help line for New York City residents.

IV. Benefits
While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand how to ensure that the liberatory mindset of Black school leaders positively influences the pedagogical development of their teachers, and leads to greater, more equitable, and empowering outcomes for Black children.

V. Confidentiality
Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher’s office for a minimum of 5 years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may be used in future research.

Note for Focus Group Participants: Participants will be informed that the information shared in the focus group session should not be shared with anyone outside of the group, and that the confidentiality of anything they choose to say during the session is not guaranteed.

VI. Compensation
You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary nature of this research
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Contact information
If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:
1) Orpheus Williams USD Email: XXXXX@XXX.XXX
2) Dr. Maya Kalyanpur USD Email: XXXXX@XXX.XXX

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
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</table>

Name of Participant (Printed)
Framing Semistructured Interviews School Leader (via Zoom):

Facilitator opens with, “Thank you for your attendance and participation in this interview centered on the transfer of liberatory mindset from leaders to staff at your school site. My name is Orpheus Williams, and I am a Doctoral student at the University of San Diego. The purpose of this interview is to gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of teachers and leaders about developing and using a liberatory mindset in instructional planning and delivery. This interview will be digitally recorded for audio-only. Your participation in this interview and any information that you provide through the answering of questions will remain confidential. You are welcome to withdraw your participation in the interview at any time during the interview and for any reason. If at this time you are not interested in participating in the interview, please feel free to stop before we get started. At this time, please turn off your video camera and change your name to the provided pseudonym. Are there any questions before I start the recorder and the interview? “

Facilitator shares a statement on confidentiality: “Confidentiality is very important to me as a primary investigator in this study. I will take every precaution to maintain the confidentiality of what is shared here today.

Facilitator continues, “Let me share a little about my story . . .”

- Birthplace and origins
- Experience in schools K–12
- Transition to college out of NYC
- Teaching in DC after college
- Returning to Brooklyn to become a principal
- Moving from overseer to educator for equity
- Coaching other educators
- Creating a formal inquiry into the practices of successful Black schools, teachers, and school leaders through this PhD program.

Agenda for Today

Facilitator states: “I will present you all with 6–7 questions about your experience here as school leaders and your beliefs about the purpose of education. You will have the opportunity to respond to all of the questions posed. Your experiences and perspectives are valuable in our shared pursuit of Black excellence for all Black students. The intention here is to better understand your ‘whys’ or motivations to be educators and how these beliefs influence how you develop your teachers and staff. It is also important to understand how you developed your beliefs about the purpose of education and how those beliefs influence your professional development planning and delivery. My role as the interviewer is to keep the conversation going, ask further probing questions to elaborate, and clarify your thinking so that your words and experiences are documented thoroughly for this study. The questions will not be asked in a strict
order but rather will be presented when deemed appropriate to reflect the direction of the conversation. In addition, the facilitator may ask probing questions to help you provide greater depth and clarity to your responses.”

**Semistructured Interview Question Set:**

**Purpose**
- What is your definition of pedagogy?
- What is your definition of liberatory pedagogy?
- In your own words, what is the purpose of school?
- What are the most important outcomes for your students?

**Perspective & Beliefs**
- How does your cultural heritage impact your beliefs about Black student capacity?
- How does your racial identity impact your beliefs about Black student capacity?

**Staff Recruitment**
- What elements or evidence of a liberatory mindset do you look for in prospective teachers/staff?

**Development and Delivery of Professional Development**
- How do you construct and implement effective professional development training towards the development of liberatory mindset in order to create liberatory learning spaces for your students?
  - What are the goals of your professional development sessions, and how will your beliefs influence those of your teachers?
  - What have you learned about teachers/staff needs?
  - How do your professional development sessions impact planning for the future to ensure a stronger transfer of liberatory mindset?

After these questions are presented and discussed, the Facilitator states, “Do you have any questions for me?”
APPENDIX I

Community Circle Protocol

Williams Focus Group Protocol

PhD Research Study Title:

Black School Leader Truth: How Black School Leader Epistemology Influences Liberatory Mindset Development in their Staff

Framing Focus Group (Community Circles, In-person):

Facilitator opens with, “Thank you for your attendance and participation in this focus group centered on the transfer of liberatory mindset from leaders to staff at your school site. My name is Orpheus Williams, and I am a Doctoral student at the University of San Diego. The purpose of this focus group is to gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of teachers and leaders about developing and using a liberatory mindset in instructional planning and delivery. This focus group will be digitally recorded for audio-only. Your participation in this focus group and any information that you provide through the answering of questions will remain confidential. You are welcome to withdraw your participation in the focus group at any time during the process for any reason. If, at this time, you are not interested in participating in the focus group, please feel free to stop before we get started. Are there any questions before I start the recorder and formally begin the focus group?”

Facilitator shares a statement on confidentiality: “Confidentiality is very important to me as a primary investigator in this study. I will take every precaution to maintain the confidentiality of what is shared here today, although the nature of focus groups prevents me from guaranteeing complete confidentiality. Please the privacy of your fellow participants and do not repeat what is said in the focus group to others. Can we agree to confidentiality in our focus group today?”
(Have participants verbally agree to confidentiality)

Facilitator continues, “Let me share a little about my story . . .”
- Birthplace and origins
- Experience in schools K–12
- Transition to college our of NYC
- Teaching in DC after college
- Returning to Brooklyn to become a principal
- Moving from overseer to educator for equity
- Coaching other educators
- Creating a formal inquiry into the practices of successful Black schools, teachers, and school leaders through this PhD program.

Agenda for Today
Facilitator states: “I will present you all with 6–7 questions about your experience here as educators and your beliefs about the purpose of education. We are seated in a circular formation to ensure every voice and perspective is equally represented and accessible to every participant. This setup is reminiscent of both African and Indigenous community sharing and dialoging. You will each have the opportunity to respond to the questions posed and to each other’s answers. Your experiences and perspectives are valuable in our shared pursuit of Black excellence for all Black students. The intention here is to connect the levels of individual belief in an open forum where you all can share and understand your ‘whys’ or motivations to be educators. It is also important to understand how you each developed your beliefs about the purpose of education and how those beliefs interact with your school leader’s beliefs. My role as the facilitator is to keep the conversation going, ask further probing questions to elaborate, and clarify your thinking so that your words and experiences are documented thoroughly for this study. The questions will not be asked in a strict order but rather will be presented when deemed appropriate to reflect the direction of the conversation. In addition, the facilitator may ask probing questions to help participants provide greater depth and clarity to their responses.”

**Focus Group Question Set:**

**Purpose**
- In your own words, what is the purpose of school?
- What are the most important outcomes for your students?

**Perspective & Beliefs**
- How does your cultural heritage impact your beliefs about Black student capacity?
- What does liberation mean to you?
- What does liberation mean for your students?

**Alignment with School Leader beliefs**
- How do your school leaders construct and implement effective professional development training towards the development of liberatory mindset in order to create liberatory learning spaces for your students?
- How do your professional development sessions influence your instructional practices?
- What do you appreciate about your leader’s approach to your development?

After these questions are presented and discussed, the Facilitator states, “Do you have any questions for me?”
## Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Coding</th>
<th>Axial Coding</th>
<th>Selective Coding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
<td>Connection to and inspiration/support from the participant’s community (caregiver, family, friends, and institutions).</td>
<td>Cultural awareness &amp; identity: Understanding the importance of connecting Black students to their self-hood and ancestry through an understanding of their historical greatness and the diverse expressions of Blackness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural Heritage</strong></td>
<td>Understanding of the historical and cultural richness of the Black diaspora.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other Identity</strong></td>
<td>The impact Blackness has on other identities — intersectionality.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Racial-Cultural-Ethnic Identity</strong></td>
<td>The overlapping impact of the different identity markers that impact social response and behavior.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Representation</strong></td>
<td>The act of ensuring that there are adults (teachers and leaders) that are reflective of the Black students being served.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adaptability-Flexibility</strong></td>
<td>The ability to respond to challenges in life without surrender.</td>
<td>Educating with integrity: Leading and developing educational skills and beliefs that are grounded in the expressed needs the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership Integrity</strong></td>
<td>Staying focused on the success of Black children despite institutional pressures to decenter their development.</td>
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A primary element of liberatory schools, according to the participants in this study, was that they be culturally responsive to the needs of their Black students holistically. This involved (a) developing counternarratives which subverted the historical purpose of schools whereby Black students were tracked into factory jobs and instead empowered them to dream beyond these boundaries; (b) developing a sense of community among the school staff through the careful hiring of like-minded educators who were committed to these educational and
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legacy of Resistance</th>
<th>Understanding the history of Black resistance to oppressive systemic and institutional pressures of white dominance and cultural erasure.</th>
<th>Black community.</th>
<th>cultural counternarratives based on their own experiences of schooling, and (c) developing a sense of community and belonging among the Black students to give them a sense of self-worth and pride in their own racial identity as Black students.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy</td>
<td>The art, culture and science of teaching and learning.</td>
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<td>Power</td>
<td>The ability to influence the development and beliefs of others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Development-Teacher Training</td>
<td>Conditioning and unlearning opportunities educators receive during preservice and while in the teacher position.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sacrifice</td>
<td>Lifestyle choice made for the greater goal of long-term development and sustenance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Preparation</td>
<td>Exposure and mastery to the content Black students will need to be competitive in the higher education recruitment/selection process.</td>
<td>Educational equity &amp; access: The imperative to support Black students in ways that are reflective of their unique and often-ignored developmental needs, and to encourage their</td>
<td>Sociology, 2022; Orum &amp; Cohen, 1973; Solomon, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access and Vantage Point</td>
<td>The perspective one has on their own life’s possibility due to exposure, encouragement, and support from others.</td>
<td></td>
<td>This theme highlighted the importance of developing critical thinking as a guiding principle for liberatory schools. This involved study participants describing how they develop curiosity and facilitate self-discovery in their Black students through supporting their exploration of self-worth. The participants also shared how their communal feelings of personal commitment to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of School</td>
<td>Defining the intended outcomes that are inherent in a school’s design, organization, and staffing (Social Mobility, Social Reproduction, or Social Justice and Empowerment).</td>
<td>ability to explore varying perspective on their pathway to success.</td>
<td>the empowerment of Black children were inextricably bound to their sense of purpose, personal fulfillment, and a welcomed ancestral obligation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>Attracting like-minded teachers and other staff members to work in a school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-advocacy</td>
<td>Developing courage to remain steadfast in one’s beliefs despite discouragement or the fear of failure.</td>
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<td>Student</td>
<td>The results of the experiences a student has within a school that reflect the vision and mission of that school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural</td>
<td>The presence of reflective cultural beliefs, practices, and artifacts throughout the learning experience.</td>
<td>Personal &amp; social development: Emphasis on doing appreciating the life lessons that contribute to the sense of self and guide decision-making as one navigates the larger hegemonic society.</td>
<td>One, it was important, specifically for the Black female students, to experience a school environment that affirmed and protected their Black femininity. Black girls were highlighted, due to their intersectional identity, as requiring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heritage</td>
<td></td>
<td>Resilience and Personal Growth (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Kelley, 2002; McTighe &amp; Haywood, 2018; Morsy &amp; Rothstein, 2019)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Natural and critical wonder about the natural world and the sociopolitical realities of the United States.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>Remaining aware and committed to a specific goal despite temptation, doubt, or distractions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duty-Personal Responsibility</td>
<td>Accepting feeling moral and cultural obligated to develop and protect Black students.</td>
<td>specific and consistent messaging that would reinforce their ability and resilience in combatting negative messages, just as the women research participants had done themselves. Two, aware of how stereotypes for all Black students played out in society, the participants emphasized the importance of “unlearning” traditional approaches to disciplining Black students using punitive and humiliating disciplinary measures and instead making them teachable opportunities for the students that promote persona growth and resilience.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Caregiver</td>
<td>Anyone who has accepted responsibility for being the primary teacher and supporter of a Black child’s growth and development. A partner with the schools the Black child attend.</td>
<td>Participants in this study identified student outcomes as the most significant factor relating to educational</td>
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<td>Fear as obstacle to progress</td>
<td>Debilitating feeling due to the possibility of failure that prevents any from taking risks, trying new ideas, experiences, perspectives, and</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
imagining infinite possibilities for their own life. (Gooden, 2012; Hobbs, 2020)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-Determination</th>
<th>The will to define one’s own pathway to success and create a plan to achieve it despite any obstacles.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Worth, Worthiness</td>
<td>The belief that one know they have inherent value leading to health psychological well-being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Preparation</td>
<td>Understanding how to navigate social spaces that may not always reflect, value, celebrate or protect one’s existence due to difference in identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>The ability to experience equal rights and protections under the law, to express oneself without fear, and have access to all opportunities desired. Well-Being: Physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and cultural health fully incorporated into the definition of success that schools hold for their Black students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>Cultivating the drive in others to pursue their interests, ideas, while overcoming challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
<td>Emphasizing the awareness of one’s thoughts, feelings, and sensations.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
without judgement. Fostering a greater sense of clarity, purpose, calmness, rationality, and acceptance.

| Trauma-Informed Approach | An emphasis understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of trauma on students’ learning, behavior, and overall well-being | their students to develop intellectual courage and a sense of self-determination as the main drivers toward their outcomes. |
APPENDIX K

Member Checking Intro Script

Williams: Focus Group Member Checking Introductory Script

PhD Research Study Title:

Black School Leader Truth: How Black School Leader Epistemology Influences Liberatory Mindset Development in their Staff

Framing Member Checking:

Facilitator opens with, “Thank you again for your willingness to participate in this follow-up conversation. Please turn off your Zoom camera as I will only be recording audio for this session. As the primary researcher, I’ve had a chance to review all of the responses from the focus groups and begin creating categories that capture the most salient shared themes. Today you will have the opportunity to review those categories. In research, this step is called ‘Member Checking.’ You can then clarify any of what you have shared, add additional comments or ‘push back’ on the categories presented. Your feedback and involvement in this step in invaluable for me in my attempt to gain a full understanding of your experiences. We will be together for approximately 45 minutes. You will have ~15 minutes to review the categories and rationale independently, then we will use the remaining ~30 minutes for open discussion. Just as before, your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time. I will record this session using via Zoom (audio only) and store it on my private computer. Also, just as our last session, there is no compensation for your participation.

Questions for open discussion:

- What stands out to you the most about the themes?
- In your opinion, are there any gaps or missing topics or themes?
- Is there anything you need clarification on, or would like to clarify?
- What questions do you have about the themes?
- Do you have any additional questions or reflections?
October 27, 2023

Orpheus Williams
Sch of Leadership & Ed Science

Re: Expedited - Initial - IRB-2023-436, Black School Leader Truth: How Black School Leader Epistemology Influences Liberatory Mindset Development in their Staff

Dear Orpheus Williams:

The University of San Diego Institutional Review Board (USD IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-2023-436: Black School Leader Truth: How Black School Leader Epistemology Influences Liberatory Mindset Development in their Staff.

Decision: Approved. This study may start no earlier than October 27, 2023.

IRB Review Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Administrative Check-In Date: October 27, 2024. Please submit a Renewal application for the study by this administrative check-in date. If the project is completed by this date, please submit a Closure application for the study instead.

Findings: This approval is based on the intended work and scope of activities outlined in the submitted proposal. If the research team makes changes to the project and/or its study protocols or materials used with participants, the PI or their designated team member must submit a modification application for IRB’s re-evaluation.

Researcher Notes: N/A

Internal Notes:
The USD IRB requires annual renewal of all active studies reviewed and approved by the IRB. Please submit an application for renewal prior to the annual anniversary date of initial study approval. If an application for renewal is not received, the study will be administratively closed.

Note: We send IRB correspondence regarding student research to the faculty advisor, who bears the ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the research. We request that the faculty advisor share this correspondence with the student researcher.

Applications for full review must be submitted at least two weeks prior to the next scheduled monthly IRB meeting; see https://www.sandiego.edu/irb/updates/ for specific deadlines. You may submit an IRB application for expedited or exempt review at any time.

Sincerely,

Truc Ngo, PhD
IRB Administrator