

## **ABSTRACT**

Alejandro Ramos, VOICES OF HOPE: YOUTH OF COLOR IN CONTINUATION HIGH SCHOOLS (Under the direction of Dr. Matthew Militello). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2021.

Youth of Color sit at the intersection of multiple systems of oppression—classism, racism, and sexism. Too often, Youth of Color are pushed out of traditional schools and are further marginalized by being assigned to alternative education programs, including continuation high schools. To address a recurring issue of dynamic inequality in which high school youth are marginalized in traditional schools and then poorly served in continuation high schools, the study examined how youth voices could be informed and magnified to advocate for practices and policies that would better serve them. During three cycles of inquiry, we encouraged and showcased the voices of students with the goal of informing educators how to improve education for students in continuation high schools. I worked with 10 continuation high school students over a period of 18 months, using popular education theory and processes, to deeply analyze their stories of individual and collective identity by discussing their histories, values, assets, and interests. When students have regular opportunities to talk to each other with supportive, adult facilitation, they validate each other's experiences and reinterpret them. Through guided self-awareness, students can harness their collective power to understand and interrogate larger systems of oppression, stop blaming themselves, and advocate for themselves to teachers and administrators. Students articulated their desires for teachers to listen, to express care and concern, and to provide opportunities for self-reflection and sharing of experiences. They developed a hopeful outlook and helped educators reimagine the current approach to alternative education. By relying on student voice to disrupt normative educational experiences, we envisioned and enacted different learning outcomes for vulnerable Youth of Color.



VOICES OF HOPE:  
YOUTH OF COLOR IN CONTINUATION HIGH SCHOOLS

A Dissertation Proposal

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership

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Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Laura and three children, Alejandro, Joaquin, and Galilea. My academic journey would not be possible without my wife's support and encouragement. My children's love kept me focused and determined.

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I wish to acknowledge my parent's immigrant struggle and successful integration into this country. Their story and steadfast belief in education has inspired my hard work and pursuit for higher learning.

I am grateful to my sixth-grade teacher, Gary Bell, member of the Tuscarora Nation, for embracing and validating my presence in his classroom. He taught me to engage academically, planting the seed for my educational development and professional journey. I would like him to know that *Running Deer* continues to run and will continue his great work of inspiring Youth of Color.

To Lynda Tredway for believing in me and guiding my intellectual growth. I am forever thankful and honored for being a thread in her quilt for social justice and equitable schooling.

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## CHAPTER 1: FOCUS OF PRACTICE

*Imagine a school where democracy is more than a buzzword and involvement is more than attendance. It is a place where adults and students interact as co-learners and leaders and where students are encouraged to collaborate throughout their education. (Fletcher, 2017)*

In the participatory action research project and study, we explore how to effectively incorporate the voices and experiences of high school students in re-imagining their schooling. The students in the study are enrolled in continuation high schools, or “second-chance” high schools, in California that are smaller than average and designed to provide a different opportunity for students to be successful. However, continuation schools fail for the same reason that the students were unsuccessful in comprehensive high schools: the schools rely on traditional methods and systems. Instead of attempting to understand how and why students have not been successful in comprehensive high schools, educators in continuation high schools often ignore a key source that could improve possibilities for student success—the voices of youth. The study offers a counter-narrative to the usual continuation high school story by incorporating the voices and experiences of young people.

In the project and study, I matched participatory action research with the popular education model to collect and analyze student knowledge of their individual and collective identities and experiences (Arnold et al., 1991). By incorporating student voice, I posit that students can more fully see themselves as successful learners who have agency in making decisions about their lives. In other words, by focusing on student voice, I believe we can reshape their attitudes toward schooling and boost their self-efficacy. In addition, I believe their stories should inform the educators who are responsible for designing and implementing programs that serve youth in continuation high schools. The study provides insight into what can happen when school leaders acknowledge the potential of students considered marginalized and

underserved and invite students into the conversation of self-empowerment. By using their life stories as a text for investigating and interrogating their experiences, we build a stronger capacity to serve students and ensure greater success for them.

Through the study, students learned about each other and became the experts on their own lives and learning. They are our greatest asset for educational change. The research team used a three-step process: listening to their stories; providing thoughtful input to students to understand systemic inequities and how their stories fit into a larger social dynamic; and organizing a forum for them to relate their experiences and ideas to other educators.

This project resulted in increased student self-efficacy and generated recommendations about how to engage students more effectively. I worked closely with a group of students from a continuation high school in northern California. As the former principal of the continuation high school, I am committed to serving youth I term “at-promise” instead of “at-risk” and reframing how we perceive students in continuation high schools. The student stories and voices could be instrumental in improving what is not working in our school system while also serving as a vehicle for individual and collective self-efficacy. “Something powerful happens when students feel that their personal experiences are valued and that they as young people can take on identities as experts” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 14). The ideas and voices of students provided the expertise to identify what has not worked in schools and to inform a teaching approach for students who have not experienced success. Beyond the outcomes of student identity and agency, we proposed an approach to creating educational spaces that validate, empower, and improve outcomes for students.

In the next section, I introduce the focus and rationale for the study based on current data. Then I describe the purpose and the overarching research questions that guided the work, review the design of the project, and explain its significance.

### **Focus of Study**

The study was centered on a group of students from Patwin High School (PHS) a continuation high school in northern California. I worked with them using a participatory action research (PAR) methodology that incorporated the stages of the popular education model (see Chapter 3). The goal was uncovering the values, assets, and interests of youth so they could develop a stronger sense of individual and collective identity as well as an understanding of how the larger oppressive society influences their lives. Ultimately, I wanted to increase their self-efficacy.

I worked closely with students in this process, eliciting their thoughts, feedback, and creative energy as student voice is a powerful engine in school reform (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Fletcher, 2017; Mitra, 2007; Quaglia & Corso, 2014). “Student voice is essential in defining problems plaguing schools. A young person’s input on problems of local significance is invaluable to strengthening collaborations centered on creating policy and practice intended to adequately respond to those problems” (Mitra, 2007, p. 26). There is an increasing body of research that identifies the need to involve all youth as active constituents in the process of educational reform. Because those closest to the problem are best situated to offer solutions (Guajardo et al., 2016), students bring a vital lens to the work (Fielding, 2001; Fine & Wise 2003; Mirra et al., 2016; Mitra, 2007). Students’ experiences, even negative ones, bring much needed insight. “What if these voices, along with the chorus of dropouts, were allowed expression? If they were not whispered, isolated, or drowned out in disparagement, what would

happen if these stories were solicited, celebrated, and woven into a curriculum?" (Fine & Weis, 2003, p. 33).

### **Rationale for the Study**

I was deeply concerned that most students at continuation high schools are Youth of Color who are being further marginalized. I describe continuation high schools in California, including data that verifies the continuing lack of success of the schools. Then I provide a justification for why the study is critical in changing the ways we think about the constituents of the continuation schools—the students themselves.

### **Continuation High Schools**

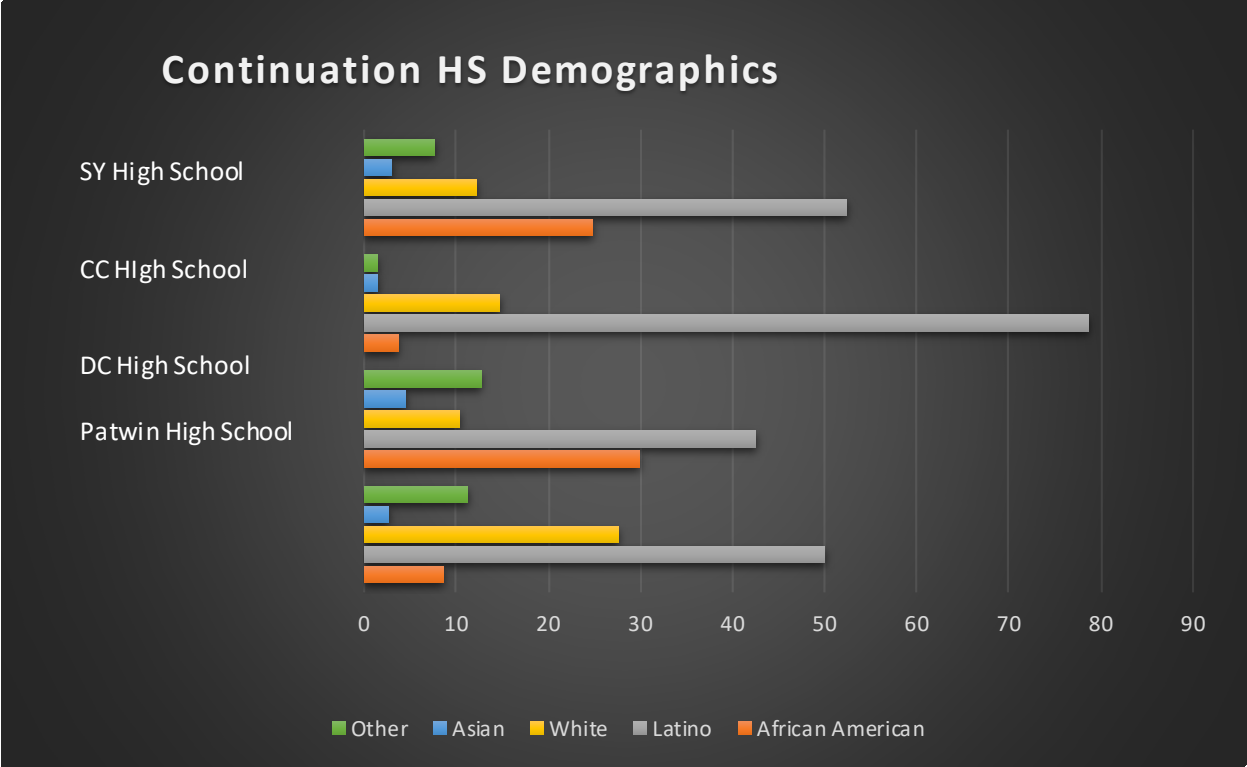
Continuation high schools are an alternative diploma option for a significant portion of the high school student population. According to the California Department of Education, “[i]n the 2017–18 school year, there were 435 continuation schools reporting an enrollment of 51,811 students. However, CDE demographic report indicate that the total number of students served by these schools over the entire year to be 85,343” (EdData, 2019). While they are large in number, these often-overlooked schools offer hope to the most marginalized student populations that are overrepresented in the continuation high school population. Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012) noted the important role these schools could play in helping students beat the odds: “Our study of California’s continuation schools confirms that many of these alternative placements are, in fact, successful on-ramps for re-engaging youth back into school and onto a path to a high school diploma and post-secondary education” (p. 24).

In the course of the study, I undertook a student project, aimed at shedding light on the role of continuation schools, while highlighting the resilience and potential of the students who attend these schools. The study represented a sincere effort to focus on the complex needs of

continuation high school students and ensure those needs take center stage in more authentically committing to equitable outcomes for all students.

Continuation high school students are more likely to be Hispanic, African American, and English Language Learners. In contrast, Asian and White students are underrepresented in continuation high schools (EdSource, 2008). Figure 1 demonstrates the demographic composition of four continuation high schools near the Sacramento area where the study took place. These four continuation schools serve primarily Latinx and African American students. CC High School has a 78.7% Latinx student population while the Latinx population of the city where the school is located is under 50%. SY High School has a 22% African American population despite being situated in a city consisting of 15% African Americans. The White population at SY High School is 12% while White residents are 56% of the city's population.

Achievement data show a similar story; the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) yearly standardized test data demonstrate poor results for students at the four continuation high schools. The yearly assessment is regarded as the standard to identify student and school performance. The current results place all the schools significantly below the standardized benchmark and near the bottom of the tests' grading scale. In wealthier districts with less than 20% of low-income students, schools reported 70% proficiency rates. However, in districts with 80% of students from economically disadvantaged homes, proficiency rates hovered around 40% (Wiley, 2019). A significant percentage of students are falling behind in poorer school districts. In Figure 2, most students in all four continuation high schools fall near the bottom of the grading scale in both English and math. DC High School is the only school with any students who fall within the category of college readiness. With the exception of DC High School, none of these schools have career pathways at their school sites, nor do they



*Figure 1. Demographic data from CA Dashboard 2018 for four continuation high schools.*

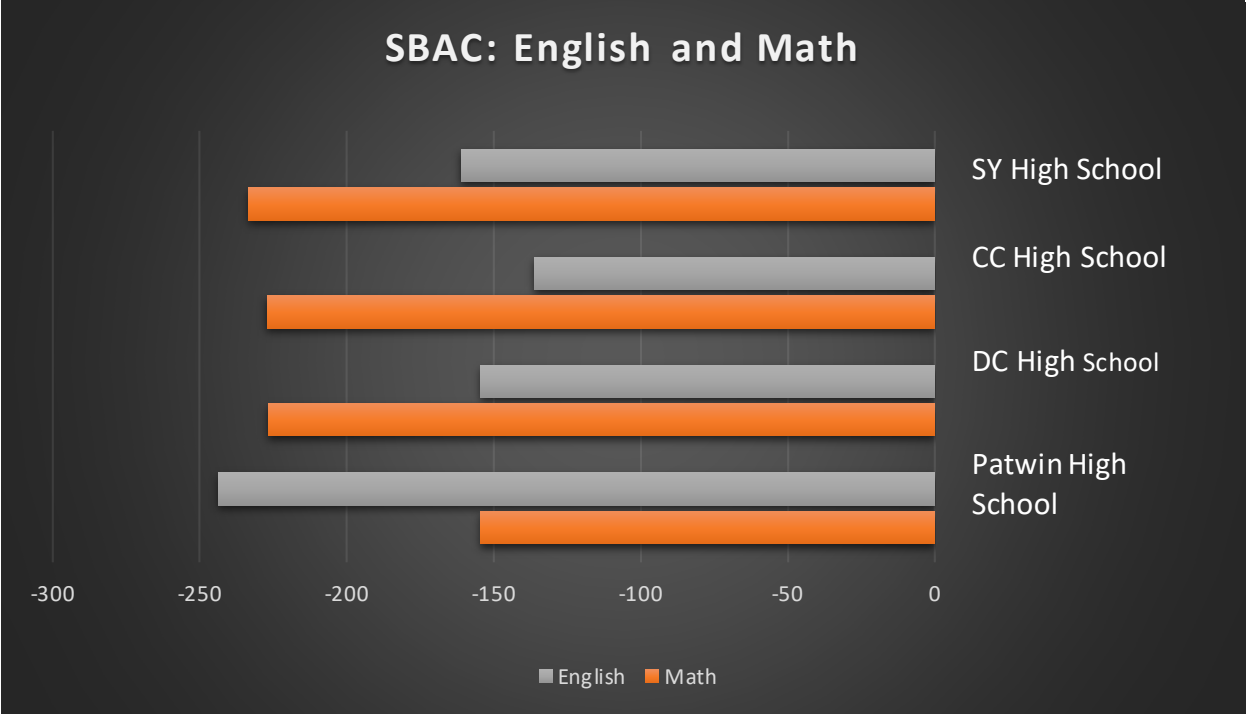


Figure 2. Achievement data on the SBAC yearly standardized test for four continuation high schools.

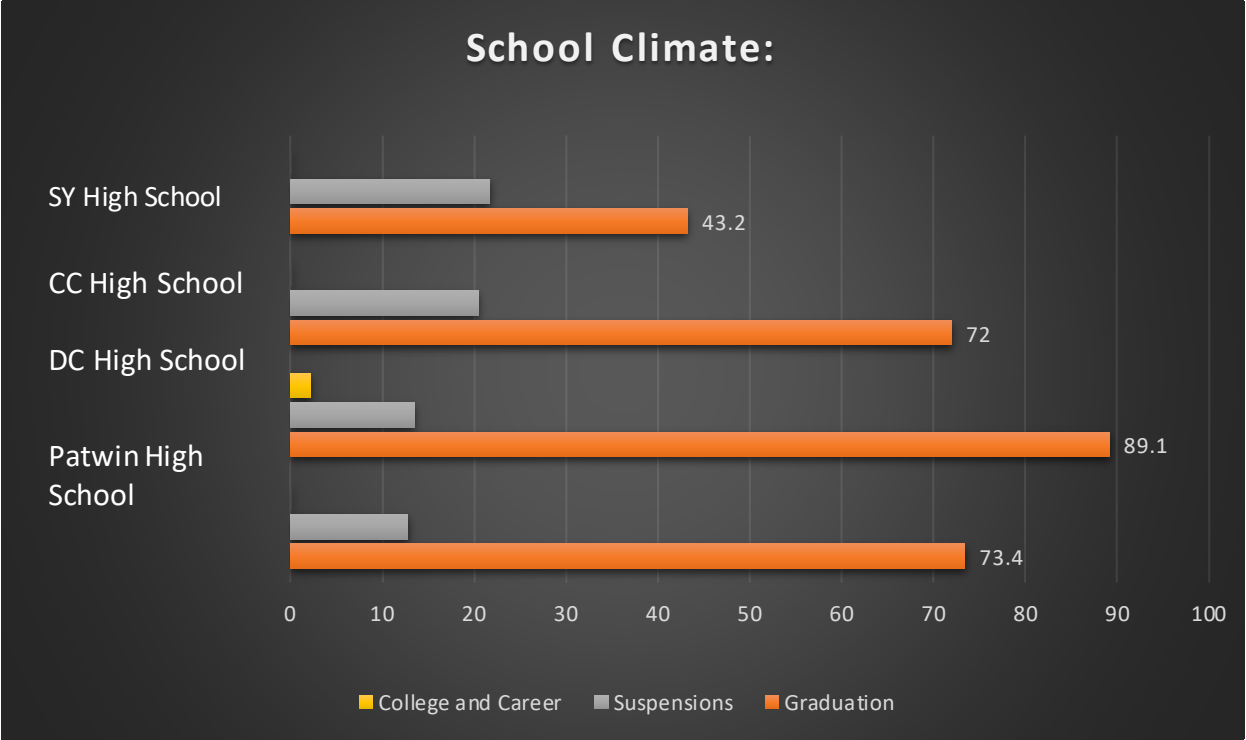
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have the funding allocation for electives that promote college and career preparedness (see Figure 3). Two areas provide additional rationales for the study. First, teachers are not fully prepared to teach at continuation high schools and receive limited targeted professional learning. The study results could provide a resource for teachers to rethink approaches to teaching and learning. Second, high school graduation is essential to students' future lives and continuation high schools need the support at all levels to assist youth toward obtaining a high school diploma. The lack of direction and oversight from the state and district levels in the way of weak accountability measures and often vague student transfer policies compromise the potential of these schools (Ruiz De Velasco & McLaughlin, 2012). Continuation high schools can play a more prominent role in our educational system as an important alternative toward reengaging youth successfully and preparing them for success after high school. Arrillaga and Issa (2019) found that, in order to better prepare students in alternative education, there is a need for more experimentation, investment, and reflection on student outcomes to better understand how, and under what circumstances, best teaching practices can be implemented in continuation high schools.

Six of the eight teachers at PHS have taught in continuation high schools an average of 18 years. In discussions with the teachers, none had participated in professional development specifically targeted to how to serve the needs of continuation high school students. They all agreed that more targeted professional development would help support their instruction.

Prior to my hire as the principal at that school, the average length of time a principal worked there was two years. According to the teachers, prior leadership did not promote positive professional development or growth. Despite attempts to shift classroom pedagogy to embrace student-centered approaches, the teachers did not fully adapt their instruction to meet the needs





*Figure 3.* Achievement data and suspension rates from CA Dashboard 2018 for four continuation high schools.

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of their student population. Instead, in observations of classrooms, teachers emphasized behavior and compliance with traditional lecture and minimal student interaction as the norm. Students, in turn, resorted to the “silent contract”, where they earn credit by complying with instructions and by remaining silent in the classroom.

Throughout California, professional development for teachers follows what I perceive as a *trickle-down* effect. Teachers are expected to incorporate and adapt the professional development geared to the comprehensive high schools and apply it to the continuation high school setting. A single professional development approach is adopted by a district and used for all schools in the district without distinction. Ruiz de Velazco and McLaughlin (2012) found that “[t]eachers [at continuation high schools] reported that they were not included in professional development opportunities available to teachers in comprehensive schools or that those opportunities were not relevant to the unique facets of their work with abused or otherwise vulnerable youth and that many require special staff training or skills” (p. 19). There is no acknowledgment of the unique needs of continuation high schools and no adjustment to the professional development model. Continuation high school teachers are asked to attend training and implement teaching strategies that are designed for traditional classrooms.

Continuation high school play an important role with ensuring that students get the opportunity and support to complete their high school diploma. In recent years, the high school diploma has become an increasingly fundamental entry point into today’s economy. It is necessary for most entry level jobs and mandatory for employment that offers possibilities for promotion and health insurance. According to the National Dropout Prevention Center, “The 21% of Hispanics students who fail to graduate or the 24% of Black students who fail to graduate further distance these segments of our population from the general economic prosperity.

Unless we find a way to graduate high numbers of work-ready and life-ready graduates who can participate in our prospering economy, we'll lose that prosperity" (Addis & Withington, 2018, p. 2).

Additionally, researchers are increasingly noting the direct correlation a high school diploma has to the health of a community. "The less schooling people have, the higher levels of risky health behaviors such as smoking, being overweight, or having less physical activity. High school completion is a useful measure of educational attainment because its influence on health is well studied, and it is widely recognized as the minimum entry requirement for higher education and well-paid employment" (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007, p. 2).

The graduation in California for 2018 indicated that 73% of African American seniors earned a high school diploma last year, compared to 93% of Asian students, 81% of Latinx students and 87% of White students (Fensterwald, 2018). The graduation rate for students at PHS was 74.3% in 2018, up from 70.2% in 2017. However, these data do not fully consider the push-out rate in which students are dropped from the attendance rolls and are not included in calculating graduation data.

In working with students at one continuation high schools to uncover their stories and develop their individual and collective identities and self-efficacy, I expected to use this model to demonstrate to educators that the voices of youth are a critical component of an effective second chance educational program. The end goal is to provide the districts with ideas from youth about how educational services at continuation high schools can improve. The collective stories were used to inform an educational approach that engages students rather than alienating, silencing, or otherwise pushing them out of school.

## **Purpose Statement and Research Question**

The purpose of the study was to learn from the students and use the knowledge to inform educators at continuation high schools about schooling that could better serve marginalized youth and better prepare them for their transition from high school to adulthood. The overarching question for the study was: How can a group of students, working with a school leader, uncover their values, assets, and interests to better understand their individual and collective identity and become more efficacious voices for themselves and other youth?

Insights into the question came from a robust set of research sub-questions. Each sub-question is aligned with a specific set of data collection and analysis procedures along with a timeline (see Chapter 3). The sub-questions for the study are:

1. Do high school students who have been traditionally marginalized and underserved successfully engage in a collaborative process in which they share stories about their beliefs, assets, and interests?
2. Can the students develop an individual and collective identity to exhibit agency and self-efficacy through this collaborative process?
3. How can the students design a collaborative project in which they can take collective action for change?
4. How does this process inform my ability to be a more deliberate, engaging, and effective school leader?

In the purpose statement and the research questions, I clarify the direction of study by conveying the main goal of the work. The research question and sub-questions frame the purpose of the project in a researchable format. The rich stories, articulated by the students in the study, served to empower the students.

## **Research Methodology and Design**

I approached the study as a qualitative action research project. I believe that action is vital to knowledge and that knowledge is understood through the actions we take, mirroring another key process for the research: praxis, i.e., “reflection in order to act” (Freire, 1970). I drew upon the philosophy and approach of the activist researchers (Hale, 2008; Hunter et al., 2013). In using this methodology, I assume the role of participant observer and summarize the study design, which I explain more fully in Chapter 3.

### **Activist Research**

Participatory action research is a form of action research with qualitative evidence as the primary method of data collection and analysis. Participatory activist research or PA<sup>1</sup>R (Hunter et al., 2013) is a type of participatory action research in which the researcher assumes the role of an advocate for social justice, working directly with a group of marginalized persons co-researchers while fully engaging the participants in looking at the evidence to ensure a just and equitable outcome for the participants. The research is often messy and iterative, relying on the evidence from consecutive cycles of inquiry to make decisions about next steps. While I had a tentative plan in mind to work with youth over three cycles of inquiry using the five steps of popular education, I had to ensure that participants were ready for successive steps.

Hale (2008) suggests that activist research is subject to a key validity: the study must be useful to the participants. Thus, I positioned the study following the reasoning articulated by Hale (2008):

1. Modern science has developed an ideal of knowledge based on detached, objective observation, and activist research contends the opposite. The researcher is not detached but immersed in the experience.

2. Activism is widely understood as directly expressive of individual interests, emotions, or ethical commitments rather than a broader, more reflective, and more intellectually informed perspective on social issues.

The study demonstrated the important knowledge that can be generated by being a participant working with the students. Activist research emphasizes a form of reflexivity about the conditions for formulating knowledge of different kinds (Hale, 2008). As an activist researcher, I could dignify the experiences of marginalized students in a continuation high school by generating the knowledge vital to understanding their individual and collective identity, and they could interact with new knowledge through the popular education process and become stronger agents of change. When they applied learning about systemic oppression to their life experiences, they gained not only knowledge but authority over their own stories and were then able to voice their ideas to adults in the third cycle. It was and is my belief that the stories of the student participants were shaped by the numerous people in their lives, the ecologies they bring with them, and most importantly the social DNA given to them by the people who raised them (Guajardo et al., 2016).

For these reasons, I chose to include *pláticas* in the study because they are consistent with the activist researcher approach. *Pláticas* are an expressive cultural form shaped by listening, inquiry, and storytelling, a story-making process that is like a multi-dimensional conversation (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013). Conversations were critical for building the relationships and fostering dialogue among the participants. Key to this approach was learning to listen closely to the stories, to the form of the stories, and to the environment surrounding the stories and the question. The form of the question and its context are equally important (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013).

The study design was a challenge to traditional approaches to scholarship. I sought to validate the stories of the students that participated. The ability and opportunity to cogenerate knowledge with marginalized youth informed my educational practice and leadership development.

### **Project Design**

The project unfolded in three cycles consistent with the five stages of popular education. The first cycle focused on getting to know the students deeply. This cycle represented Stages 1 and 2 of popular education. Stage 1 focuses on getting the students to understand themselves individually and collectively. Stage 2 gets students to make connections between their shared stories. The goal in the first cycle was to build on their collective knowledge and have the students draw parallels from their shared experiences. Popular education is a collective effort that requires the engagement of all the participants.

The second cycle aligns with Stage 3 of popular education. During this stage new information or theory is introduced to the learning process of the study. The information introduced during this stage was guided by the discussion and needs of the students. The students during this stage demonstrated the need to place their lived experiences in the context of larger social structures of oppression. The goal was to build the individual and social identity and enhance their critical consciousness.

The third and last cycle fulfilled Stages 4 and 5 of popular education in which the students planned actions to and make their collective learning meaningful. Their stories and experiences served as guidelines to inform educators for re-imagining how continuation high schools could better serve students. The experiences were not only useful to them but also to a larger audience (Hale, 2008).

The study participants included a group of 10 PHS students and I as a school administrator. The school counselor at PHS played an important role in supporting the logistical aspects of the study helping arrange meeting times and the location. The counselor has been on the PHS campus over 6 years working in different capacities. He began as a volunteer and a year later took on a paid administrative assistant position within the campus. He transitioned after 2 years to Career Specialist for the high school, and eventually I hired him as the school counselor. He is now in his 3rd year as a counselor. He speaks Spanish and has been effective in connecting and building relationships with the students.

The students selected for the project represented the demographic distribution of the students enrolled in the continuation high school where the study took place. I selected four young women and five young men for the study. I considered the relationships within the group to ensure I could proceed without disagreements or issues based on previous incidents. I describe more in detail the selection process in Chapter 3.

### ***PAR Cycle One***

In the first cycle of the PAR study, we established a safe space for dialogue. It was important that we validated the knowledge and experiences of all the student participants during the process. We spent time establishing relationships and ensuring that each student felt comfortable with the study. It was also important to ensure that the student participants could speak without the fear of taking risks. I conducted individual monthly conversations with each student participant. The meetings and the interviews with the students helped me develop better relationships with them, helping me to support and guide their individual growth.



### ***PAR Cycle Two***

In the second cycle of inquiry, we built on established relationships and protocols from the first phase. I incorporated new knowledge using structural and institutional lenses so that students could understand their experiences in a broader social context (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). I challenged the students to think critically about the social inequities that they encountered in their lives, thus linking their micro experiences to the larger systemic structures. I used the four-quadrant analytical framework that illuminates oppressive socio-political processes so that participants can reflect on their own positions and responsibilities in relation to various forms of oppression (Adams & Bell, 2016). The sources of evidence for PAR Cycle Two included student interviews, study session notes, and observations.

### ***PAR Cycle Three***

In the third cycle of inquiry, we planned meaningful action. The decision on what action to take was a collective process for the students and directly connected to their experiences. They decided to hold a teacher training, which they called a listening circle, to speak directly to educators. The experiences of the students guided the study and informed the ways they planned the session. Four teachers from different school districts participated in the zoom online listening circle. The educators were selected for their experience and desire to improve the educational experience of Youth of Color in alternative education.

In this study design, I relied on evidence from prior cycles of inquiry to make strategic decisions for the next one. First, we built community among the students and me. We relied on the direct experience of the participants to make meaning and co-create the knowledge necessary to inform our outcomes. By using popular education as a process, we ensured the active

participation of all students. I modeled and facilitated the activities encouraging student reflection and voice.

### **Significance: Equity Considerations and Importance to Practice, Policy, and Research**

This study was significant because it shed light on the long-overlooked stories of the students who attend continuation high schools. It exposed the assets of the students and attempted to address the deficiencies of an educational program that directly impacts some of our most vulnerable students. Since continuation high schools further marginalize Youth of Color because of the schools' failure as an educational program, the study directly addressed the marginalization. The study was intentional about advocating for equitable learning conditions for youth. As a result, the study could have significance for practice, policy, and research. In fact, the processes in this study, by youth for youth, can be adapted and scaled to address concerns in other school districts seeking to better serve youth and rethink their approach to continuation high schools (Morel et al., 2019).

### **Equity Considerations**

Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012) concluded that continuation high schools “are failing to provide the academic and critical support services that students need to succeed” (p. 4). This finding is particularly disturbing given that continuation schools serve some of our most vulnerable student populations. Continuation high schools in California enroll English Language Learners, students in foster care, parenting students, and victims of violence or alcohol and drug abuse at rates significantly higher than comprehensive schools.

It is an unsettling reality that our current educational system is increasingly failing to meet the needs of our most vulnerable student populations. The narrow focus on testing along with zero tolerance discipline policies of the comprehensive schools are creating a push-out

effect on the marginalized student population. This is a problem that is well understood at the highest levels by policymakers. “Congress recognized that holding schools accountable for their test scores could create a perverse incentive to ‘push out’ low-performing students; that is, the easiest way to increase test scores and meet progress goals could be to encourage or force low-performing students out of the school before they take the test” (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007, p. 7).

Therefore, the work and voices of the students during the study, is an equity call to action for our most marginalized student population. Continuation high schools have become a default placement where we warehouse our most vulnerable students. The study was significant in that it re-imagined continuation schools as spaces that can actually serve youth by actively engaging youth in conversations with the adults who could re-design these spaces.

## **Practice**

Educational reforms historically have targeted the instruction of the traditional classroom setting with no meaningful direction or consideration offered for continuation high schools. The structure of the school day, curriculum design, instructional practices, and instructional methods vary widely between traditional classrooms and continuation high school classrooms and among continuation high schools. Some continuation high schools only provide 15 hours of instruction, the minimum required by the state.

Modifications to the overall structure, courses, and pedagogical approaches of continuation high schools have been not been consistent (Bush, 2012). Student voice is largely absent from proposals about what teachers could and should do in their instructional practices. The study engaged students from one continuation high school and provides student ideas to administrators and teachers. In the study we identified the structures, curriculum design, and

instructional practices currently being used on the PHS campus to determine whether these strategies were effective with engaging or empowering students. Its findings not only provide direction to professional development efforts but also encourage a broader conversation on student needs and how to best prepare them for life after high school.

### **Policy**

Continuation high schools operate on legislation that was originally crafted and designed to serve working students in the early turn of the past century. Legislation changed slightly in the 1960s to incorporate a vocational focus. According to Stits (2013), during the middle of the sixties, there was a new focus approach by the federal government, referred to as a 'seek and serve' mission to find students who were dropping out of school and retain them in the system. The mission of current continuation high schools was born out of this outlook. The present mission of most schools is to support students with obtaining a high school diploma by actively seeking them out.

The No Child Left Behind legislation of 2002 was the most recent attempt at large-scale school reform that only added more expectations to continuation high schools without additional guidance or support. At the moment, the language in education code section 48430 describes the need for continuation high schools to continue serving as a complement to a work study option, which was the original design. According to Ruiz de Velasco and Gonzalez (2017) the occupational emphasis implies a lower academic standard for continuation students, which is at odds with recent educational reforms that strive for rigorous academic curriculum and college and career readiness for all students. The legislators need to reexamine the design of the authorizing legislation to provide clear signals and to clarify goals for the alternative education options in California (Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017).

There is a clear need for legislators and policy makers to work with the educational community to craft legislation that is meaningful and up to date with the realities of continuation high schools. The study can better identify the complexity of the distinct needs for effective continuation high schools. In addition, the study results proposed a closer look at the purpose of continuation high schools and the need to revisit current education policy.

## **Research**

The research on continuation high schools is inconclusive as to the effectiveness of such programs given the significant differences that exist across the institutions' structure, curricula and practices. There are even fewer studies on student perceptions of structure, curricula, and instructional practices or that ask students their suggestions. The study can provide a more intimate account of the effects of continuation high schools on the lives of the students they serve. It highlighted the need to move beyond the quantitative assessments and the importance of qualitative, participatory and activist approaches.

I advocated throughout the project for a prominent student voice in the equation. As the foundation for our democratic institution, the educational system would benefit from a reform that includes the voices of the students it serves.

## **Study Limitations, Confidentiality, and Ethical Considerations**

We looked deeply into the lives of the students. The process required extreme attention to confidentiality and ethical considerations. The study uncovered the unique needs of the students, needs that are otherwise overlooked in much of what we consider for students in continuation high schools. However, the study was limited to one school site over an 18 month period. The students selected for the study were not all enrolled at the school during the three consecutive semesters in which the study takes place. Many of the participants completed the program early,

and only two students remained enrolled at the end of the study. Despite the narrow focus on one continuation high school program, the study provided an intimate perspective for how to approach instructional reform in unique educational environments such as continuation schools.

The study touches on the personal lives of students and thus required extra attention to confidentiality. The transcripts of interviews, field notes, and other documents were kept in locked locations separate from documents with identifying information. They will be retained for 3 years after the completion of the study. Final approval to conduct the research project was granted by the East Carolina University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The approval certified that the study complies with ethical standards and federal regulations on the treatment of human subjects.

To avoid extracting information from a site without contributing to it, I elected to do research with former students at a site where I had worked for 5 years. This is a community with which I feel a sincere connection. I taught for more than 6 years in alternative education schools and have served as a school site administrator in various roles for nearly 15 years. My long tenure (when compared to prior principals) and the small size of our school allowed me to build a trusting relationship with both the staff and the students involved in the study. I gained consent and assent forms from parents and from all students who were under 18 years of age. I also obtained consent forms from all students who were over 18 years of age. These students were all graduates and met on their own time outside of school.

### **Conclusion**

The PAR study empowered students in a continuation high school by building their individual and collective knowledge and increasing their self-efficacy so they could act on their own behalf to improve their experiences at continuation high schools. Engaging students as co-

learners and leaders through *pláticas*, using the popular education model, was designed to provide transformational and empowering learning. Students had a central voice of hope in a process that validated their knowledge and informed student learning. Their past classroom experiences helped inform the research and brought to light instructional approaches that validated students and engaged them meaningfully.

The dissertation comprises seven chapters. Chapter 2 is the literature review in which I examine key concepts and prior research on alternative education and how it can further marginalize the youth it is purported to serve. Critical pedagogies and popular education are discussed as successful approaches toward working with Youth of Color. The chapter challenges the negative portrayals of Youth of Color and argues for engaging student voice within educational reforms. I present in Chapter 3 the research methodology, the research context, and the process for the research. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I describe the cycles of inquiry using the popular education model and present an analysis of data from those experiences. In Chapter 7, I discuss the key findings and analyze the contributions this study makes to the field of educational research and to practice communities.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

*Education runs on lies. That's probably not what you'd expect from a former secretary of education, but it's the truth. How schools work best is often by confronting and fighting these lies, but this is exhausting, and sometimes perilous work usually undertaken by an isolated teacher or principal (Duncan, 2018, p. 1).*

The above quote by former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan calls out the false narrative that exists about our nation's attitude toward education. As citizens of the United States, we aspire for education to reflect our country's values and to be a cornerstone of democracy; yet the reality is disturbing when we analyze current performance of our educational system. The lies according to Duncan, include a poorly designed accountability system and a culture of low expectations for high school students who are not prepared for the real world.

One of the greatest of these lies is that all youth receive access to free and appropriate education at schools with the resources and well-trained teachers needed to educate students well. The other great lie is that the underperformance of low-income Youth of Color can be blamed on youth themselves or the communities they come from. When in fact, the root causes of the achievement gap suggest a long history of disfunction in the education system and oppressive practices do indeed lead to an educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Throughout this study, I used the term "Youth of Color" to refer to the Black and Brown students because that is the term frequently used in educational research and is my term of preference. I used the term to establish the importance of the voice of Youth of Color and the need to address the systemic issues that they face in our current society. The grammatical move is one step toward social justice (Pérez-Huber & Cueva, 2012).

The US has repeatedly shown a blatant disregard for the teachers and students that serve our most vulnerable students. Youth of Color in our educational system are not to blame. They have never had access to equitably-resourced schools. Despite the promise of the landmark



Supreme Court case in 1954 that was the cornerstone of the civil rights movement, *Brown v. Board of Education*, schools today are more segregated than when the ruling went into effect. The distribution of resources across schools are as inequitable as ever (Rothstein, 2014). This historic neglect was highlighted by former President Trump's appointment as Secretary of Education of Betsy DeVos, an advocate of a neoliberal agenda including school vouchers and market-driven educational reform, which harm the lowest-performing students in an already distressed public school system (Nasir et al., 2016).

The works of Paolo Freire (1970) and Charles Mills (1997) provide insights into the forces behind the lies to which Mr. Duncan refers. According to Freire, the propaganda favoring oppressive education efforts (and the result—underserved low-income students within the educational system) obscure the deliberate effort to dehumanize and oppress lower-income families. Freire argues that the educational system plays a key role in the maintenance of a hierarchical, class-based system. Mills provides a lens through which to understand race-based oppression and attributes the neglect of institutions such as schools to White supremacy. He argues that society operates on a racial contract “that is always the differential privileging of the Whites as a group with respect to nonWhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them” (Mills, 1997, p. 11). Drawing on Freire and Mills, I argue that class-based and race-based oppression is the outcome of an educational system that pretends to serve equitably while failing significantly.

Dominant and popular explanations for why youth underperform in school place the blame on the youth (Bluestein, 1988; Dreikurs, 1968). In this chapter, I review the many ways that the “underperformance” of low-income youth and Youth of Color has been framed. Once the problem is identified as Youth of Color themselves, policy makers and school administrators

responded by attempting to push them out of schools (Balfanz & Legters, 2006) instead of recognizing our country's historical lack of commitment to educating marginalized youth. In echoing the arguments of Freire (1970) and Mills (1997), I offer frameworks and solutions based on a recognition of the institutional and structural dimensions of the problem.

The over-assignment of Youth of Color in alternative programs is an example of how they are marginalized. The method of the PAR project and research study was to look at the youth themselves to provide a response. I will explore in the literature review research on engaging Youth of Color through critical pedagogies to develop viable solutions to their educational realities. Discovering youth voice and the potential of student agency are critical elements for responding to educational injustices. Lastly, I argue that popular education may be a model for engaging Youth of Color in developing critical consciousness and self-efficacy.

### **Youth of Color Perceived as the Problem**

Valdés (1996) analyzed how the US has historically through past scholarly work framed Youth of Color as inferior and the source of their own educational problems. The framing came in the form of the “disadvantaged” narrative, a typical deficit perspective that students of color do not have the right “culture” (Deutsch 1969; Ornstein, 1970; Riessman, 1962). This explanation for the academic failure of Youth of Color ignores institutional and structural factors. By contrast, Ladson-Billings (2006) challenges the “achievement gap” and frames the problem as an education debt because the problem lies with the institutions and systems rather than on the students themselves in whom we have failed to invest adequately. Next, I examine how the negative framing of Youth of Color led to instructional practices the push out students.

## **The Historical Framing of Youth of Color as Inferior**

Education researchers and practitioners have framed Youth of Color as inferior in three ways: genetically, culturally, and sociologically. In each of these cases the social structures that gave rise to the individual are not questioned (Grant & Allweiss, 2014). The use of the term “disadvantaged” needs to account for systemic and structural inequities. Similarly, Valencia (1997) argued against the blaming of the individual for failing to succeed and a framing of “disadvantaged” students within a deficit framework. Valdés (1996) provides multiple examples of the deeply racist, classist, and anti-immigrant rationales used to explain the underperformance of Mexican youth. Building on the work of Bond (1981), she categorized these rationales as the genetic argument, the cultural argument, and the class analysis argument.

### ***Youth as Genetically Inferior***

Some researchers have argued through their work that White students are genetically more intellectually capable than others (Eysenck, 1997; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Jensen, 1969). They have used the IQ test to claim the existence of a relationship between heredity and intelligence. The metrics used by researchers to support these claims failed to answer if the differences in IQ tests were irreversibly fixed and independent of the influences of social and economic inequality (Mensch & Mensch, 1991). Steele (2010) demonstrated the effects of stereotypes on test results by increasing or decreasing test anxiety. Researchers and practitioners continue to use the IQ test despite the evidence they fail to adequately measure intelligence. “The tests have served as a very efficient device for screening out Black, Spanish-speaking, and other minority applicants to colleges” (McClelland, 1973, p. 1). The IQ test and other standardized tests are tools for the subjugation of Youth of Color in our school system.

Additional scholars revisited the genetic argument that academic talent is largely inherited, and that society rewards these genetically-inherited abilities. According to Herrnstein and Murray (1994), a wide range of social problems—school dropouts, unemployment, work-related injury, out-of-wedlock births, crime, and many other social problems—are correlated to intelligence. Lynn and Vanhanen (2002) argued for a causal relationship between IQ and the gap between rich and poor countries. “Intelligence differences between nations will be impossible to eradicate because they have a genetic basis and have evolved over the course of thousands of years” (Lynn & Vanhanen, 2002, p. 195). Thus, if Youth of Color do not achieve in schools, schools are not responsible. Students identified as genetically inferior are more easily pushed into special classes and schools as seen today in the over-representation of Youth of Color in special education (Artiles et al., 2001).

### *Youth as Culturally Inferior*

Many researchers and practitioners persist in using cultural explanations for poor achievement. Lewis (1998) argued that poor children are trapped in a “culture of poverty” and locked into a self-perpetuating cycle of failure. Prevailing narratives cast Youth of Color as culturally deficient (preventing them from assimilation and social mobility) or mismatched (unable to blend with or complement the dominant White culture) (Brachrach & Baratz, 1970). Thernstrom and Thernstrom (1997) influenced a generation of post-war racial progressives and contributed to the narrative that Black families struggled because of their deficiencies. Loury (1997) summed up the book’s message in his review: “If many Blacks languish, this is their own fault, raising no policy-relevant issue of racial unfairness. Work is available in the inner cities; immigrants can find it, why not the Blacks? If

the Blacks would marry, if they would cut out their disruptive behavior inside school buildings, if they would just stop their lawbreaking, their prospects would brighten” (Loury, 1997, p. 148).

A related cultural argument against Youth of Color is that their parents do not value education. The perspective is held widely among political leaders and in mainstream media. According to New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, “Unfortunately, there are some parents who...never had a formal education, and they don’t understand the value of an education.” (Perry, 2014). Similarly, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* columnist Tony Norman attributed student underachievement to “the lack of active, radical involvement of every parent” (Perry, 2014). Perry points out that blaming parents absolves cities from addressing problems of governance, curriculum, instruction, lack of resources, or any city policies that might have created the problems in urban schools.

### ***Youth as Underclass***

The third deficit-based explanation for school failure is class. These authors contend that our capitalist society successfully created and continues to sustain an economic order that maintains people in low, middle, and upper classes. Educational institutions play an important role in creating and sustaining class by reinforcing social categories. The educational system sorts and places students into distinct categories with implications that extend beyond the classroom (Domina et al., 2017).

To counter these arguments, Morrell and Duncan-Andrade (2008) argue, “Schools are the country’s *de facto* socioeconomic sorting mechanism. Under the logic, schools are the primary place in which economic futures are cast and people are sorted into their roles in society” (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2008, p. 2). Students often believe that because they are being given an equal opportunity, failure in school is entirely their own fault. Youth of Color navigate

the educational system with limited perspectives of their potential. They attend schools that are inequitable by design composed of classrooms with more negative contextual characteristics and less effective teachers (Palardy, 2015). Students are led to believe that their failure is due to their limited ability and leave the schools firmly believing that they could have achieved as much as their middle-class peers if only they had tried harder (Valdés, 1996).

Each of the three rationales blames the individual student or the student's family for lack of success in the educational system. A more complete analysis must link structural, cultural, and interactional elements. Persell (2017) states that, "structurally, it is important to measure the degree of racial stratification. This includes the historical social, symbolic, economic, educational, and political domination of race in different regions of the country" (Persell, 2017, p. 301). The redefinition of cause requires a more thorough analysis that moves away from an individualistic framing.

### **From an Individualistic to a Structural Framing**

Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that the traditionalists, who frame the educational underperformance of Youth of Color by blaming and diminishing the students, overlook the role of our racist institutions in creating and sustaining the gap. Instead, Ladson-Billings encourages readers to reframe the problem as an "education debt." The education debt is the cumulative effect of underfunded educational systems, insufficient and inadequate housing, lack of access to health care, and poor government services (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The education debt concept highlights the cost of not investing in the educational institutions serving Youth of Color, including a variety of social problems (e.g., low productivity, low wages, low labor force participation) that require ongoing public investment (Ladson-Billings, 2006). To fully

understand the magnitude of the debt, Ladson-Billings urges readers to imagine the impact of funding our poorest schools as we do the wealthiest ones.

While Boykin and Noguera (2011) frame the issue as the lack of opportunity, they argue that historical and cultural defamation has exacerbated the marginalization of students from the educational system. “Race, class, culture, and linguistic differences do not cause the achievement gap; however, they do contribute to its persistence and often complicate efforts to reduce or eliminate disparities in student outcomes” (Boykin & Noguera, 2011, p. 29). Another way of viewing the problem of the achievement gap is to move away from a focus on cultural, social, and economic factors and look instead at the way we structure schools. Fergus (2016) found in his ten-year root cause analysis that the wellness of instruction and curriculum as it is represented in instructional support teams/teacher assistance teams, intervention services, assessment, and gifted and talented programs continuously emerge as maintaining gaps in practices that disproportionately affect struggling learners.

Love (2019) concurs that we should not blame Youth of Color. She contends that the root of the problem is a system that under-appreciates what Youth of Color have to offer. She recommends starting with an acknowledgement that the problem is located outside the child and inside the institutions. This framework—which she terms an abolitionist approach—is a way to address the racism in schools that underserve Youth of Color. Abolitionist teachers seek to abolish the injustice in and outside the schools, much like the abolitionist movement to outlaw slavery preceding the Civil War. Abolitionist teaching is the practice of working in solidarity with communities of color while drawing on the “imagination, creativity, refusal, remembering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination, and subversiveness of abolitionist work to eradicate injustice in and outside of schools” (Love, 2019, p. 2).

Framing Youth of Color as the problem leads to overlooking the embedded structural inequalities in our educational system. As a country, we are amassing an ever-growing debt to our communities of color. The repercussions for Youth of Color and their families are lost opportunities for academic success and a roadblock for social mobility. The neglect and lack of investment leads to a great loss of human capital for the entire nation.

### **Alternative Education**

Alternative education has evolved as a response to the need to increase high school graduation and as a means to support students that are falling behind academically. The growth of alternative education has also emerged as the new form of segregation. While institutions could construct supportive environments, they instead default to punitive warehouses for the students deemed unable to succeed.

One response to the perception of youth as to blame for their own underachievement has been to push them out of the traditional school environment into a parallel educational system. Across the nation, separate classrooms and schools have been created to segregate students who are not deemed ready for a traditional classroom or school. “Alternative education” refers to programs that exist outside the typical system of comprehensive schools. California state law authorizes three types of educational programs that serve students who are “at risk” of dropping out of high school: continuation schools, community day schools, and community schools (Hill, 2007). Table 1 provides a framework of the three types of schools.

In the study I focused on a continuation high school where I worked as principal when the project started. The mission of continuation high schools originated as a way to serve students at risk of not graduating by providing flexibility for students who also are employed to obtain a high school diploma. In the 2016-17 academic year, 441 continuation high schools



Table 1

*Framework for Alternative Schools*

	Continuation	Community Day	Community
Mission	Complete courses for graduation	None identified	Individually planned education
	Emphasize work and intensive guidance		Emphasize occupations and guidance
	Meet students' needs for flexible schedule or occupational goals		
Eligible to Operate	Districts	Districts or county offices	County offices
Grades Served	10-12 (at least 16 years old)	K-12	K-12
Placement Criteria	Volunteers	Volunteers	Volunteers
	Suspended or expelled	Expelled	Expelled
	Habitually truant or irregular attendance	Referred by SARB <sup>a</sup>	Referred by SARB <sup>a</sup>
		Probation referred	Homeless children
			Probation referred
Instructional Setting	Small classes	Small classes	Small classes
	Individual instruction	Individual instruction	Individual instruction
	Independent study		Independent study

*Note.* <sup>a</sup> SARB-School Attendance Review Board. Legislative Analyst's Office Report 2007 (Hill, 2007).

operated in the state of California (EdData, 2019) with approximately 100,000 enrolled students. While community day and community schools are designed for short-term interventions, continuation high schools are designed for long-term high school placement. The longer placement option of continuation high schools facilitates extended segregation for marginalized students (see Table 1).

Bush (2012) identified the structural modifications, curriculum design, and instructional practices in a multiyear analysis of continuation high schools throughout California (see Table 2). These high schools are more flexible and thus can provide a variety of approaches in these three areas: structural modifications, curriculum design, and instructional practices. The flexibility in each of these three areas can be both beneficial and limiting. Continuation high schools can accept student at any given time throughout the school year. They are better structured to meet the academic needs of the students and generally require less credits towards high school graduation. Most of the students that enroll at a continuation high school are significantly behind in credits and require individualized instruction.

Providing individualized instruction for the students can present a challenge for the teaching staff. Because of their size, continuation high schools often cannot provide the needed core courses at a given time nor provide a variety of elective course offerings. Online credit recovery classes are an additional strategy that can assist with the gaps in courses needed for high school graduation. These online credit recovery programs require additional monitoring time from teachers or administrators and are not readily embraced or available to all schools.

Recent trends toward curriculum standardization and high stakes testing are further complicating the delivery of instruction in continuation high schools. The schools are faced with needing to provide individualization instruction to serve the specific needs of the students, while

Table 2

*Structural Modifications, Curriculum Design, and Instructional Practices*

Method	Description
	Structural Modifications
Altered Course Structure	Schools offered specialized coursework under general course titles (e.g., ‘math’ instead of separate algebra and geometry courses) or created interdisciplinary courses (e.g., combined English Language Arts and United States History block period).
Short-Term Modules	Teachers designed curriculum within the structure of short-term modules (or mini-units) in which the students receive grades and credits every 3 to 6 weeks. Teachers chunked content into these shorter units based on a teacher-defined set of learning objectives, often backward-mapped to the standards.
Performance-Based Credit Recovery	An extension of competency-based education, course grade and/or coursework corresponds to the number of credits awarded. For a 3-week period, a student might earn a third of a credit for a C, two-thirds of a credit for a B, or a full credit for an A. In some cases, grading was further tied to the quantity of work product submitted by the students based on a menu of assessment options (final essay, research presentation, multiple choice test, etc.).
	Curriculum Design
Data-Driven Approach	Teachers and principals in our study administered pre-test assessments to identify gaps in student learning. At some sites, teachers described periodic data analysis meetings with the principal, during which they discussed student progress and created an intervention or re-teaching plans.
Backward-Mapping to State Standards	Some successful schools engaged in careful backward-mapping of the standards in creating intensive, content-infused units tailored to student background, ability, and needs. Often, teachers choose standards based on student benchmark assessments.

Table 2 (continued)

Method	Description
Computer-Based Programs	<p>Schools utilized computer-based programs for four purposes: (1) to assess and address gaps in student learning with highly differentiated, targeted instruction; (2) to allow students to take courses that could not otherwise be offered within the confines of a small school (including A-G requirement courses and sometimes Advanced Placement courses); (3) to facilitate accelerated credit recovery by allowing students to complete additional hours and credits outside of the school day; and (4) to manage intake.</p>
Direct Instruction	<p>Instructional Practices</p> <p>Teachers and principals used this term to describe teacher-guided group discussion of a reading, lesson, or case-study. (<i>Note: Teachers were not referring to the highly scripted style utilized in some direct instruction curricula, particularly as most curricula were teacher-modified or teacher-created.</i>)</p>
Project-Based Learning	<p>Teachers engage students in inquiry-based projects focusing on solving a complex problem or question collaboratively. In continuation high schools, students often complete projects in coordination with Regional Occupational Programs (ROP)<sup>3</sup> or Career Technical Education (CTE). Some schools also drew on community partnerships to collaboratively design projects with real-world impact.</p>
“No Homework” Policy	<p>Notably, the schools that we visited did not issue homework assignments to students. At most, students were only expected to complete any extra-credit (independent study) or ‘make-up’ assignments outside of school.</p>

*Note.* Bush (2012).

aligning their courses to the curricular standards of the school district and state. While curriculum standardization arguably serves to monitor the progress of programs and student achievement in comprehensive schools, in the case of continuation high schools, it does little to identify and address the diverse needs of the students enrolled. “Standardized school learning periods, behavior, and high-stakes tests all steal our children’s opportunities for the genuine, shared, and engaging struggle that comprises the sort of real learning that we all must engage in for meaningful life and work in this century” (Bjerede, 2013).

Continuation high schools face a multitude of obstacles to success. Along with the negative stigma and neglect, the schools often lack good governance, district support, and guidance. The issues are the cumulative effect of a lack of investment and commitment at all levels of the educational system. The increased accountability through standardized testing, intended to improve instruction in the traditional high schools, has increased the number of students failing and more student referrals to continuation high schools.

Fedders (2018) argued that the placement in alternative schools have become the new forms of school exclusion and a way for comprehensive high schools to game the system. She pointed to not only the increasing suspension rates for African American youth but also to the growing number of alternative school placements. Because traditional high schools are receiving greater scrutiny through standardized testing and accountability, they are motivated to remove struggling students and thereby improve their overall school performance data and graduation rates. By shifting students with weak test scores and a greater propensity to be truant or drop out to alternative programs, some traditional high schools have improved their metrics (Vogell & Fresques, 2017). The number of students enrolled in alternative settings for youth “at risk” of school failure has increased significantly in recent years (Lehr & Ysseldyke, 2009). The

increasing numbers of students who attend these educational programs calls for increased accountability to ensure that the programs are not used as dumping grounds for Youth of Color.

The information needed to adequately assess and support program improvement efforts in continuation high schools is limited. Little information is available on their governance, physical facilities, student population, and educational programming despite the growing numbers of these schools and the extensive history of alternative education programs in the state of California (Foley & Pang, 2006).

A significant issue that limits the support and guidance provided to continuation high schools is the lack of an effective accountability system. The new indicators and standards for the accountability system were modified for alternative schools, but their effectiveness remains in doubt. According to the California Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), the state's current school accountability system fails to adequately address alternative schools. It neither establishes clear long-term objectives nor sets relevant short-term performance expectations for continuation high schools (Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017). The LAO is known for its programmatic expertise and nonpartisan analyses to the state legislature for over 75 years. The most important responsibility is the analysis of the state budget. The LAO concluded in the report that the California Department of Education (CDE) does not provide schools with the needed direction, guidance, and incentives for improvement. "The State Board of Education (SBE) and other policymakers must recognize and acknowledge the specific circumstances and needs of students enrolled in alternative programs. Failure to do so will place the futures of the state's most vulnerable youth at even greater risk" (Ruiz de Velasco & Gonzales, 2017 p. 11).

In isolated cases, principals in alternative educational institutions have successfully leveraged the flexibility and lack of oversight to create responsive educational programs that

meet their communities' needs. Despite the structural limitations and despite being embedded in a system that historically underserves Youth of Color, some administrators acknowledge the issues plaguing marginalized students and have created intentional responses to the failures of the educational system. Until the educational system creates traditional schools that serve all youth rather than pushing out students perceived as incapable, successful alternative programs serving Youth of Color are merely an inspiration of what could be.

Continuation high schools in California are a parallel and largely unsuccessful educational program. Youth of Color are further marginalized in continuation high school programs because of the educational system's inability to validate and embrace their knowledge and potential by constructing curricula and instructional practices that support them. The next section addresses asset-based educational approaches that offer a different approach when working with Youth of Color.

### **Youth of Color and Hope**

We must start by challenging the deficit perspective of practitioners and scholars when working with marginalized youth in both traditional and alternative educational spaces. When educators understand that Youth of Color are not deficient and that they possess the tools and capabilities to perform academically in the classroom, student outcomes will improve. We propose an instructional approach that builds on critical pedagogies to build youth agency.

### **Critical Pedagogies for Youth of Color**

Critical pedagogies originated from the incorporation of critical theory into education (Bennett & LeCompte, 1999). Critical theory is the philosophy that questions prevailing views in society. Critical theory focuses on the oppression of the individual, the group, and of society by self-imposed or externally imposed influences (Peca, 2000). Critical education theorists argued

that teachers must become transformative intellectuals and critical pedagogues to resist the oppression of the dominant ideology and to produce a liberating culture within schools (Bennett & LeCompte, 1999). Proponents of both critical theory and critical pedagogies questioned the prevailing views and challenged inequities in education. The goal of critical pedagogy is to engage participants to challenge the system of oppression and improve their realities (Freire, 1970).

Several educational approaches originated from the work on critical pedagogy with a focus on improving the instruction of Youth of Color. Through understanding the distinction between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation, teachers can change their practice to make education more relevant to their students and to contemporary culture (Buffington & Day, 2018). Next, I review the contributions from three such pedagogies: culturally relevant pedagogy, hip-hop pedagogy, and reality pedagogy.

### ***Culturally Relevant Pedagogy***

Culturally relevant pedagogy is a framework that highlights the uniqueness and attributes brought to schools by Youth of Color. Ladson-Billings (1995) first described it as a pedagogy that accepts and affirms the cultural identity of Youth of Color while also supporting their development of critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools and other institutions perpetuate. Too often the school administrators and their policies overlook diversity and discourage multiculturalism (Schlesinger, 1991). The neglect creates the damaging outcome of pedagogies that disregard the background, cultural differences, strengths, and potential of students, especially Youth of Color. Acknowledging the cultural diversity of Youth of Color in the classroom was a step toward confronting the negative effects of traditional, White-centered curricula, teaching practices, and school policies that distorted the histories, cultures, and



backgrounds of Black and Brown students in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Culturally relevant teaching empowers the students' intellectual, social, emotional health, and attitude (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

### ***Hip-Hop Pedagogy***

Hip-hop pedagogy originates from the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy and capitalizes on the creative elements of hip-hop culture—deejaying, emceeing, break dancing, graffiti art, and knowledge of self (Adjapong & Emdin, 2015). Teachers validate and celebrate Youth of Color by introducing elements of hip-hop culture into their instructional practices. It is the affirmation and celebration of the belief that marginalized youth have the skills and the capacity to excel academically when teachers tap into their interests and strengths.

Hip-hop culture is rooted in West African traditional music that for centuries blended percussion from talking drums with songs of religious worship and celebration (Emdin, 2010). The rhythm and storytelling have become a platform giving voice for Youth of Color in marginalized urban communities throughout the world. Scholars consider hip-hop the genius of African Americans. It originated during a time when communities of color were living under highly oppressive circumstances and yet found a voice and artistic expression closely tied to their culture, history, and heritage (Love, 2019).

### ***Reality Pedagogy***

Reality pedagogy is based on the understanding and utilizing the realities of youth within a classroom as an anchor for instructional delivery (Emdin, 2011). The theoretical approach builds on critical relevant pedagogy by requiring dialogue between the student and teacher about the inequities experienced by Youth of Color. The teacher must then identify and make the connections with the lived experiences of their students to better instruct the students whether or

not the teachers may share similar experiences (Emdin, 2011). The elements (the “Seven Cs”) to reality pedagogy are:

1. Cogenerative dialogues—structured dialogues that build on students’ hip-hop identities and familiarity with the Hip-hop communal tradition of cyphers;
2. Co-Teaching—encourages students to be the experts while the teacher is positioned as a novice;
3. Cosmopolitanism—based on the philosophical construct that human beings are responsible for each other and that individual differences should be valued;
4. Context—connects students’ home lives and culture to their classrooms through community and cultural artifacts;
5. Content—evolves out of the willingness of the teacher to acknowledge his or her own limitations with academic content and to explore and learn with students;
6. Competition—builds positive emotions, fosters intense collaboration, and makes content relevant;
7. Curation—collecting, annotating, and preserving information.

The “Seven Cs” provide a guide to help support teaching and learning for both the student and the teacher. This approach has the potential to transform the lives of Youth of Color if implemented at the school and classroom level.

The key to the critical pedagogical approaches is the understanding that Youth of Color bring a distinct story and knowledge to the classroom. It is essential for instructors to validate the individual and collective stories of marginalized youth. “It takes pedagogical strategies birthed from neo-indigenous practices to bring their voices to the fore and allow their brilliance to

flourish” (Emdin, 2016, p.162). Tapping into the practices that foster youth expression and voice during the teaching process leads to increased student engagement.

### **Youth Agency**

Harnessing student voice demonstrates the power and potential of youth directed toward agency and action. When students become directly involved with social movements or with the instruction of their classroom, they build knowledge and the capacity for learning that they can transfer elsewhere. I review the youth movements and the student activism that emerged following the Civil Rights Era. Then, I demonstrate how student voice has important dimension in the educational environment as an effective instructional approach to support Youth of Color.

### ***Activism***

The Civil Rights Era coincided with a wave of student-led activism with the goal of empowering marginalized Communities of Color and forcing mainstream society to confront White supremacy and the negative effects of racism. The Black Power movement emerged from youth organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which protested the poor treatment of African American students. The local, student-run organization was conceived when Ella Baker, a veteran civil rights organizer, invited Black college students to demonstrate for civil rights, thus showing the potential of grassroots militancy and enabling a new generation of youth to gain confidence in their own advocacy (Martin Luther King Jr. Research & Education Institute, 2019). The nonviolence-based group remained autonomous from other coalitions during that era, yet it played a significant role during the civil rights period, participating in the Freedom Rides, the Selma to Montgomery March, and the March on Washington.

The Chicano Movement originated during the Civil Rights era with demands for equal treatment and ethnic pride. The Chicano Movement gave rise to the Brown Berets, a community-based action committee. The Brown Berets were active in the unincorporated East Los Angeles area, taking on a range of social and political issues that plagued the Mexican and Chicano barrios, including educational inequality, healthcare access, police brutality, and wartime casualties (Los Angeles Conservancy, 2019). The Brown Berets originated from a youth organization called the Young Citizens for Community Action. The organization fought against inequality in schools and mainstream White society. They often joined walkouts staged by high school students in response to inadequate teaching facilities (Estevez, 2016).

The 1980s and 1990s saw a significant level of student activism. During the 80s students came together around the issue of racial apartheid in South Africa. At the University of North Carolina, students organized rallies and other protests to encourage universities to divest from companies doing business in South Africa. According to Lisa Lindsay, a history professor at UNC, “There is no question that outside economic pressure helped bring down apartheid, and I think part of the building of that outside economic pressure was the student movement” (Conti, 2016).

The 1990s witnessed a notable difference in student organizing. There was a shift from a focus on rights to equitable opportunity, particularly to improving higher education access and the campus climate for underrepresented and marginalized populations (Rhoads, 2016).

For example, Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometti organized to form the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013. Its mission was “to eradicate White supremacy and build local power to intervene in the violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter, 2020). It called out the increasing violence and deaths targeting the African

American community at the hands of the police. Their advocacy went beyond civil rights to that of a human rights movement. Black Lives Matter pushed for a fundamental reordering of society wherein Black lives are free from systematic dehumanization (Roberts, 2018). Through the use of social media, the Black Lives Matter movement not only inspired other movements such as #MeToo, #NeverAgain, and #TimesUp, it also provided a framework for re-imagining democracy in action and transforming how Americans talk, think about, and organize for freedom (Roberts, 2018).

Another passionate, youth-led mobilization occurred in response to increased gun violence. High school youth mobilized all over the country in favor of gun control, especially after the shootings on February 14, 2018, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Students there emerged as strong advocates for gun control, spearheading massive demonstrations to demand “enough is enough” with more than 800 protests in every state in the US (Yee & Blinder, 2018). The Parkland students’ campaign became a demonstration of the power of youth activism.

The “#FridaysForFuture” movement started in August 2018 when 16-year-old Greta Thunberg, a Swedish activist, walked out of school to demand action on climate change. On March 15, 2019, the movement became the Global Climate Strike Campaign, inspiring students from over 100 countries on every continent to walk out of classrooms to protest the lack of adult action on climate change (Gerretsen et al., 2019).

These examples of pivotal moments in our country and the world show how young people stood up as leaders, voicing their concerns and rightfully drawing attention to issues of equity and justice. Student movements challenged traditional practices while encouraging the belief that every student in the school, regardless of age, culture, gender, and socioeconomic

status, is a contributor and producer of knowledge (St. John & Briel, 2017). Our educational system would benefit from taking steps to capitalize on the potential and advocacy students can bring to the learning environment. Building a culture of inclusiveness that values youth advocacy and voice is also an important strategy for all students, especially for Youth of Color.

### ***Student Voice***

Litzinger et al. (2017) define student voice as the student's ability and right to freely express his or her opinion, beliefs, perspectives, and experiences without fear or judgment. Instruction that aims to validate the experience and knowledge of all students is a democratic and inclusive approach. Student voice has many dimensions and could be a powerful tool in reimagining school, particularly for marginalized youth. Student voice strategies increase academic achievement by helping students feel they have a stake in their learning (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Student voice consists of students sharing opinions and answering questions as they collaborate with teachers in addressing problems in the classroom or the school (Mitra, 2007). Instruction that builds on student voice positions students as active contributors to the learning environments, moving beyond simple expression within the classroom toward a classroom in which students are co-planners and co-instructors. Figure 4 presents the range of student experiences and opportunities for potential student involvement. The columns from left to right reflect a continuum from lesser to greater roles, responsibilities, and decision-making authority for students (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Student voice is more than student participation during the classroom lessons or activities. Ideally, student voice is the exchange of ideas and knowledge between student and teacher where power dimensions are set aside. Meaningful instruction occurs when teachers partner with students in the instructional process and position students as agents of change. The

<b>Students articulating their perspective</b>		<b>Students involved as stakeholders</b>			<b>Students directing collective activities</b>
<b>Students as data sources</b>		<b>Students as collaborators</b>			<b>Students as leaders of change</b>
<b>Expression</b>	<b>Consultation</b>	<b>Participation</b>	<b>Partnership</b>	<b>Activism</b>	<b>Leadership</b>
Volunteering opinions, creating art, celebrating, complaining, praising, objecting  <b>(Most student voice activity in schools and classrooms resides at this end of the spectrum)</b>	Being asked for their opinion, providing feedback, serving on a focus group, completing a survey	Attending meetings or events in which decisions are made, frequent inclusion when issues are framed, and actions planned	Formalized role in decision making, standard operations require (not just invite) student involvement, adults are trained in how to work collaboratively with youth partners	Identifying problems, generating solutions, organizing responses, agitating and/or educating for change both in and outside of school contexts	Planning, making decisions and accepting significant responsibility for outcomes, guiding group processes, conducting activities  <b>(The need for adults to share authority, demonstrate trust, protect against co-optation, learn from students, and handle disagreement increases from left to right)</b>

*Note.* (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

*Figure 4.* Spectrum of student voice in schools and community.

collaboration empowers students and leads the way for student activism and leadership. Fielding (2010) argues for the radical potential of teacher and student partnerships that increase engagement in the classroom. The collaboration can be viewed as the reciprocity and synergy of young people and adults working together in genuinely exploratory ways. Fielding proposes that students identify the issues they wish to explore and become co-researchers with teachers. The instructor supports students in carrying out the research and engages them in the reflection process.

Cammarota and Fine (2008) champion the concept of students as co-researchers. Their work through Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a methodological approach that empowers youth to address issues of social justice in their schools and communities. Fine discusses how the YPAR process both illuminates existing conditions of injustice and demonstrates that these conditions can be challenged and changed. Through the YPAR process, young people learn how to analyze problems in their communities and to address them. YPAR, “has implications for re-imagining the nature of teaching and learning in formal and informal education spaces, the ways that education policymakers conceptualize the capabilities and aspirations of young people, and the purpose of the educational research community as a whole” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 2).

The need for student voice in the schools is far more than a privileged pedagogy for a few but rather necessary for understanding and empowering our Youth of Color. Student voice can bridge the divide between students’ experiences inside and outside of school, helping them see how their education is relevant to their daily lives (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). When embraced by Youth of Color, student voice holds potential for student empowerment and school transformation. Student voice provides the platform for communication and engagement, which



is critical for student development and student learning (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). Through open conversations about injustices in schools, student voices can raise equity issues that tend to get swept under the rug by administrators and other adults in the school who would rather avoid controversy (Mitra, 2008). Next, I introduce a process that engages marginalized youth in conversations and positions youth as change agents, capitalizing on their experience and knowledge.

### **Popular Education**

Popular education is a model for pedagogy to humanize oppressed or marginalized people (Freire, 1970). It aims to help disadvantaged subjects liberate themselves from their oppressors by analyzing the conditions of their oppression and working toward action and liberation. Popular education involves an inherently self-reflective, reflexive, and non-dogmatic approach that enables collective production of knowledge and insight and builds on what emerges from the experiences of those actively participating (Walters & Manicom, 1996). Nydia Gonzalez (2011) defines popular education as:

- A pedagogy of the oppressed that aims to create awareness not only of the world we live in but also of the one we want to be.
- A methodological counterproposal to the banking concept of education and an approach that promotes student involvement in the construction of knowledge through practice.
- An alternative communicative approach to inclusion and dialogue and a viable proposal to nurture the hope and the ethical commitment that imbues liberating action with life.

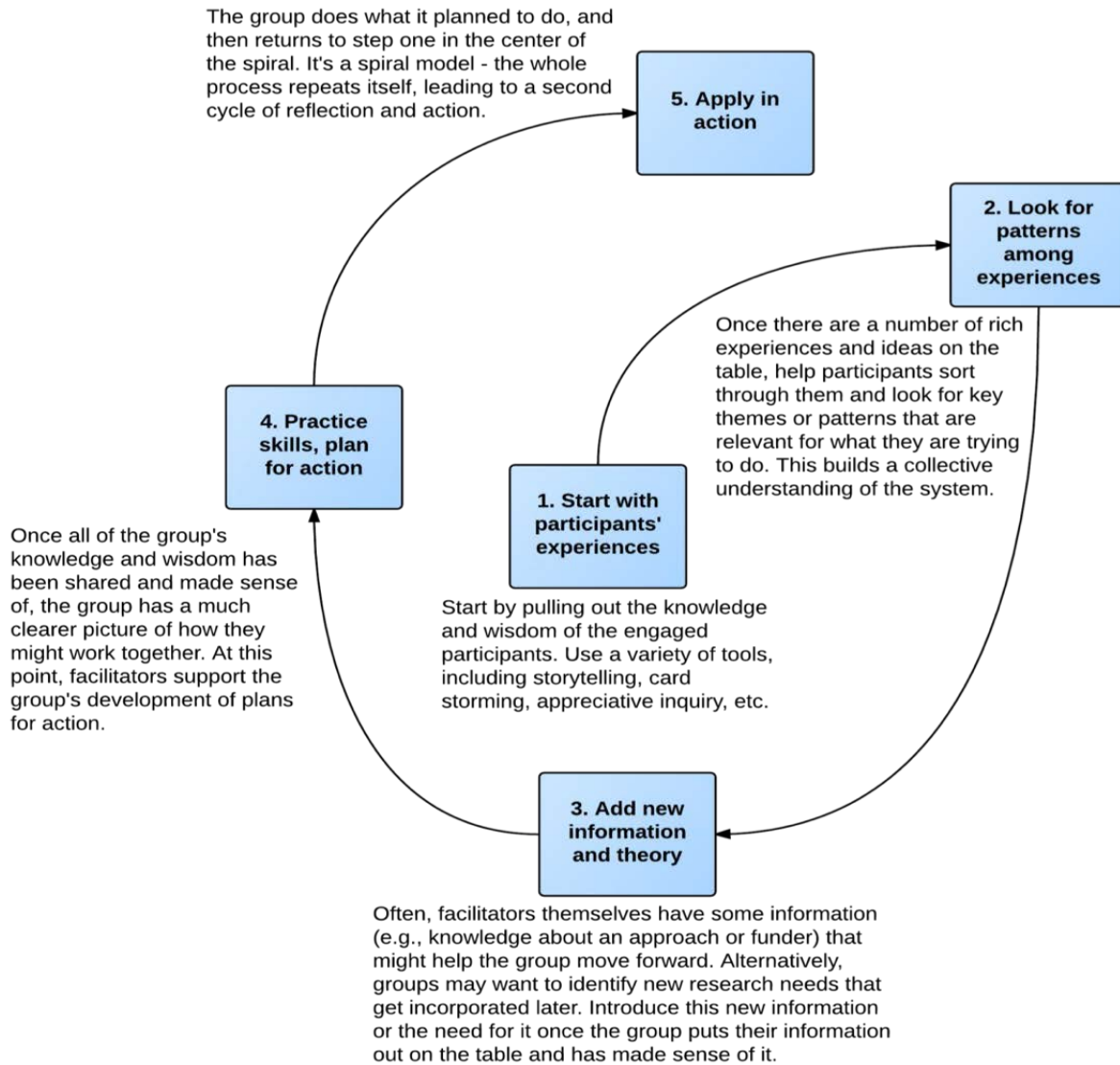
These ideas are valid today in the context of educating Youth of Color who suffer at the hands of the oppressive conditions of systemic racism and structural inequalities. Building social consciousness through a dialogic process counter to traditional schooling is the essence of popular education and the direction the study took when working with Youth of Color.

The spiral model is a framework to conceptualize popular education and guide both the educator and the participants in the process of learning. Popular education is a philosophy and methodology of teaching and community organizing (Wiggins & Rios, 2007). The popular education methodology helps students learn collectively from their knowledge and experience collective work leading to action. Figure 5 depicts the stages and strategies of popular education in the Spiral Model for Popular Education (Hale, 2002).

The first stage of the process begins with eliciting the knowledge and experience of the participants. The activities for this stage aim to build on the knowledge and experience of the students and allows them to make connections with what is working for them and what is not. A variety of tools or formats can be used to document and capture the wisdom of the group: storytelling, *pláticas*, art activities, projects, and appreciative inquiry. The goal is active engagement, collective analysis celebrating discovery of ideas, an acknowledgment that struggle is the instruction (Arnold et al., 1991).

The second stage is building a collective understanding from the participants by finding patterns in their ideas and experiences. After the students have all shared their experiences, the participants draw parallels of the themes that are uncovered through their discussions.

In the third stage, new information is introduced to make meaning of the identified themes. The study introduced an analysis of different forms of oppression and how that related to the student's experiences. The third stage requires an assessment of the collective leverage from



*Note.* (International Centre for Human Rights, n.d.).

*Figure 5.* The spiral model of popular education.

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the student participants to identify their willingness to address the issues and problems they identified. It also requires insight from the students to challenge the weakness in their schooling.

The fourth stage is to plan the work or action needed. By this stage, the students have connected their ideas to the new information and theory introduced. They can begin to plan how to take meaningful action on what they perceive needs changing or addressing. The last step is stage five in the spiral model. In this stage, the students carry out the action planned.

Popular education positions students and the teachers as equal learners in the spiral approach. The increased interaction during the process proves more engaging and interesting compared to the traditional direct teaching approach. Students become actively involved in discussions and recognize that they know more than they thought. Through that realization, they gain confidence to challenge themselves further. The format promotes increased dialogue and immediate feedback, which allows the teacher to adjust accordingly. Russell (2010) noted that:

Working with students who feel comfortable enough to say that they don't understand something or that something is not relevant for them helps you develop as a teacher, linking ideas that might have been latent in your mind, enabling you to broaden your knowledge. It is also stimulating to be made to think on your feet and widen your subject knowledge when asked questions you haven't anticipated—and therefore develop confidence in your own skills (p. 39).

The opportunity for students to have a safe space for interactions and dialogue and the opportunity to learn together with the teacher creates a powerful education model and experience. The process challenges traditional education by expanding the space for critical reflections on activism starting with the assumption that “all life is pedagogical.” Therefore, the

approach taken by teachers needs to include pedagogies of engagement that combine academic and activist knowledge and classroom learning with social action (Amsler et al., 2010).

Popular education differs from formal and informal education in that it is a process that aims to empower students who feel marginalized socially and politically to take control of their own learning and to effect social change (Hale, 2002). According to Mitra (2008),

The institutional constraints of schools prove to be especially challenging to puncture because of the power and status distinctions in school settings especially due to commonly held norms of deference to adult authority and the separation of adults and youth roles in schools. (p. 12)

Critical pedagogies and student voice initiatives aim to challenge these power dynamics by engaging Youth of Color directly with the learning process and empowering students.

In conclusion, critical pedagogies are a powerful strategy to elicit student agency and voice. Popular education builds on this strategy to bring hope for Youth of Color. Student voice, when empowered, provides an important instrument for activism and social change. It is important to understand the dynamics of how we position ourselves as educators in the classroom, ideally working toward student-centered environments that celebrate student expression and are inclusive of Youth of Color. Through engaging students more critically in their learning we can provoke students to resist current dispositions of power and instead encourage Youth of Color to take control of defining, redefining, and redesigning their reality (Lozenski et al., 2013).

### **Conclusion**

The Secretary of Education's assertion that the public education system in this country is a lie helps frame the need and purpose for this study. As Duncan contends, we must confront and

fight the propaganda based on lies that blames Youth of Color. The analysis has demonstrated how the narrative of Youth of Color as the problem justifies their further marginalization. Alternative education, in the form of continuation high schools, are the default placement and thus, the lie, of the promise of a fair and appropriate public education (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Rather, we needed to listen and understand youth voice as an essential component of constructing learning environments. As a society, we have a responsibility to educate all our children and to do so in a manner that allows each child dignity.

In this study, I intended to confront the lies by demonstrating the possibilities that exist when we listen to and embrace the voices of marginalized students at a continuation high school. It starts from my belief that “those who have been most systematically excluded, oppressed, or denied carry specifically revealing wisdom about the history, structure, consequences, and fracture points in unjust social arrangements” (Cammara & Fine, 2008, p. 215). The study capitalized on the experiences and knowledge of Youth of Color by engaging them directly in a process to learn from their stories and by actively sharing those stories to increase critical consciousness so they could gain agency and move from sources of data to leaders for change (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). The next chapter explores the methodological considerations and the context of the project in greater detail.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

Reframing student failure and engaging student voice in an alternative education setting is at the heart of the research study. I planned and implemented the project and study consisting of three iterative cycles of inquiry. The primary project participants were a group of students from Patwin High School (PHS). PHS is located near Sacramento in northern California. Like most continuation high school programs in the state, the school has been an overlooked and under-resourced educational option for marginalized students in our educational system (EdSource, 2008). Most students in continuation high schools have been *pushed out* of the comprehensive educational system. In the study, we validated the personal stories and educational experiences of the students who attend these schools to co-construct knowledge as members of the larger school community. We wanted the teachers and administrators at this school and other continuation high schools to understand how students frame their educational experiences and how listening more fully to youth could support different curricular, pedagogical, and social-emotional choices for youth who have been systematically marginalized.

The students as researchers gained insight into the learning environment in continuation high schools and used it to construct better instructional spaces and acknowledge the assets of the students and the challenges they face. Freire (1970) states that “[e]ducation must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 72). The contradiction Freire identifies reflects the current disconnect at all levels of schooling for marginalized students of color throughout the United States. Teachers overwhelmingly feel and act as the sole possessors of knowledge, and they often shield themselves from professional development that would shed

light on working with students who have been underserved by schools and society. I sought to promote teachers' individual and collective abilities to listen to and provide for the needs of all students in the classroom to create a meaningful educational program through validating our students' struggle and stories.

### **Research Question**

The aim of the study was to better serve youth who have been marginalized by schools and society to prepare them for their transition from high school to adulthood. As the lead researcher, I worked closely with at a group of 10 students from PHS and supported them to develop individual and collective identities that could increase their self-efficacy; in fact, they became researchers of their experiences and used those experiences as a catalyst to gain agency and confidence to tell teachers and administrators what continuation high schools could and should look like. Their combined efforts generated knowledge for the educational community about how to create educational spaces that validate and support Youth of Color.

The overarching research question for the study is: How can a group of students, working with a school leader, uncover their values, assets, and interests in order to better understand their individual and collective identity and become more effective for themselves and other youth?

The sub-questions for the study include:

1. Do high school students, who have been traditionally marginalized and underserved, successfully engage in a collaborative process in which they share stories about their beliefs, assets, and interests?
2. Can the students develop the individual and collective identity in order to exhibit agency and self-efficacy through this collaborative process?



3. How can the students design a collaborative project where students can take collective action for change?
4. How does this process inform my ability to be a more deliberate, engaging, and effective school leader?

I used the research question and the sub questions to guide the study and uncover the values, assets, and interests of the students for them to better understand their individual and collective identities. The stories of the youth offered a starting point for challenging the inequities of the continuation high school experience; as Freire (1970) says, the “starting point for organizing content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people” (p. 85). In this study, I wanted to raise the voices of youth about their concrete situations, and I wanted them to have a voice in how adults organize the educational program content. As a result of working in collaborative groups to develop a collective identity, efficacy, and agency, could they influence the adults who manage continuation high schools? As we examined how the students developed a collective voice, we uncovered ways in which educational leaders can create educational spaces that include and validate Youth of Color within the school system.

### **Research Design**

The project design relied on two overlapping qualitative methodologies: ethnography and participatory action research. I engaged in three action research cycles of action and inquiry in which I collected and coded evidence for each cycle and used that evidence to inform the next steps.

### **Methodological Foundations**

The methodologies that inform the project design include ethnographic research (Denzin,

1997; Genzuk, 2003; Wilson, 1977), a form of participatory action research that relies on an activist perspective (Freire, 1970; Hale, 2008; Hunter et al., 2013) and qualitative research methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). These methods provided a more intimate perspective of the participants and their process of knowledge creation.

### ***Ethnography***

Ethnographic research derives its methods and techniques from the fields of anthropology and sociology (Genzuk, 2003). According to Denzin (1997), “Ethnography is a form of inquiry and writing that produces descriptions and accounts about the ways of life of the writer and those written about” (p. xi). The researcher using ethnographic techniques gathers information about human behavior that is impossible to obtain by quantitative methods. This method rests on the belief that human behavior is significantly influenced by the setting or environment. Thus, to generalize research findings to the everyday world where most human events occur, the research must be conducted in settings similar to those that the researcher hopes to generalize about (Wilson, 1977). Historically ethnography was used to study a particular slice of social life in foreign cultures throughout the world. This method can provide data just as valuable for mainstream American schools as for those in other cultures (Wilson, 1977). In the case of this project and study, ethnography as a research tool provided me a process for what Guajardo et al. (2016) say is necessary for action: persons closest to the issues are the best sources of learning how to solve an issue.

### ***Participatory Action Research: Activist Researcher***

Activist research at its core addresses issues of systemic inequalities. As a form of action research, we engage participants who are deeply involved in the study focus, students in continuation high schools (Hunter et al., 2013). Hale (2008) describes activist research as an

effort to better understand the causes of inequalities, oppressions, and the violence carried out on an organized collective of people who themselves are subject to these conditions. The people affected join the research process to transform the conditions. The major criteria of validity in Hale's (2008) activist research frame is the utility of the process and the lessons learned to the participants. In this case, how do the participants gain a sense of efficacy and agency, and how do the processes of storytelling through *pláticas* make that possible? Activist research is based on the theory that the outcomes improve because the underlying tensions are identified and confronted directly (Hale, 2008). Similarly, Freire (1970) explains that in this methodology of working in marginalized communities, the participants need to be intentional agents who effect social change through reflection and collective action. Hunter et al. (2013) distinguish between typical action and activist research because in the latter the researcher(s) make social justice as the primary goal rather than the acquisition of new knowledge. This approach was conceived as a method of collaborative, self-reflective problem-solving in a community context and a way to rejuvenate the social agenda of action research (Hunter et al., 2013).

### **Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting and Coding**

I relied on qualitative research methods for collecting and analyzing evidence. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research requires a specific design, careful reflection on the role of the researcher, an ever-expanding list of data sources, specific protocols for recording data, analysis of the information through multiple steps, and documentation of the methodological integrity or accuracy of the data collected. I obtained qualitative data through *pláticas*, group discussions, group activities, interviews, and observations. *Pláticas* are a type of storytelling process that support an “epistemological construct congruent with their research partners that challenges higher education to engage in research that privileges the lives of youth,

elders, and the organic leaders from the community” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013, p. 159). Thus, by using the example of Guajardo and Guajardo (2013) in which they made student stories part of the research agenda, I am drawing on hybrid research principles emphasizing “building strong relationships [and] work originating from self, place, and community” (Guajardo et al., 2016, p. 3). As a result of this methodology, we relied on popular education pedagogy (Arnold et al., 1991; Beck & Purcell, 2010; Wiggins & Rios, 2007) to enact our beliefs of critical pedagogy theory and activist research methodology.

### **Cycles of Inquiry**

The study took place on a continuation high school campus in three iterative participatory action research cycles of inquiry and used the popular education pedagogical model (Arnold et al., 1991; Beck & Purcell, 2010; Rural Support Partners, n.d.; Wiggins & Rios, 2007). In the last cycle, the student participants planned a teacher training that provided insight toward transforming education in a way that validates and leads to their increased engagement and greater self-efficacy. For each phase of the study, I collected qualitative evidence, coded the evidence, and shared the results with the participants. In Table 3, I connect the research questions to the activities and sources of evidence.

### ***PAR Cycle One***

In the first PAR Cycle of the study, I established a safe space that validated the knowledge and experiences of the student participants. I established relationships and got to know the students in the study to make them feel comfortable with the process. Creating a safe space was important because it ensured that the student participants spoke openly and were not afraid to take risks. The students met as a group twice a month, and I interviewed each student participant monthly. The meetings and the interviews with the students focused on building

Table 3

*Research Questions and Data Sources*

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*How can a group of students, working with a school leader, uncover their values, assets, and interests in order to better understand their individual and collective identity?*

Research Question (sub-question)	Data Source (Metrics)	Triangulated With...
Do high school students who have been traditionally marginalized and underserved, successfully engage in a collaborative process in which they share their stories about their beliefs, assets, and interests?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Interviews</li> <li>• Study sessions</li> <li>• Observations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memos</li> <li>• Counselor discussions</li> </ul>
Can students develop individual and the collective identity in order to exhibit agency and self-efficacy through this collaborative process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Interviews</li> <li>• Study sessions</li> <li>• Observations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memos</li> <li>• Counselor discussions</li> </ul>
How can high school students design a collaborative project where they can take collective action for change?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Interviews</li> <li>• Study sessions</li> <li>• Observations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memos</li> <li>• Counselor discussions</li> </ul>
How does the work with school leaders inform and transform my leadership?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Observation notes</li> <li>• Individual Coaching</li> <li>• Reflection session notes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memos</li> <li>• Advisor discussions</li> </ul>

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individual and collective identity. During the last meeting of this cycle, I incorporated time for the students to plan the second PAR Cycle. The primary evidence sources included student interviews, study session notes, and observations.

### ***PAR Cycle Two***

In this cycle of inquiry, I incorporated new knowledge designed for students to better understand oppression and the distinct forms it manifests itself. The new theory and knowledge helped the students understand their experiences in a broader context (Seider & Graves, 2020). I challenged the students to think critically about the social inequities that they encountered in their lives, thus linking the micro to the meso and macro structures. Being explicit about how individual issues of inequity occur and linking these to the larger structural context is a primary responsibility of strong leaders (Rigby & Tredway, 2015).

The second cycle of the study built on the established relationships and protocols from the first phase. We used the four-quadrant analysis framework that enables people to become aware of and analyze oppressive socio-political processes and to reflect on their own positions and responsibilities in relation to various forms of oppression (Adams & Bell, 2016). The students participated and had the opportunity to share in discussions during the study group. I elaborated on the emerging ideas and thoughts with each student during the interviews and conversations. The primary sources of evidence for PAR Cycle Two included student interviews, study session notes, and observations.

### ***PAR Cycle Three***

In the third cycle of inquiry, we focused on planning how to take meaningful action. The decision on what action to take was a collective process for the students and directly connected to their experiences. The students decided to hold a teacher training to speak directly to

educators. Four teachers from different school districts participated in the Zoom online teacher training. The educators were selected for their experience and desire to improve the educational experience of Youth of Color in alternative education. When people understand the social economic and political forces that threaten their communities, they're more likely to engage in activities that challenge those forces (Ginwright, 2010). The collective planning and follow-up actions validated the student's voice and built critical consciousness in the student participants.

The methods I selected for the study were chosen because I could capture the intimate accounts of the work and experiences of the participants. The activist perspective helped students interrogate their experiences within the context of systemic racism and structural inequalities. In addition, the data collection process afforded by qualitative research, along with the three cycles of inquiry, ensured validity and relevance and brought to life the knowledge of Youth of Color. The stories of youth are a source of validity because they affirm the lived experiences of the participants; the researcher close to these experiences can observe them and use them to guide subsequent actions (Hunter et al., 2013). As Hale (2008) indicates, the primary source of validity in activist research is its usefulness to the participants—in this case, the evidence was useful to the students in building efficacy and placing their experiences in context.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Qualitative data were collected from observations, interviews, *pláticas*, stories, circle activities, and memos. I gathered accurate and systematic data to capture the process, interactions, and activities. Through carefully planned activities and group study sessions, we captured the stories of the student participants. I consistently documented my thoughts in reflective memos after each observation and study group meeting (Saldaña, 2016).

## **Data from Students**

The forms of data I collected and identified in the student consent forms (if over 18) or student assent forms with parent or guardian consent forms (for under 18) were observations, interviews, activities, and reflections. Additionally, I collected cell and text conversations, including Zoom meetings, and recordings from the students who engaged in the project. I transcribed recordings from the study group meeting notes and interviews.

### ***Observational Data***

I collected and analyzed documentation from the student meetings including agendas, meeting notes and posters, and pictures, created in the meetings. I coded these to identify patterns and emerging categories that revealed themes and findings that I report in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 (Saldaña, 2016). The observational data was reviewed on several occasions during the coding process.

### ***Interviews***

I conducted interviews using guided questions, which required planning and strategic thinking (Tracy, 2013). The aim was to access student past stories, special occasions, and emotions. The interviews strengthened other data and helped me further question students on ideas and stories of interest that came up during the study groups. The interviews also helped develop closer connections with each participant.

### ***Pláticas***

*Pláticas*, a form of storytelling, played an important role in supplementing the interview and later the check-in conversations. *Pláticas* are an expressive cultural form shaped by listening, inquiry, storytelling, and story-making that is akin to a nuanced, multi-dimensional conversation (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013). Their inclusion was important to understand how the



student participants make sense of their lives. The emergence of *pláticas* in academia is part of an innovative, culturally rich, and contemporary Chicana/o pedagogy (Gonzalez & Portillo, 2011).

### ***Stories***

I additionally engaged students to tell stories, write and/or record those stories, transcribe the stories, and collectively analyze them. Getting students to better understand themselves through storytelling is important for identity creation and for working with one another. The process of sharing their experience and stories created the space for teaching and learning and building organizations and communities (Guajardo et al., 2016). We engaged in the coding process collectively and analyzed the stories using a story mapping process (Tredway & Generett, 2015).

### ***Opening and Closing Circles***

At each in-person or virtual meeting, we began with a circle, which was an effective way to ensure equal participation. Circles allow for deeper conversations and for collective understanding of the issues. There is a specific process for opening, conducting, and closing the circle to ensure participation, reflection, relationship building, and collective knowledge acquisition (Guajardo et al., 2016).

### ***Memos***

Memos are a form of written documentation for engaging in *praxis*, reflection leading to action (Freire, 1970). During my documentation, reflective memos helped me make sense of my observations. This form of documentation was useful although I found it more difficult than I expected to produce them routinely and systematically. Memos were a strong form of

triangulating the data from other qualitative sources to address my perceptions and address any limitations I had as an observer (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## **Data Analysis**

I conducted the analysis of the qualitative data simultaneously as I obtained it from various sources to have an iterative perspective on what was being observed and to use the evidence to make changes in the processes. Qualitative data analysis is an interactive and reflexive process that begins as soon as data are collected (Stake, 1994). The consistent reflection and analysis allowed me to observe and document my growth and learning throughout the project phases. Table 4 outlines the approach to the sub-questions and the data sources. The major data sources were triangulated with memos and individual student interviews.

I coded significant amounts of text data, including memos, transcribed interviews, and observation notes. Saldaña (2016) explains that, “a code is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 4). Coding offers a process of organization for the information obtained and analyzed. From the codes, I identified categories that in turn led to emerging themes in the research. The codes helped to reduce and identify regularities within the data to discern why things happen within the observations. Coding helped me to better understand the relationship between what was observed and how it related to the research questions. We used Crabtree and Miller (1999) guidelines for qualitative analysis:

1. Know yourself, your biases, and preconceptions.
2. Know your question.
3. Seek creative abundance. Consult others and keep looking for alternative interpretations.

4. Be flexible.
  5. Exhaust data.
  6. Celebrate anomalies. They are the windows to insight.
  7. Get critical feedback. The solo analysis is a greater danger to self and others.
  8. Be explicit. Share the details with yourself, your team members, and your audiences.
- (p. 142).

Understanding my stance as a researcher was important in guiding the youth in the process of the study. Through my role as facilitator, I was cautious not to influence the conversations by imposing my views and biases, and I demonstrated flexibility by consulting with the students and conducting member checks, particularly as I analyzed the codes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This proved significant for identifying the emerging themes. When speaking to the group members, especially the students, I promoted youth expression through authentic listening. Equally important was the critical feedback offered by the university coaches, the counselor, and the student team.

The approach to data collection and analysis we used for the study is a common method for qualitative research. Ensuring the systemic process with a clearly defined method proved important for establishing trustworthiness and for uncovering the findings and later generating the themes from the study. The context described next was critical for obtaining the needed data. Meeting students at their school during the school day and knowing the students and teachers facilitated both the logistics of the study as well as the sincerity of the conversations and commitment from the student participants.

### **Context**

Our student participants were living in a marginalized community and going to a school

that was experiencing budget cuts that led to programmatic changes and significantly reduced the personnel at the high school. The decisions by the school district and the changes made for PHS further confirmed that continuation high schools are overlooked and under-supported. The budget cuts for the 2019–20 school year led to changes in the district and significant changes for the alternative education site where PHS is located. The principal position for PHS was removed, and the district delegated administrative duties to the district’s director of student services. Three teaching positions were cut, along with the part-time assistant principal and half of the counselor’s work time. In addition, the career specialist who provided college and career guidance was removed. The Opportunity Program that served elementary and middle school students was eliminated. The Adult Education Program also suffered significant cuts in personnel despite being self-funded through a state block grant. The overall cuts reduced the capacity of the education site and of PHS by half. The decisions and cuts raised questions for a district that advocates equity and then proceeds to eliminate an alternative educational option that succeeded with the most underserved students in the district. Exposing these decisions is part of the activist study to ensure that we are critical of the decision makers and do justice to the students at greatest need.

## **Community**

PHS is situated in a relatively small city adjacent to the state capital. The proximity to a much larger city has exposed The City to both the benefits and challenges of urban life. Among the challenges for The City is the inadequate infrastructure, income inequality, and poverty. Motels, liquor stores, and mobile homes line the main street that divides the north from the south side of The City. Transients and unhoused people are common on this corridor, which leads into the state capital. Despite the recent investments in housing and infrastructure for isolated

geographic pockets, The City is known for crime, drugs, and poverty. This reputation primarily affects the northern side of The City where PHS is located and where most of the students that attend the school live. Crime statistics compiled from data by a realtor database indicate that total crime is 17% higher in The City compared to the state of California, divided into property crime (18% higher) and violent crime (9% higher) (Areavibes, 2020).

The concern for crime, which is mostly believed attributed to gang activity, is nothing new. As a result of the perceived gang activity, the California district attorney filed an injunction against the “X Gang” on April 23, 2007. According to the injunction, “The X Gang is the largest street gang in the city, numbering over 350 members of mixed race—mostly Hispanic and Caucasian—and mixed gender, ranging in age from 12 to mid-40s. The gang is connected to the Nuestra Familia prison gang and uses the color red and certain symbols in clothing, graffiti, and accessories” (People Reisig v. Keith Edwards et al., 2007). The injunction against the X Gang proved controversial and damaging for the Youth of Color in The City by enabling over a decade of police profiling. In one case, four former students had sentence enhancements of up to 10 years. One original plaintiff in the injunction is the father of two of my former students at PHS. One child currently still attends. I have worked closely with all five of the siblings from my time working at the comprehensive high school and know the father well. PHS today continues to be stigmatized by the broader school community as the place where the unruly criminal X Gang students “belong.” Youth of Color in the community and in the school are tarred with the stereotype of possibly being involved and treated as part of the perceived city gang problem.

### **Patwin High School**

PHS is situated in an education center that concurrently housed a pre-school, elementary, middle school opportunity programs, and an adult education program. PHS served between 100

and 150 students, considered an average size for a continuation school. PHS in recent years has improved significantly on most metrics, including increasing graduation rates and declining disciplinary incidents. Operating on a 6-year Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) accreditation, the school completed a Model Continuation High School (MCHS) visit in the 2018–19 school year, narrowly achieving this status. The visiting team chairperson commented in its Model Continuation High School visit report: “With the leadership of the principal, the dedication and diligence of the staff, faculty, and counselor, there is no doubt this team can become an exemplary program.... What was clearly apparent was the lack of support from the District Office” (McKenzie, 2018). The intended budget cuts that had not been disclosed to the community and the designation of Model Continuation High School would have certainly worked against the district plans on significantly reducing funding for a school deemed by the California Department of Education as a model program.

### **Selection of Participants**

In this section, I discuss the selection of the participants and provide a biography of each student participant. I consulted with the school counselor to decide on the criteria for student selection and secure commitment from the potential student participants as we wanted to replicate as much as possible the demographics of the school. We also wanted to also capture the diverse challenges and stories that the student participants face. The process for selection was purposeful sampling because the counselor and I set criteria for key characteristics of potential student participants. We were equally intentional when choosing adult participants.

### **School Counselor**

I selected the school counselor, Martin, as a collaborator and supporter for the study. His relationship to the students was important not only with helping select the students but with

keeping them engaged during the study. Martin is first-generation Mexican American and the first in his family to attend college. He empathizes with the students' journeys and the challenges they faced. He served as co-facilitator and provided logistical support as the main contact with the students. He began working at Patwin High School as a volunteer before I arrived at the school. After completing his counseling degree, he chose Patwin High School to begin his career because he wanted to work with and for marginalized youth. His diligence and work ethic were quickly noticed by the previous principal at Patwin High School. He is a steadfast student advocate who understands the disadvantages and challenges faced by Youth of Color.

### **Students**

While 10 students started during PAR Cycle One, not all finished for all the complex reasons that regularly affect students at a continuation high school. Despite the counselor's best efforts to retain students and the benefits that students reported from participation, by the third cycle only six students, all male, completed the process. I began meeting with the initial group of 11<sup>th</sup> grade students on a regular basis in the Spring of 2019. The anticipated plan at that time was that all these students would return for their senior year and participate with the study fully. However, not all of the students returned. Two students from the first group graduated early, and two students moved away from the area.

During the selection process, the counselor and I discussed adding more students to the study group. Our priority was to consider the personalities of each potential participant to ensure that they were willing to work together. We also considered the level of commitment we could expect from each based on our perceived commitment and relationship. The intention during the selection process was to balance the male and female students in the group. We lost two female

students from the previous group and were not able to fill the positions when the study started (see Table 4).

The ten students represent the diverse demographics of PHS. They faced diverse personal challenges, common with the other students and in the school. These students presented a good sample of students that do not fit the norms in the school system and are easily *pushed out* by the inability of the school system to understand or support them. Despite the challenges these students face, providing an appropriate space and format proved sufficient to begin engaging them in meaningful discourse.

Figure 6 is a picture of the initial meeting with the students to discuss the study, determine the students' interests, and decide on the structure of the project. The meeting took place late in the Fall of 2018. This meeting provided a glimpse of the future success that the student study groups would present both for the teachers and the students. "I found the task of finding our commonalities and differences in our journeys to be the most fruitful. We found that students certainly enjoy socializing, and as a teacher I will look for more ways to allow students to engage in a social activity to help them learn concepts" (J. Gaza, 2018, reflection notes, October 23). We strove to maintain a consistent student group throughout the study to ensure a consistent level of engagement and fidelity to the learning process. Although the students' lives were complex, most of those who committed at the beginning of the first phase remained throughout the study. The participants who stopped attending did so because of extenuating circumstances despite seeing the value of the study. The level of commitment did vary for some, mostly because of the lack of access to technology during the distance learning portion of the project.



Table 4

*Student Participants*

Students	Family situation	School situation
Armando Male Mexican 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Born in Mexico. Lives with mother and older brother who attended PHS. (He dropped out of HS after being returned to the comprehensive HS.) Mother remarried and stepfather has an older son (graduated from PHS). Mother works cleaning hotels; stepfather works in construction. Mother is an advocate and has referred student from out of district to PHS.	Has struggled in school. Has diagnosed ADHD. Refused to take medication. Was sent to our “Opportunity” program as 7 <sup>th</sup> grader” located on the PHS campus. In 9 <sup>th</sup> grade was returned to the comprehensive HS. Is outspoken and bright. Does not work well in traditional educational settings. Needs to be challenged and engaged in activities. Returned to PHS for 11 <sup>th</sup> grade. In one year, caught up with credits and considered returning to the comprehensive HS. Will graduate a semester early.
Beth Female African American 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Lives with Father. Mother died during her 9 <sup>th</sup> grade year. Has struggled significantly with the loss and has missed most of her 9 <sup>th</sup> and 10 <sup>th</sup> grade years. Was sent to PHS her 10 <sup>th</sup> grade year for an altercation with another female student that involved parents. Father is involved and very responsive.	Has not placed much effort in school. Seems distracted within the classroom and does not put in much effort despite being very capable. Finds comfort in her relationships with her peers. Is not a disruption or behavior issue at school in the classroom and is considered pleasant and sweet by her peers.
Cesar Male Mexican 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Born in Mexico. Has suffered significant trauma at an early age including an attempt on his life by a neighbor at age 4. Often self-medicates to avoid his past and has struggled with addiction on strong drugs. Has been in treatment and claims he only smokes weed now.	Has struggled academically and has bitter feelings about his elementary schooling. Has been a victim of bullying and has not felt the support of the school system. Still holds a grudge against one of his elementary school teachers who he feels did not help him.

Table 4 (continued)

Students	Family situation	School situation
Kevin Male African American 11 <sup>th</sup> grade	Originally from the Bay area. Came to Sacramento because of the problems he was having in his former schools. Attended schools in Richmond, including Longfellow Middle School in Berkeley, where I worked as a Vice Principal. Is bitter with “adult” problems. Does not get along with his mother’s boyfriend.	Has struggled in school because of issues he has had with other students. Loves to play football but has not been able to make the grades necessary to be eligible. Gets involved with his friends’ problems. Self-medicates and is not fully engaged in school.
Juan Male Mexican 12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Currently lives with mother. Parents separated at some point during his elementary years, which has affected his engagement in school. Older brother graduated from PHS.	Was an AVID student in middle school. Was not placed in AVID in HS and does not know why. Is quiet and thoughtful. Struggled in school because he does not put any effort.
Andrea Female African American 11 <sup>th</sup> grade	Is a foster child who was adopted by her aunt after being in foster care at an early age. Knows her mother and feels disappointed with the decisions that her mother made.	Came to PHS her 9 <sup>th</sup> grade year with no credits. Is pleasant and kind. Gets along well with others and has minimal issues in the classroom. Cares about her schooling and is currently working after school.
Jessie Female White 11 <sup>th</sup> grade	Comes from an unstable family situation. Mother has been absent. Father has been in jail most of her adolescence. Has grown up with no structure or guidance. Older brother who graduated from PHS and is currently in the military has been her only family support. Suffered a miscarriage last year with twin babies, leading to her maturing significantly.	Was sent to PHS her 9 <sup>th</sup> grade year. During her 9 <sup>th</sup> and 10 <sup>th</sup> grade years, she was more interested in partying with her friends and did so frequently even during school days.

Table 4 (continued)

Students	Family situation	School situation
Donald Male African American 11 <sup>th</sup> grade	Lives with his grandparents because of the trouble he was getting into while living with his mother in San Jose. Grandparents are very responsive and engaged with his schooling. Both are retired professionals. Father's absence has affected him. Has gang ties and continues to engage in criminal activities.	Enrolled as a 10 <sup>th</sup> grader and is on probation for various criminal charges. His probation officer allowed his change of placement hoping it would get him to change his behaviors. Is quiet and pleasant. Has not had issues with other students.
Maria Female Mexican 11 <sup>th</sup> grade	Lives with both of her parents. Comes from a stable household and is a first-generation immigrant.	Can be impulsive and has struggled with other students. Can become aggressive and has had many physical altercations at school. Has been diagnosed with ADHD. Had many issues at school because of her temperament.
Miguel Mixed Latino & Native American	Lives with mother and stepfather. Family has gone through significant hardships including homelessness.	Has struggled with self-esteem. Is an introvert with a quiet demeanor and does not interact with his teachers. Is considered defiant and non-cooperative with school staff.



*Figure 6.* Initial meeting with students to gain their input and agreement.

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## **Confidentiality, Ethical Considerations, and Limitations**

The PAR study consisted primarily of student observation and interactions. I took special measures and precautions to protect their well-being and confidentiality; these precautions were consistent with Institutional Review Board (IRB) regulations concerning particularly vulnerable populations. The small size of the school campus makes it necessary to take additional steps when dealing with sensitive information and data. I personally met with the parent(s) or guardian(s) of each student in the group to explain the project and review the protocols for keeping information secure. Students over 18 years of age signed consent forms; for those under 18 years of age, their parents signed the consents. I maintained the data in a secure and locked place and will do so for three years after the conclusion of the study

I maintained four distinct locked locations for different pieces of information pertaining to my research, including the formal application to conduct the project and the district's signed approval form. The names and the signed consent forms were kept in this location. The pseudonyms used during the project were kept in a locked location apart from the actual names. Artifacts and information generated during the distinct phases of the study were kept in a third locked location. The fourth secure area was reserved for the current tools or documents that I worked directly with at any given time and that needed processing.

The final approval to conduct the research project came from East Carolina University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval certified that the study complies with ethical standards and federal regulations governing human subject research. This certification is important because it protect the rights and welfare of the students and the participants in the study.

The project considered the limitation to the standard established by scholars for conducting qualitative research. To establish what is termed “trustworthiness” for qualitative research requires the following consideration: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My positionality during the study was that of an insider to outsider. The initial design was for me to conduct the research as an insider and that plan changed the summer before Cycle 1. Herr and Anderson (2015) view the ideal positionality as the insider-outsider whose position lends itself toward reciprocal collaboration. This requires a level of trust that I had established and that I maintained even when the student composition changed. As outsider, I relied on the counselor, as a needed support for the logistical aspects of the study and as a point person for the immediate support for the student participants that remained at the school. He also assisted with intervening on my behalf with the new administrator advocating on the importance of the study for the students and the school. I maintained myself as lead researcher and participant observer.

The primary measure of validity for action research is the usefulness to the participants (Hale, 2008). I paid particular attention to attend to multiple validity procedures as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018); these include triangulation, member checks, and the use of rich, thick descriptions to communicate student stories. I recommend the use of multiple approaches to enhance our assessment of the accuracy of the findings and to convince readers of that accuracy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200). I relied initially on the school counselor as a member check to determine the accuracy of the findings.

Although I am no longer the principal of PHS, I remain subject to bias. The findings from the study are shaped by my background and socio-cultural history. I am a Mexican American from an immigrant family; I have spent all my professional life as a teacher and school

administrator attending to the students who are having the most difficulties. At the time of the study, I was working as a school administrator in another school district and came back to work with the PHS students as an outsider-participant. I required the additional support of the new administrator of PHS and of the school counselor to continue the study and relied on the counselor's added role as co-facilitator and direct communicator with the students to arrange the logistics of the meetings. The school counselor became a key contact to ensure that the study moved forward.

Another limitation was the transient nature of the students who attend a continuation high school. On average, students attend such schools for approximately 1 year. Students on the PHS campus often elect to return to the comprehensive campus to receive a high school diploma from that institution. Students frequently leave the school district for other nearby schools in the area, or they experience complexities in their lives that cause them to stop attending school. The frequent change in student composition of the school was a factor in the study.

Continuation high schools vary significantly from district to district. These programs not only represent the unique cultural, socio-demographic, and racial dynamics of their respected communities, but they also significantly inherit the leadership of the school. The principal plays a significant role in establishing the culture and expectations that shape the day-to-day operations, including the learning in the classroom. Principals in continuation high schools change more frequently than their counterparts in other school sites. I can be considered an exception: PHS has not had a principal stay in the position for 3 consecutive years in nearly 20 years. The current administrator for PHS did not return for the following year when the third cycle took place.

Finally, the study is limited because of the size of the study and its generalizability. The process is generalizable to a continuation high school in which teachers or school leadership are attempting to engage student voices more fully. However, the findings are not generalizable to all continuation high schools. The purpose of the study was directed more on providing an in-depth explanation and meaning rather than toward generalizing the findings.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I outlined the methodology. I mapped out the three cycles of inquiry in which the data were generated. An important aspect for the research project and study was the establishment of a process and format to encourage and engage the students effectively in reflection to elicit their voice and knowledge. Eliciting student voice in a continuation high school is an asset-based approach based on the idea that knowledge creation is available to anyone, including Youth of Color. This project not only validated their past experiences but ultimately empowered the participating students to develop critical consciousness through the development of personal and collective identity and greater self-efficacy. The experience and growth students experienced during the process of the study enabled them to take meaningful actions relevant to their learning.

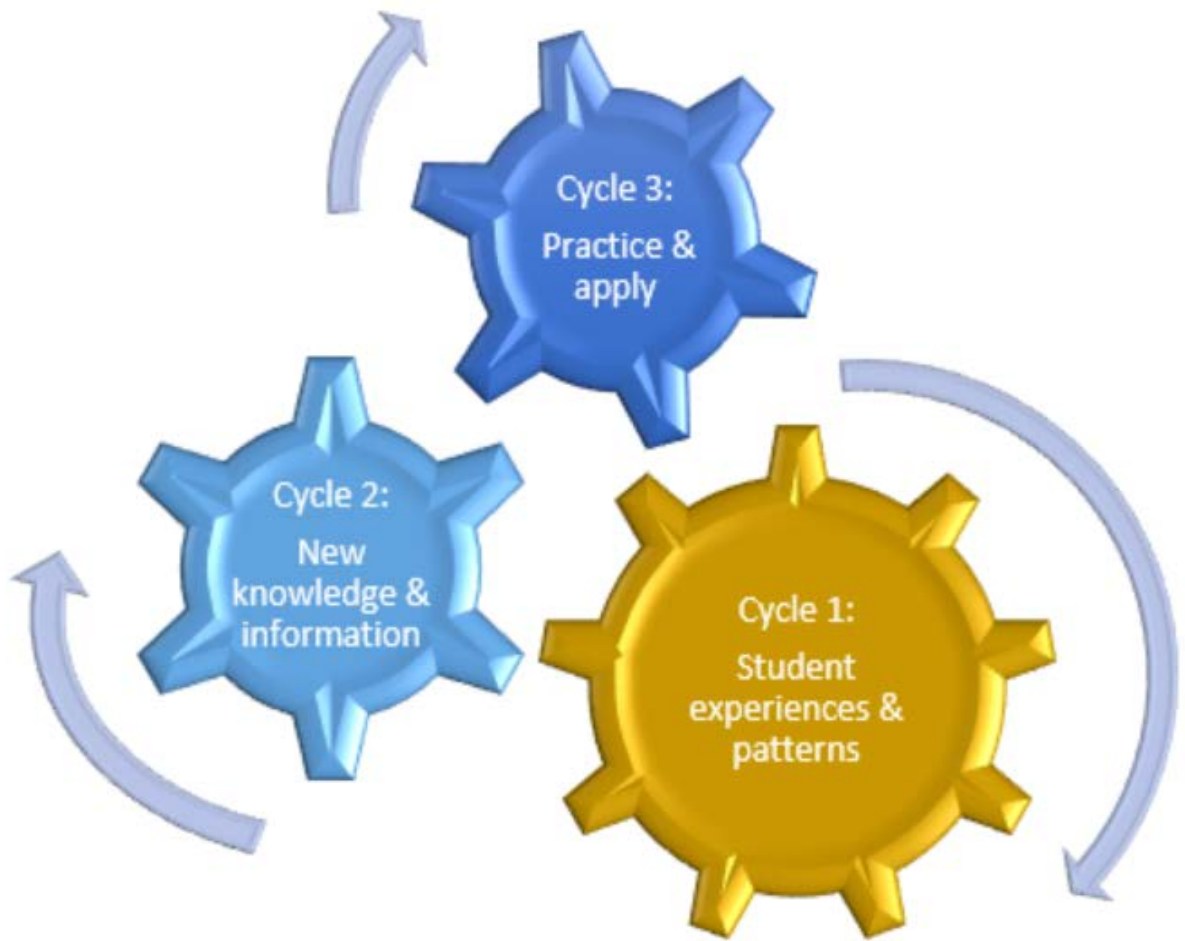


## CHAPTER 4: PAR CYCLE ONE

Youth of Color are increasingly pushed out of traditional education into continuation schools—schools that are often marginalized within a larger educational system. Although the continuation school spaces are charged with educating youth and preparing them to return to traditional spaces (or graduating), these efforts fall short (Legislative Analyst’s Office, 2015). In the dissertation project and study, I sought to understand how youth in continuation schools perceive their schools, characterize the ways in which they believe their school does not serve them, and tell adults what they need from their schools. I centered the study on their voices and their ideas to provide the much-needed perspective to change instructional approaches that further isolate and marginalize underserved youth.

Traditional and continuation schools alike often blame the youth themselves for failing in schools. They label youth “dropouts” rather than seeing the ways schools push them out (Morris, 2016). Reframing the problem as how teachers and school authorities perceive Youth of Color is critical for this study because it places the burden on the institutions that put them and keep them at a disadvantage. Freire (1970) describes this phenomenon as dehumanization and distortion. The result of an unjust order that engenders violence from the oppressors. Pushing out Youth of Color from traditional schooling and marginalizing them in alternative educational placements is an experience of violence, which hinders their critical consciousness and further cripples their advancement and liberation.

In the first cycle of the study (see Figure 7), I established a safe space for dialogue to validate the participants’ knowledge. In the second cycle, our activities guided the students toward developing critical consciousness and their individual and collective identity. In the last



*Figure 7.* Cycle one of the three PAR iterative cycles of inquiry that align with five stages of popular education.

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cycle, we guided the students toward meaningful action. In this chapter, I present and analyze the findings and outline the implications of the cycle for my practice and for the next cycle.

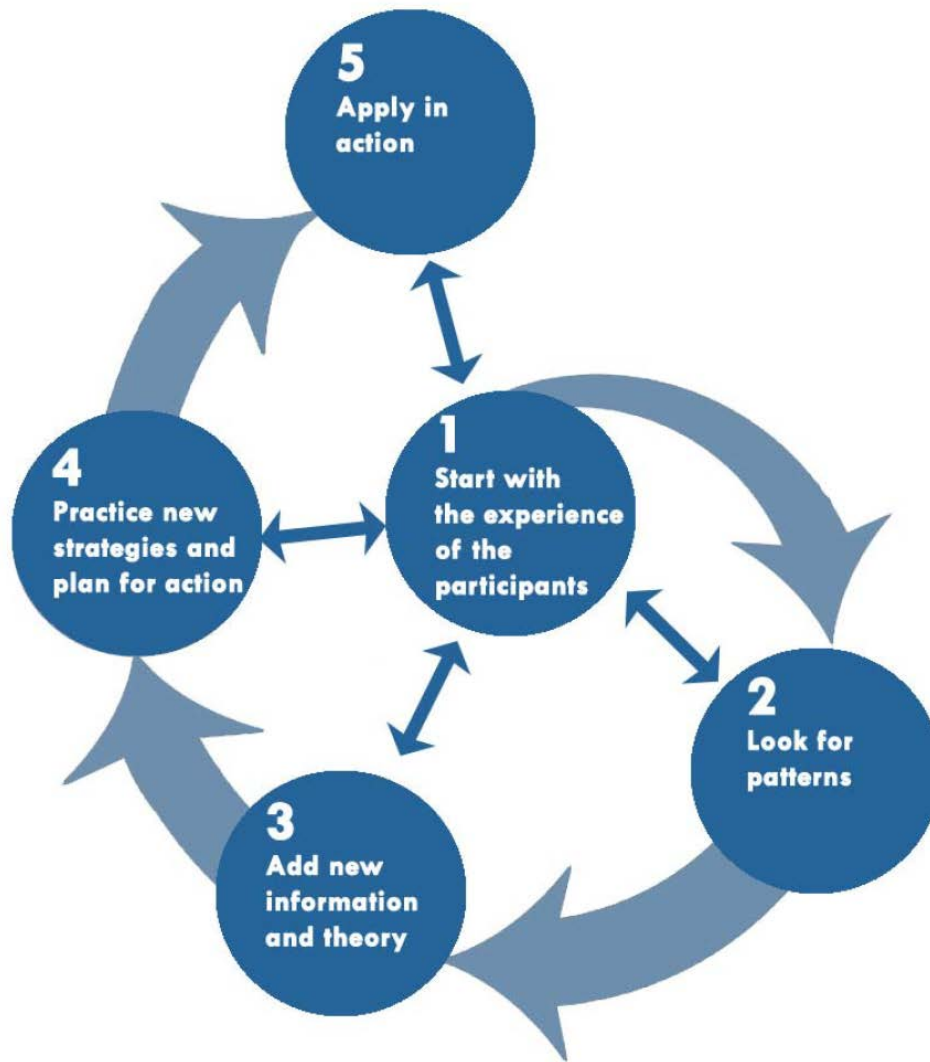
### **PAR Cycle One—Stage 1 and Stage 2 of Popular Education**

The PAR study will be comprised of three iterative cycles of inquiry aligned to the popular education model/ I chose popular education approach for the study because its aim is education that generates critical consciousness through participation and dialogue (Arnold & Burke, 1983). Figure 8 outlines the cycles of the study: Cycle 1 (Lived Experiences and Look for Patterns); Cycle 2 (Add New Information: and Cycle 3 (Plan New Strategies and Act/Apply).

The popular education model is a concept for education grounded in notions of class, political struggle, and social transformation (Hale, 2002). It is composed of five stages in the learning process. In the first cycle, I followed the first two stages of the popular education model. In the two stages the students' experiences are validated and parallels of their experiences are established. The students learned from each other and promoted further reflection.

#### **Process**

Prior to PAR Cycle One, I had established a positive relationship with the students because I had worked closely with them as their principal the previous school semester. I created a safe space for the student participants so that we could uncover the students' emotions without the usual tensions associated with speaking on sensitive issues. The greater the complexity and emotions of the topics, the more vulnerable students felt about participating in the discussions (Gayle et al., 2013). The student participants all knew each other, which made the task easier. I designed the format and the study groups to promote trust and dialogue. Student participants drew parallels from other each's experiences and learned from them. We held firm to centering the students' voices by engaging them in knowledge creation through dialogue and meaningful



*Note.* (Arnold et al., 1991).

*Figure 8.* The spiral model of learning for five stages of popular education.

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action. Through the process, the students demonstrated how they understood the problem of continuation schools and considered solutions to those problems.

### **Activities**

I emphasized activities and topics of discussion that nurtured trust and building community among the 10 student participants (see Table 5). The students shared their life stories through the study group discussions. I was able to schedule and have individual check-ins with each of the 10 student participants. I scheduled the study groups for twice a month on a Thursday during the students' last period. Conducting the study groups during the school day helped with the participation and attendance. I consulted the teachers, and they approved the student participation. Other work schedule conflicts prevented me from conducting two study groups during the month of October and November. I had individual check-ins with each student on three different dates to ensure the flow of the study.

The teachers accommodated the time missed from class or incorporated the work with the study groups to their assigned classwork. In each study group, I culminated the discussion with a reflection activity. I set aside time at the end of each session for the students to express their thoughts or feelings. On one occasion, I used a writing prompt to encourage thought and reflection. When asked what they experienced in the study group, Armando expressed, "This group has become a tool to my way of thinking and the way things are, so in just a short period of time, the amount of perspectives that can be heard is phenomenal" (Armando, meeting notes, September 17, 2019). Participating in a study group that validated and encouraged participation was new for all the students. In each study group meeting, we began and ended with a circle. The circle format has been used as an effective strategy for meaningful conversations used by distinct cultures, including indigenous tribes on this continent. The circle draws on a longtime ritual of

Table 5

*Fall 2019 Key Activities and Data Collection*

	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12	Week 13
Study Group Meetings (n=5)	•		•			•	•				•
Student Individual Check-in dates for all students (n=2)					•			•			

communities to provide space to open up fresh possibilities for connections, collaboration understanding (Guajardo et al., 2016). The circle discussions fostered community and intimacy in a classroom and served academic and social-emotional purposes (Davenport, 2018). The circle activity proved effective with guiding the discussions and ensuring that every student had the opportunity to speak.

I included several community-building and consciousness-raising activities throughout the sessions. One example is an art activity that I included in the second study group. The idea to add art as an activity came from my belief that all students have distinct styles and strengths that often go unnoticed and are an untapped source of potential that can be awakened easily through art and play. I provided materials for the students to create visual representations of themselves. The art activity was engaging for the students. I was able to learn more about the student interests and beliefs while capturing useful information because different personality styles have different creative styles; there is not just one idea of creativity (Nachmanovitch, 1990). We transformed the workplace into a fun space where the students were able to drop their guard.

The discussions during the study groups were designed to get the students to broaden their perspectives. The topics included the graduation rates for Youth of Color, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the mental health of Youth of Color. I followed up on these discussions with activities designed to expand the students' understanding of the topics and prepare them for the second cycle. The focus on topics of social justice served to preview the third popular education strategy: provide new information. Placing individually experienced issues of equity in a broader structural context makes it possible for students and adults to feel a part of a larger effort to right wrongs (Rigby & Tredway, 2015).

*Pláticas* played an important role in the study group. *Pláticas* are intimate conversations that help shape critical thought (Ayala et al., 2006). Guajardo and Guajardo (2006) contend that *pláticas* are necessary for advancing intellectual dialogue and knowledge creation. They are “an expressive cultural form shaped by listening, inquiry, storytelling, and story making that is akin to a nuanced, multi-dimensional conversation” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013, p. 160). During the activities, reflected through the stories and *pláticas*, the students identified with the stories and with each other, and that led to critical reflection. All the students were appreciative of the space and the opportunity to speak. One student said:

It makes me feel like we could have a chance to open up to each other cuz’s [sic] like everyone here is like...nobody ever really talks about stuff like that, get to know each other personal life. Get to know who people really are like and how they are at school (Jessie, meeting notes, November 7, 2019).

*Pláticas* proved useful and necessary to uncover the knowledge, including cultural knowledge, civic participation, and the effects of the schooling process (Gonzales & Portillo, 2012). In the context of the study group, *pláticas* played an important role because the students had the power of common stories, and that brought meaning to their story and reduced their feelings of isolation.

In the student check-ins, I connected with each student individually and delved deeper into the thoughts of each student as we followed up on ideas from the study group. In addition, the student check-ins helped prepare the student for the upcoming discussions and answer any questions they had. Each student met with me individually on three occasions. I felt that the conversations helped strengthen our relationships and supported the necessary trust and ongoing commitment to the learning process. On one occasion due to time constraints, I checked in with



two students at one time. Surprisingly, the discussion proved to be successful because each student built on the other's responses and gained insight during the process. Both students were surprised to have had similar experiences and shared similar feelings.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

I collected the following evidence: transcripts and notes of the student responses and discussions from the study group activities and individual check-ins. I transcribed all individual check-in discussions with all the student participants. I organized the data and inductively coded each data set. During the first cycle of coding, I underlined pieces of the data I felt represented a potential code. Because I was a novice researcher, in the first attempt I failed to arrive at an appropriate representation of the code or name and vacillated among perceived codes and categories (Saldaña, 2016). In fact, I had trouble distinguishing between a code and category and often missed the detail of the code. I conducted a second and third cycle of coding to reach a consistent description or name for the codes that emerged. I then placed the data in an Excel file where I used sheets, columns, and colors to organize the data and tabulate the information.

Through the analysis of the evidence, I began to slowly uncover a fuller story of the youth. In conversations with the school counselor and my ECU advisor, I was able to triangulate the evidence, which guided me to develop categories.

### **Emerging Categories**

By engaging continuation high school students in groups and individual conversations, I uncovered their values, assets, and interests. The young people showed a level of excitement with the group experience that I initially associated with them being able to leave their classrooms to do something different. The excitement quickly turned to a sobering realization of

the complex issues with which they were grappling and their need to share their individual and collective traumatic experiences.

The categories that emerged from this first cycle indicated the challenges that the participants were facing. In the study group conversations, the students expressed a keen awareness of their past and current experiences, which manifested in negative and positive forms. I identified the following categories: (1) they are aware of negative and positive complex issues; (2) the school system is failing them; and (3) they had strong positive and negative emotions about their experiences that we needed to discuss (see Table 6).

### **Awareness of Complex Issues**

In the study groups and the student conversations, a significant number of responses revealed that they faced negative and positive struggles and hopes. The challenges and complex issues that the students shared during the conversations, while different from one another, had a level of familiarity with which all the students could identify. The common topics in their stories were: challenging home dynamics, family pain, and past personal traumas related to death. Their awareness of the complexities they had to confront affected their lives on a regular basis. However, the students are more than their struggles and past traumas. Current instructional approaches are failing to identify how to support students and not get distracted by perceived deficits. Knowing more about their stories and realities provided the necessary context for how they should be treated and taught. This understanding is needed for all educators to counter the impulse to ignore, discipline, or push out.

### ***Home Dynamics***

Volatile home dynamics stood out as one of the many complex issues that the students faced. None of the students in the group had the upbringing or support from both biological

Table 6

*Fall 2019 Categories*

Categories	Study Groups	Art Activity	Check-in 1	Check-in 2	Student Reflection
Awareness positive	28	9	18	49	10
Awareness negative	18	6	4	35	
Schooling positive	3		2	2	
Schooling negative			17	9	
Emotions positive	6	1		1	12
Emotions negative		6		17	1

parents. Half of the students did not live with their parents; three lived with grandparents. Miguel, who was the only student who lived with both of his biological parents, possibly experienced the most neglect. He had gone extended periods of time without his father during his childhood and at one point was homeless. His father was in and out of prison while his mother continues to suffer from mental health problems. The family dynamic of the students in the group was further challenged by incarceration. Four of the students in the group lived with parents who at some point during their upbringing had been imprisoned for a significant period of time.

### ***Family Pain***

The conversations uncovered repeated instances where students expressed mixed feelings for their parents or family due to their difficult home circumstances. They told many stories about parents or loved ones who had caused them pain. Andrea was removed from her mother on various occasions during her youth because of her mother's substance abuse. She was in and out of different home placements until her aunt was able to adopt her. "One struggle is not being able to see my parents. Knowing I am adopted. I feel it would be different if I were adopted at a younger age. I know my mother. I know what she did" (A. Taylor, study session response, November 22, 2019). As a result, she struggled with anger issues in school. However, we could hear in her story and voice a need to have someone believe in her.

Feeling let down by their parents was a common story. When asked about his relationship with his mother, Kevin said, "With family you can't really change it. It is always going to be there. Adults don't really give a fuck [sic] what kids say. I still don't know how I got through it, but shit, I did" (K. Smith, study session response, November 22, 2019). Kevin struggled to let me know that his mother lives with her boyfriend and that he does not approve of their relationship.

As a result, he has changed schools often because he does not get along with his mother's partner.

### ***Trauma of Death***

The pain and trauma from the death of a loved one came up repeatedly. Three of the students in the group experienced the loss of a parent or guardian; other students had lost close family members, and many students expressed a deep sense of loss and grief after a classmate died. Donald and Beth experienced their losses during their early teens. Donald lost his father figure (uncle) in middle school while Beth experienced the loss of her mother during her first year in high school. In both cases this loss affected their focus and engagement in school. "Life was more fun when she was here. I was very close. It was better. I don't remember struggles back then. School was bad when she was dying" (B. Taylor, study session response, November 22, 2019). Following the loss of her mother, Beth recounts becoming isolated and quiet. Her communication with her father suffered as well, and she stopped attending school. Her grades dropped, and she fell significantly behind with her credits for high school graduation. She maintains a quiet, yet warm affect, and she is determined to graduate and move out of the area to experience new things.

Donald, who is on probation awaiting a court hearing on his past criminal charges, was associated with the *Norteño* street gang in San Jose, California. The probation officer wanted to provide Donald with a new beginning and supported his move to the Sacramento area. I had repeated conversations with his probation officer who would check on him periodically. Donald lost his uncle during his seventh grade. He mentioned it briefly during one of the first circle activities and did not bring it up again during the group or conversations. He had never mentioned his father, and it was difficult for Donald to speak of his uncle's death. I was able to

get him to talk only when I asked him directly about his uncle. Donald had become angry and rebellious with the absence of a father figure, turning much of the anger on his mother. He was unable to process his uncle's death and the absence of his father and instead resorted to aggressive and criminal behavior. In the absence of his uncle, his mother sent him to live with his grandparents.

The year before this study took place, the student participants were impacted by the death of Key. Key was a popular and well-liked student on campus who died unexpectedly in his sleep. He was a foster child with many challenges, including being on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that mandated special education services. We learned after his enrollment at Patwin High School (PHS) of his IEP and of his specific educational needs. Key's story and his enrollment at the continuation high school was an example on how students *fall through the cracks* or are pushed out. During a review of his situation and placement, we determined that his previous school failed to provide an adequate review nor support for his educational needs. The former school's communication with his guardian was vague. He was transferred to PHS without the proper process and documentation for a student on an IEP. The case manager of his IEP resigned unexpectedly. Without the support of a case manager, Key was left without proper oversight or advocacy.

Key was removed from his biological mother along with his siblings at a very young age. He was later abused by a teacher in elementary school and again by a male parent in one of the foster homes where he was once placed. Despite his tragic past, Key was very charismatic, friendly, and loved by his peers. His memory came up during the first group session. Kevin, a close friend, expressed during the first circle activity that he is most proud of "all my brothers, my close friends. That they got through Key's death...It did not break us!" (K. Smith, study

session discussion, September 17, 2019). Key was the fourth student death at PHS in the 5 years I worked there. It was believed that drugs played a role in his death as it did in the death of the other students. The death of Key uncovered old wounds for the other students at PHS, like Beth and Donald, who had experienced the death of loved ones. His loss impacted the comprehensive high school as well as the community.

The struggles and traumas faced by the students revealed themselves as the group's sessions and conversations progressed. Many of the student responses throughout the first cycle left traces of stories untold and personal wounds that still need healing.

### **Educational Institutions Neglect Them**

Education as it currently exists is not meeting the needs of Youth of Color, but I already knew about this as it was central to my decision to conduct the study in a continuation high school. I was aware of the challenges that the students faced were not easy to address when educators are not aware of them or are not making connections with their students. The structure of the school system, including the classrooms, were often a barrier for student expression, engagement, and voice, especially for marginalized Youth of Color. Removing the student from the classroom is much easier for the instructor than taking time to address the social-emotional needs of the students. The data contained frequent accounts of significant instances of negative schooling experiences. These included how students want to be treated differently, what they would value in stronger personal connections to teachers, and clear ideas about what constitutes relevant learning.

### ***The Difference That Differences Should Make***

Students expressed that they want to be known for who they are as individuals. They were clear that one size does not fit all, and that schools and teachers should differentiate.

Armando, an English Language Learner student who arrived with his family from Mexico, highlighted how students in continuation high schools have specific challenges and needs and were being left out of full consideration because of them.

I was rejected by many people in the schooling system. My way of being was not tolerated or given a chance to understand me. I had a hard time with teachers, principals, and all staff. It's not that the kids' the problem. It's that we are not the same. We are not meant to be the same, and that is just how it is.... But if everything was the same... it would have no point (Armando, check-in response, November 17, 2019).

Students want to be acknowledged for who they are and how their experiences shape them. They want to be treated and taught differently; that is what equity means—responding to students in different ways so they can fully participate and achieve. For Cesar, discussing his past was schooling was particularly difficult.

Back then, it was different for me, the bullying and things that messed me all over. I always tried to get help but did not know the resources that were out there. In my mind, if I would have told, I would be looked at as a bad person, as a snitch, and get more beat up (C. Gutierrez, check-in response, November 22, 2019). The students in the study needed the teachers to be aware of and understand the differences among students to better support them. They needed authentic individual education plans that addressed their academic needs, including time during school for social- emotional healing.

### ***Personal Connections***

In addition to wanting and needing to be seen and affirmed for their individuality, students want to engage positively with their teachers. The students expressed multiple instances of negative interactions and/or lack of interaction with teachers. How teachers interact with



Youth of Color during instruction can validate or alienate, especially when redirecting or intervening. Teachers need to be aware of the classroom dynamics, including the distinct student personalities. Well-meaning attempts to intervene or address an incident can embarrass the students in front of their peers. Kevin stated that teachers should “talk with students after school instead of in class...not in class in front of people. When I was struggling, I did not like to talk about it in front of the whole class” (Kevin, study session response, October 17, 2019). Feeling called out in front of the classroom for either not knowing the current material or not being in an emotional space to engage academically is common among students who are not meeting the traditional academic expectations. Understanding the social-emotional and mental health needs of students is critical for establishing meaningful relationships with underserved students.

The students wanted teachers to be warm demanders (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Delpit, 2012). They want personal relationships with them, and they wanted teachers to push them to do their work and check in to ensure they are completing their work. Armando described good teachers: “The teachers *throw* themselves in a way to help you. They care for you. They demonstrate they like their job. Not just for one student” (Armando, study session response, October 17, 2019). Along with encouraging or *pushing* students to complete more work, students wanted teachers to peer further into their lives, know their stories, and see them. With a strong relationship and knowing the students, often teachers can push students to higher levels of rigor (Cooper & Garner, 2012).

When students were asked, how you know when teachers care? Andrea responded, “They push me to do my work. They ask me if I am ok. They speak to me first. A lot of teachers don’t ask if you are ok. They don’t check up on the students in general...straight to the work” (Andrea, check-in response, October 8, 2019). Jessie responded to the same question by stating, “They

notice when you are in a different mood, so they try to reach out and see what is different” (Jessie, check-in response, October 8, 2019). Finding the appropriate way to communicate by demonstrating care on an emotional level is important for educators because daily temperature checks and adjustments to the students are a primary factor in the students’ connection to the classroom and their ability to be resilient in that moment (Moore & Arnold, 2018).

Wanting more personal discussion with the teacher is a daily need for students. “Show more interest... ‘here is the work’ we need explanation...tell us what is wrong” (A. Taylor, study session response, October 17, 2019). Kevin stated that teachers should “explain more. They just give us the work, throw it in our face” (K. Smith, study session response, October 17, 2019). These last statements indicate the degree of disconnect that exists in some continuation high schools where students who have not been successful academically are by default given up on by the teachers themselves. In addition to wanting their trauma to be acknowledged and wanting teachers to know them more deeply as individuals, the students overwhelmingly wanted the teachers to demonstrate that they authentically care (Valenzuela, 1999).

### ***Relevant Learning***

Making school relevant and meaningful is critical, second only to making students feel safe, accepted, and cared for. Youth of Color in continuation high schools are in the difficult position of having been pushed out of traditional schooling and then asked to redo what they failed with mostly the same teaching practices and belief systems that proved ineffective in the first place. “I feel the school system they have now is outdated. This system does not work no more. It is far behind. It needs to focus on student desire, focus, and drive” (A. Banuelos, check-in, November 22, 2019). Other students were more critical of their current teachers. “I think some teachers here should actually teach, you know. We just take hecka [sic] notes. They hand

us papers so we can learn on our own” (B. Jackson, study session, November 17, 2019). In addition, students do not see themselves in the subject matter, nor do they see the application of what is being taught to their lives or future goals.

The weak instructional practices and lack of instructional commitment enhanced the perception among continuation high school students that teachers do not care. “There are a lot of teachers that don’t care about how you do as long as you’re out of their class the next semester” (K. Smith, study session, October 17, 2019). Teachers too often give up on students and do not invest in them, expecting instead that they will soon be gone. Students are not achieving less; they are being given less by a school system that does not believe they can handle more challenging work (Innovate Public Schools, 2018).

In examining the negative schooling experiences, the students had some examples of what teachers could do to shift and support them. The students expressed wanting to be acknowledged and approached by their teachers. When asked how to know when a teacher believes in you, Cesar responded, “When they stand up and come over and talk to me and help me out” (C. Gutierrez, check-in response, October 8, 2019). Students are asking teachers to demonstrate care by approaching them and by not giving up on them. Beth responded to the same question by stating, “When they don’t stop trying, they keep helping” (B. Taylor, check-in response, October 8, 2019). Frequent and deliberate attention to the students validates them and shows that each student is an important part of the learning experience.

### **The Need to Speak of Their Emotions**

The realization from the students of their need to speak about their troubles had a strong impact to all the participants. The students in the study group all shared a compelling story hidden beneath their current label of continuation high school students. Some students were able

to articulate pieces of their story candidly while others refrained from expressing details. The school counselor observed during the first study session: “It was interesting to witness their facial expressions, tone of voice, and most importantly to hear their story. It was brief but meaningful and powerful” (M. Guerra, personal reflection memo, September 17, 2019). The ability and intention to share was present although not all could speak equally of their past. The conversations uncovered memories and feelings that some were not prepared to face.

The space to share and speak of their trauma was liberating for the students. Cesar mentioned that the group allowed him to express his emotions freely: “Expressing my feelings, not caring... everything is confidential. Even though we joke around, nobody brings it up. It is always confidential” (C. Gutierrez, check-in response, November 22, 2019). The discussions during the study group played an important role in helping the students draw parallels from their experiences helping to bringing meaning to their current lives.

### ***We Are More Than Our Traumas***

The discussions during the study group helped reinforce that the students are more than their trauma or problems. Their potential and desire to succeed despite the difficult issues they faced were manifest in the discussions. Andrea, despite being abandoned by her mother, was able to see that her situation was not as bad as others. “I am doing pretty good for someone who has been through so much. I could be worse. I don’t see my situation as horrible because there always someone that has it worse than me” (Andrea, check-in response, November 22, 2019). Andrea learned to process her past and realize the effects of her choices: “I would always let the problems get the best of me. I would focus on my problems more than anything else. I don’t pay attention to that anymore. I need to graduate and keep working” (Andrea, check-in response, November 22, 2019). The study group exposed the problems but also the possibilities and hope

they had for the future. Andrea worked part time after school. She graduated early and wishes to go to college or study cosmetology.

Jessie reflected in similar terms that she felt grateful that her parents are alive. “Like Andrea brought up that her mom passed away. I feel that would be difficult. Everybody is so lucky to have their parents. You never know what that would feel like” (Jessie, check-in response, November 22, 2019). When asked to describe her past schooling, Jessie expressed the following: “I felt like I was all over the place. I felt I had a lot of friends, but there was a lot of drama. I paid attention. I did my work. I didn’t get good grades because I didn’t turn it in or finish it. I didn’t pass my classes. I was focused on something else” (Jessie, check-in response, October 17, 2019). Jessie understood that her behavior and friends distracted her from school and influenced her perceived negative choices. Her goal was to graduate from high school and get a good-paying job. “I want to be successful. I want to do something productive with my life. Be able to have a family and be able to support them and not feel struggle or stuff like that. Get a good job that makes money and be successful” (Jessie, check-in response, October 17, 2019).

Despite the struggles and obstacles faced by the students in the group, they all expressed a positive desire for themselves and their future goals. All planned on finishing high school, and most wanted to find a job or career. At the heart of these aspirations was a desire for financial stability. During the circle activity in which I asked all 10 participants to state their goal, most responded that they wanted to be financially stable. They wanted to own a house and have money. Three expressed in some form the desire to make their family proud. Most students responded with the desire to go to college as part of their future aspirations.

### ***Learning From Each Other***

The discussions during the study group helped them to put the traumas and challenges in

perspective. As a result of participating in the study, the students got to know themselves and their peers on a deeper level. The students gained a better understanding of their challenges. Miguel, a quiet, soft-spoken participant, shared the least but demonstrated great interest in being present at all the study groups. It was only during the last check-in of the cycle when I talked to him individually that he was able to speak more about his past. "I was a troubled kid when I was little. I didn't really understand school. I had a hard life with poverty, loss of family, and other stuff like cops and drugs" (Miguel, check-in response, November 11, 2019). Miguel disclosed that he was homeless at the age of 12 and that his uncle helped his family and gave them a place to stay. Speaking of his past proved liberating for him. "I am not self-conscious as much. I am glad about that. I can talk to more people. I can come up to you and have a conversation" (Miguel, check-in response, November 11, 2019). Miguel learned not only to speak more openly but also to see that others face similar challenges and that there is benefit from sharing and connecting.

Another student that benefited from our conversations and whose story was meaningful for the other students was Cesar. Cesar suffered from several traumatic events during his early childhood. "I had health conditions and died twice at birth and once by drowning" (Cesar, study group, September 17, 2019). During an individual check-in, I questioned him further on these incidents. According to Cesar, his neighbor attempted to drown him, and the court case regarding this incident had only recently been settled. The tragic memory and the lingering court case isolated Cesar further making him an easy target for bullying in school.

Back then it was different for me, the bullying and things that happened that messed me all over...I started smoking marijuana when I was 12 years old. Trying to calm down my

ease and stress. I was getting abused during that time which we already solved with some court case (Cesar, check-in response, November 11, 2019).

Self-medication to cope with trauma was common with all the students. Being able to disclose these issues helped Cesar process his past, and his story caused others to place their own issues in perspective. “But now me knowing my own peers can help me out made me have this situation where I can get help and overcome my fears” (Cesar, check-in response, November 11, 2019).

The students connected and found parallels to the issues and problems in their own pasts and in the situations, they were facing in the present. They benefited from the opportunity to hear that they are not alone in their academic, emotional, and family struggle. The students grasped the importance of coming together in a group where they knew each other and could express themselves.

### **Implications**

The emergent categories helped to illustrate the need for new educational approaches inside the classroom and out. The youth need both social-emotional and instructional support that is mindful of the emotional traumas they have experienced and their vulnerability to race, class, and gender inequities. Schools need to focus on classroom practices that ensure a safe space that validates the stories and experiences that Youth of Color bring to the classroom. This study indicated that many teachers do not connect with their students on a personal level. Knowing the students and engaging them in conversation is a step toward fostering trust and supporting students. Next, I discuss the implications for the research question, for my leadership of the project, and for PAR Cycle Two.

The overarching concern and research question that guided the study was to understand how a group of students working with a school leader could uncover their values, assets, and interests to develop a better understanding of their individual and collective identity. The emergent categories from the first cycle provided insight to address this question. The students actively participated in the process, needing and wanting to share their stories. All students need a regular space for sharing their stories, but Youth of Color in continuation high schools need a regular experience that is therapeutic in nature so that they can connect to caring adults and be heard. The discussions and activities during this cycle disclosed a significant need for teachers to engage meaningfully with their students, particularly for Youth of Color in marginalized educational spaces.

The implications for leadership first underscored the disconnect that exists with what we should say and do as educational practitioners and leaders. The educational needs of Youth of Color are overlooked repeatedly by teaching practices that are irrelevant in the eyes of the students. Instructional approaches are overlooking the importance of meaningful relationships between teacher and student. The disconnect is enabled by district leadership who fail to adequately support school sites based on their specific needs of the students that they serve.

From the first cycle of this study, I wanted to ensure that the students developed more critical awareness as we continued to work together. I questioned what information I should bring to the students to promote critical consciousness toward greater self-efficacy. The students had internalized the message of failure that had been continuously reinforced through educational practices that did not fully acknowledge them. This was compounded by the lack of attention or services that address their social-emotional needs.



The implications for cycle two include how to move toward the next stage of popular education in which we can generate ideas about how to take the emerging patterns to assist students in developing their critical awareness. We needed to sustain the momentum and interest in the students, and my need as a researcher was to sustain a space for reflection, documentation, and action. That always proves difficult as we work with students who have complicated lives and are pressured by external factors.

### **Conclusion**

In describing the process, the data collection and analysis, the emerging categories, and the implications for the project and study from the first cycle of inquiry, I was developing as a novice researcher. Organizing the data to see the patterns that brought together the intimate stories of the student participants, I could validate the voices and stories of all the students and provide the safe space necessary for them to connect, express, and learn. In PAR Cycle One, using the popular education steps of starting with concrete experiences of the Youth of Color, I was able to uncover patterns or in this case emergent categories. Although these patterns were somewhat predictable, being specific about them in the continuation high school by using school time to have deeper reflection helped us rethink the teaching, learning, and counseling we should be providing.

PAR Cycle Two continued to follow the popular education model. The second cycle aligned with Step 3 of the spiral model of learning, included providing new information and knowledge to the student participants. The new information was aimed at raising their critical consciousness of systems of racial, class, and gender-based oppression. Getting the students to think critically about the social inequalities began to strengthen their journeys toward empowerment and liberation.

## CHAPTER 5: PAR CYCLE TWO

In the second cycle, we built on the safe space that we had created and on the deep relationships we had established with the student participants during Cycle One. The outcome of the student discussions in PAR Cycle One helped inform the format and the information that would be introduced to the students in the second cycle of inquiry. In PAR Cycle One, we uncovered the need for students to make sense of their struggles by connecting their experiences to larger structural and institutional inequities in society. To this end, I facilitated series of workshops with students in PAR Cycle Two on systemic oppression. During these workshops, students were able to connect their personal experiences with the content presented in the workshops on classism, racism, and sexism.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a significant occurrence during the second cycle. In the state of California, the pandemic led to a state of emergency declared by the governor on March 4, 2020, followed by a mandate to shelter in place. The shelter-in-place and social distancing guidelines forced the closure of all nonessential businesses throughout the state. It also led to the closure of schools throughout the country. As a result, school districts were forced to plan how to continue with schooling under the imposed guidelines.

In the next section, I detail the process, activities, and evidence that resulted from the second cycle of the study and my work with the students, and I discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our state and on this study. In the third section, I present the data analysis and the identification of the emerging themes. In conclusion, I cover the implications of the study for my research questions, for the next cycle, and for my leadership.

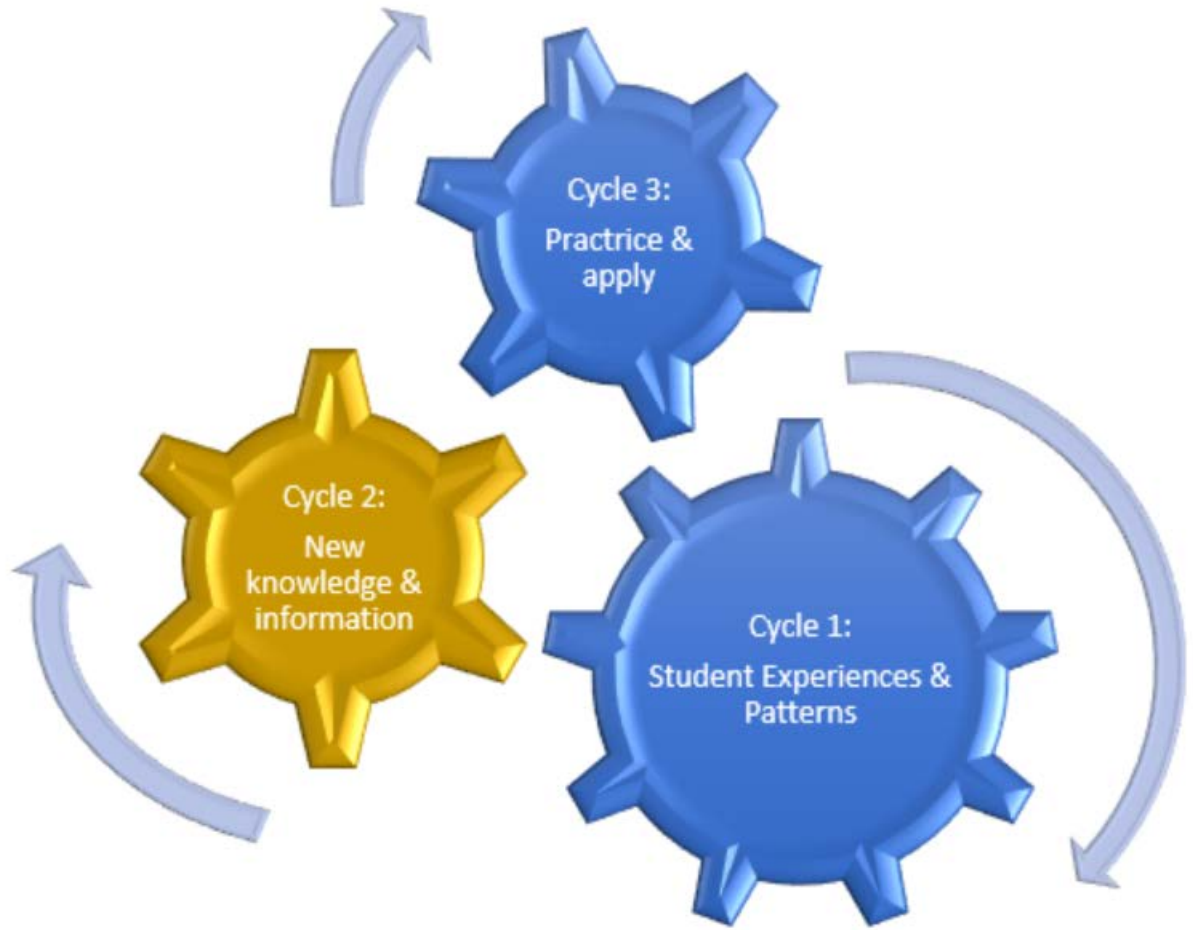
### **PAR Cycle Two—Stage 3 of Popular Education**

The second cycle aligned with stage three of the popular education model in which new information and theory are introduced to participants. The new information built on the knowledge shared by the students during the first two stages of the spiral model to help participants connect their current knowledge to new knowledge. Figure 9 outlines the cycles of the study: Cycle 1 (Lived Experiences and Look for Patterns); Cycle 2 (Add New Information: and Cycle 3 (Plan New Strategies and Act/Apply).

#### **Process**

The information introduced to the students was focused on building critical consciousness through connecting their experiences to new theory. Constructivists believe that learning occurs in the human interaction influenced by the beliefs and attitudes (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). Similar to this theory, students have a schema about topics of interest, and the more experiences or information the learning process can provide to broaden and deepen their knowledge will lead students to restructure their schema (Driscoll, 1994; Rumelhart, 1980). As the educator, I had the primary responsibility of shaping their experiences by providing concrete ways to grow (Dewey, 1938). The students had shared their experiences on schooling and analyzed those shared stories for common themes, but they viewed these experiences as individual; it was my responsibility to ensure that they converted their micro understanding to a macro structural understanding (Dewey, 1938; Driscoll, 1994; Rumelhart, 1980).

The emerging themes from the student discussions during PAR Cycle Two of the popular education model informed what new information needed to be added through workshops during stage three. In other words, the experiences and stories of students determined the content of the



*Figure 9.* Cycle two of the three PAR iterative cycles of inquiry that align with five stages of popular education.

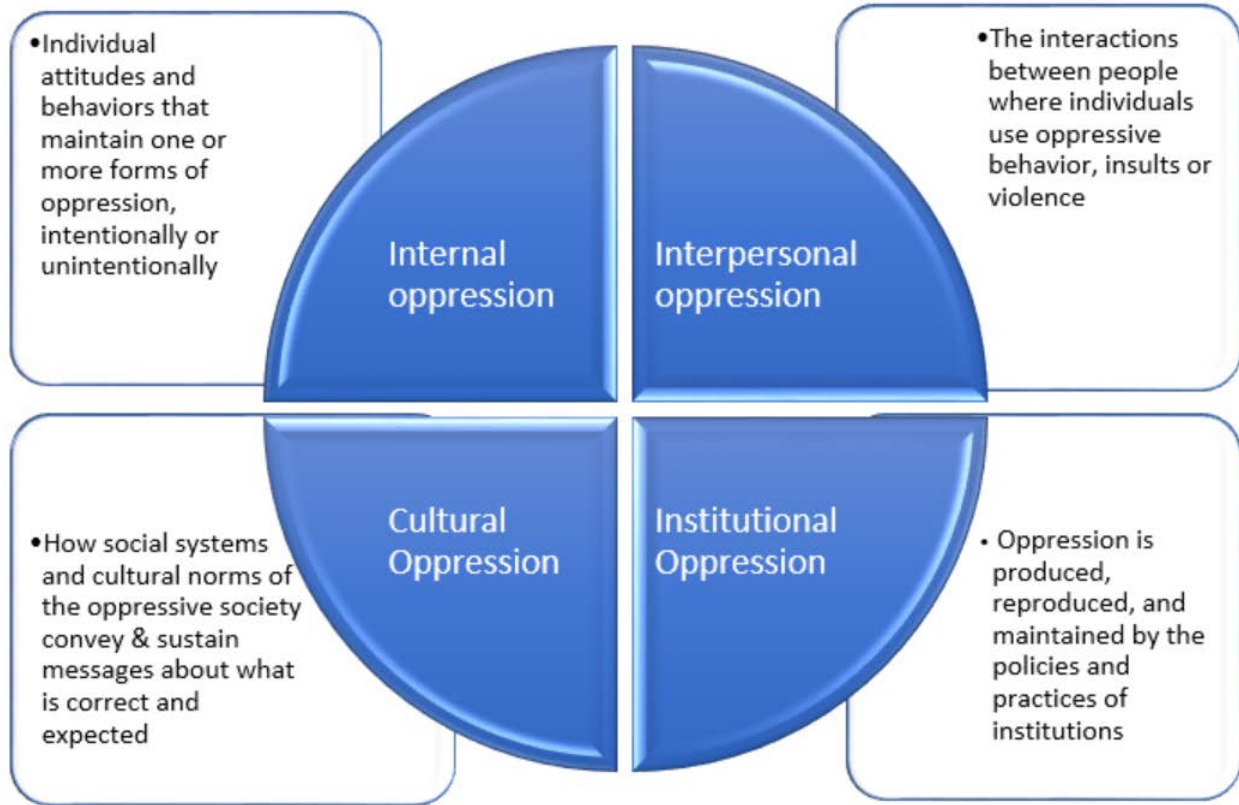
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workshops. In one sense, the curriculum for the workshops was co-generated with students because I carefully listened to the stories (Emdin, 2016). Tobin (2014) states that cogens facilitate reflection, inclusion, and diversity of experiences, giving the teacher and a small group of students the opportunity and agency to share their ideas about improving instruction. From the analysis of their stories, students realized that something else was going on in their lives, but they did not quite have the language to express themselves. The student responses and discussions placed blame on their parents, themselves, and in limited cases they blamed the systems in place (schools, law enforcement, government, etc.).

The lack of language to describe the larger institutional and structural systems at play drove our decision to introduce workshops on the different forms of systemic oppression. My first meeting with the students during this cycle was dedicated to planning the format, the topics for discussion, and the dates for these workshops.

### **The Workshops**

The workshop topics were based on the themes from Cycle One; the students needed to understand the concepts of social justice and oppression to make better sense of their experiences and struggles as they had internalized personal responsibility for their perceived failings. I define oppression as those interlocking forces that create and sustain injustice (Adams & Bell, 2016). I chose to use the four-quadrant analytical framework (see Figure 10) to introduce internalized, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional oppression. The students were introduced to the framework at our first workshop. The subsequent workshops used the framework to analyze how these four quadrants manifested in classism, racism, and sexism. We decided to focus on classism, racism and sexism because these three systems of oppression were reflected in the stories they shared during Cycle One.



*Note.* (Adams & Bell, 2016).

*Figure 10.* Four quadrant analysis of oppression.

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The workshops' design encouraged the students to engage actively, to learn from each other, and to explore challenging ideas and feelings that inevitably emerged in the process of learning about oppression. According to Adams and Bell (2016), teaching social justice “needs pedagogy that acknowledges the challenges and opportunities participants face when confronted with a new knowledge and perspective and that supports them in a learning process that is personally and intellectually challenging” (p. 28). A beneficial addition to these conversations during this cycle was the use of short YouTube video clips that animated concepts and ensured student access to the content. The videos related directly to the workshop themes.

### **Activities**

During PAR Cycle Two, the planned activities included workshops and individual one-on-one check-ins with each student. The workshops were scheduled for twice a month. I planned individual check-ins with each student participant for once a month. The proposed plan proved difficult to follow due to unforeseen work circumstances. The school counselor and I encountered scheduling conflicts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The calendar and activities were adjusted to accommodate the distance learning format as a result of the shelter-in-place order and the distancing guidelines. Prior to the pandemic, I was able to hold three workshops and one individual check-in with each student. See Table 7 for the original study design of PAR Cycle Two.

### **Impact of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic had a disproportionate effect on Communities of Color. The response to the crisis by our politicians and government officials exposed an unwillingness to compromise business interests by taking the necessary steps to halt the pandemic. The denial by the federal government of the gravity of the pandemic further demonstrates that Communities of

Table 7

*Study Design for PAR Cycle Two*

Month	Objective	Key Concepts	Activity	Questions
Jan	Plan topics and PAR Cycle Two	Review learning from cycle one	What is School for? <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfL5zGx6yKU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfL5zGx6yKU</a>	My goal for the year?
Feb	Self-identity: How I see myself & becoming a better me	Knowing myself advocating for myself	Stepping Up: The Social Justice Activist <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcbAr3QCPs0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcbAr3QCPs0</a>  Self-collage	How I see myself?  My fight is?
Feb	Social Justice: Four quadrants analysis on oppression	Oppression Internalized Interpersonal Cultural Institutional	Teenagers Discuss Micro-aggressions <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RfwnibEd3A">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RfwnibEd3A</a> CNN Report: <a href="https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/01/24/student-dreadlocks-dress-code-graduation-deandre-arnold-texas-school-district-vpx.kprc">https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2020/01/24/student-dreadlocks-dress-code-graduation-deandre-arnold-texas-school-district-vpx.kprc</a>	Can you share a micro-aggression?  Write a letter to self.
Mar	Classism: Better understand social classes	Effects of classism	Wealth Inequality in America: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM</a> CBS Report: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DANUXO-GQwU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DANUXO-GQwU</a>	Why does it matter?  How does it affect me?
Mar	Racism: Connect to personal experiences	Effects of racism	Doll et al. (2013) Study: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYcz1ppTjiM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYcz1ppTjiM</a>  Symbols of Systemic Racism: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAQ11iNknoU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAQ11iNknoU</a>	Why does it matter?  How does it affect me?



Table 7 (continued)

Month	Objective	Key Concepts	Activity	Questions
Apr	Gender oppression:	Effects of gender oppression	Discrimination Against Women: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8EiCCTto9U">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8EiCCTto9U</a>	Why does it matter?
			Mahogany L. Browne: "Black girl magic" <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQ4CPUufrIQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQ4CPUufrIQ</a>	How does it affect me?
Apr	Final reflection	Sharing what I learned	Celebrate accomplishments	What do you take with you?

Color and Youth of Color are neglected by our government institutions, including our educational system. Despite the best intentions, schools proved unprepared and under-resourced to support the neediest students. The distance learning platforms presented by schools did not fully resolve the inequities. The reality that Communities of Color suffer greater structural inequalities further exacerbated the effects of the pandemic. Communities of Color have fewer economic resources and less access to healthcare. According to Becky Pringle, the vice-president of the National Education Association, “Structural racism [is] the pre-existing condition that [has] destined us to be where we are—where our communities of color are disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus” (Alvarez, 2020). The publication *American Association of Retired Persons* (AARP) reported that Black Americans were hospitalized at a higher rate than White Americans. In New York City, one of the hardest-hit cities, Latinos are contracting the disease at a higher rate per capita (Nania, 2020).

Additional data reported by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) found that the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected Communities of Color and compounded underlying health and economic disparities (SAMHSA, 2020). Nationwide, African Americans accounted for 34% of confirmed cases as of April 20, 2020 despite constituting only 13% of the total population. The publication also noted that Communities of Color are more likely to be uninsured, leading to increased barriers when accessing health care. Communities of Color also face increased risk associated with economic and social circumstances.

The greatest impact of the pandemic was felt by Students of Color. “We [knew] this virus was destined to impact these communities more than others, and when that has a greater impact on our community, it has a greater impact on our students,” stated Pringle (Alvarez, 2020).

Families and Students of Color have less access to technology and less access to additional school resources that could mitigate the disparities. According to statewide polls conducted in California by Global Strategy Group for the Education Trust-West (Costa, 2020):

- 82% of Latinx and 76% of African American parents are concerned they do not have the resources or supplies to help their child stay academically on track.
- 21% Latinx and 12% of African American parents reported receiving little to no information about academic or other resources from their school or district.
- African American parents are less likely to have been contacted by their child's teacher than for all other racial groups.

The inequities are well understood yet not adequately addressed. According to Paul Reville, a Harvard professor and former Massachusetts Secretary for Education, uncovered that online learning is short of an adequate solution and that more is needed:

Communities and school districts are going to have to adapt to get students on a level playing field. Otherwise, many students will continue to be at a huge disadvantage. We can see that playing out now as our lower-income and more heterogeneous school districts struggle over whether to proceed with online instruction when not everyone can access it (Mineo, 2020).

Despite the immediate efforts from some school districts to provide Chromebooks and internet access to all their students, many students remained at a disadvantage. African American and Latino parents are underserved and less equipped to provide the guidance and support needed to effectively complement the online distance instruction.

The inequities were experienced directly by the students in this research study. The student participants did not respond well to the distance learning format put in place at PHS.

Chromebooks were not distributed immediately to the students. Instead, teachers resorted to emailing assignments and sending work home. Most students did not have a computer at home. The communication with the parents was poor. Teachers lost communication with the students in the study during the distance learning format. According to the school counselor, “I am surprised that you are communicating with the students. The teachers at PHS have not been able to reach them” (M. Martin, phone call, April 4, 2020). My relationship with the student participants and my realization that more was needed for the students to remain engaged in school kept me in communication with the participants during the activities despite the obstacles encountered through social distancing.

The modifications for the cycle were designed with the guidance of my ECU advisor and with the support of the school counselor. The themes for the lessons remained the same with modifications to the delivery and the dates. We anticipated trying different formats to see what would work best for the workshops. I used e-mail, text messages, cell phone calls, and online platforms such as Google Docs, Google Classrooms, Google Hangout, and Zoom. Different methods worked for different students. Although most students did not have laptops or Chromebooks, all the students except one owned a smartphone. Given the distinct challenges, I planned three formats for the students. I held online workshops with a group of three students who had access to a computer and internet connection. I communicated via phone calls and texts with two students who did not have that access. I met with the remaining two students at their home. I conducted home visits with all students to ensure that the assigned tasks were completed and to stay in touch with them. Table 8 is the schedule of activities that resulted from these changes.

Table 8

*Spring Data Collection*

Week of semester	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12	Week 13
In Person Study Group (n=3)	•			•	•			*			
Online Meetings (n=4)							•	•	•	•	
Student Individual Check-in Work (n=3)			•				•			•	
Meet with Counselor (n=3)		•		•		•		•	•	•	•
Meet with Advisor (n=12)	•	•	•	•	•			•	•	•	•
Student text/phone (Formal) (n=5)							•	•	•	•	•
Student Home Visits (n=4)								•	•	•	•

*Note.* \*school closure due to COVID-19.

I facilitated the first virtual meeting following the COVID-19 restrictions via the Google Hangout platform. I planned the meeting as a test for the feasibility of continuing the study. I was unsure of the students' access to the necessary technology. The Google Hangout platform proved easy to set up because most of the students had a Google email account. To my surprise six students attended the first meeting using their smartphones. The platform, however, had limited features. I was not able to see the students' faces through their cell phones, nor was I able to share videos. Teaching and conducting deeper discussions through this format would be challenging, and I was forced to reconsider an alternative. A popular alternative that provided more functions was the Zoom platform, which allowed for screen and video sharing and proved to be much more engaging for students. The increase in features and sophistication came at a price. Only four students were able to access Zoom because of limitations from their prepaid cell phone service.

Ongoing communication through cell phones proved to be most effective. They all responded to texts and calls. I sent them questions and links to videos for discussion through text. The video links and the discussion questions were the same material discussed with the students who attended the Zoom workshops. The cell phone access allowed the students to complete and return discussion questions and responses to the reflection prompts. In some instances, students took pictures of their handwritten responses and sent them to me through their cell phones.

The key action during this cycle was the transition the study took following the closure of the schools. That moment, in the midst of the school closures and the district's response to the pandemic, made me reconsider my role. I experienced the dilemma of proceeding as a researcher or as a support during a time of need. Behar (1996) refers to this to as "the central dilemma of all efforts at witnessing" (p. 2). Do I continue observing the effects of the pandemic by documenting

as a researcher, or do I take a moment and “place the camera down”? (Behar, 1996). I decided that for ethical reasons I could not simply be a witness to their struggle during the pandemic by taking fieldnotes and maintaining a false objectivity. Instead, I needed to respond to student needs with whatever resources I had available. I believe it was precisely my decision to put the camera down, to visit the students, and to provide resources to them that proved most rewarding personally and was instrumental for the completion of the second cycle of the study.

The home visits targeted the students who were not accessing the online platform nor responding to cell phone calls; these home visits proved beneficial in several ways. The visited students not only demonstrated appreciation and gratitude but also became more invested in the study. I was also able to see the student in their homes and meet family members I had heard so much about during the storytelling in PAR Cycle One.

Despite the brief visit with each student, the experience helped me capture a moment in their lives. Going to them was not only a positive gesture, but it also helped strengthen my relationship with them. The home visit exposed the challenging lives each student has and the issues of school access that are unseen from the school site perspective. The home visit is a powerful start towards engaging and supporting marginalized youth by knowing them more deeply. The home visit exposed the challenges families were facing during the pandemic (lack of facemasks, lack of childcare for frontline workers, etc.) and was a powerful start toward engaging and supporting marginalized youth.

Despite shelter-in-place and social distancing rules, the increased communication with students through cell phone, text, online platforms, and home visits provided a window into the lives of the students. It brought me closer to them. The deeper connection with the students translated into improved commitment and participation in this project.

## **Evidence**

The evidence I collected during PAR Cycle Two included transcripts from the 3 one-on-one student check-ins and three assignments from the workshops. The check-ins and workshops occurred in different formats. Three students participated with the Zoom online meetings for the workshops, and three students who did not have access to Zoom discussed and completed the workshops via cell and individual text communication. I worked with two students through in-person home visits. I conducted home visits with all the students, mostly as wellness checks. The personal visits helped maintain communication and engagement with the students who did not have reliable digital access or the ability to participate with the other students.

The distinct forms of lesson delivery and the data gathering did impact the responses and the consistency of the information obtained. The amount of detail from the students' responses varied significantly in the different formats. While the Zoom sessions allowed me more space for the delivery of information, the personal check-ins allowed for more thorough discussions and responses from the students. Despite the confounding issues, the information gathered provided the data needed to inform the study. Table 9 shows the codes and categories that emerged from the evidence gathered.

## **Analysis**

Unlike the previous cycle in which I began with a focus on the knowledge of the participants, in this cycle I was adding new information and knowledge. My analysis centered on how the students interpreted the information and connected new information to their life experiences and their schemata of self and the world. The initial student responses during the cycle showed us the need for conversation on student identity and social justice. I observed that



Table 9

*Spring 2020 Categories*


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Categories	Check-in 1	Study Session on Class	Study Session on Race	Study Session on Gender	Check-in 2	Final Check-in	Total
Awareness that does not connect	24	1	4	6	4	8	47
Awareness that connects at some level	35	5	43	22	44	22	171
Awareness that is critical	21	27	27	12	27	12	126
Experiences	4			5	1	4	14
Experience critical & connects	19	4	14	5	15	19	23

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the students could not initially frame their experiences in the larger context of institutional and structural oppression.

The student conversations and responses revealed significant differences in the level of critical consciousness of the participants. Many students during the conversations accepted the inequities they experienced without much thought or reflection. Accepting inequities is a result of never having been taught about oppression or never having had the opportunity to question their circumstances; the acceptance becomes a form of internalized oppression. By accepting one's circumstances, the individual often inculcates the responses of the dominant culture, which leads to negative feelings about oneself (Pyke, 2010). In fact, students' lack of critical thought can be seen as a result of the hidden curriculum of traditional schooling (Giroux, 1983). Social inequality and oppression are often unacknowledged or examined by teachers in the classroom and thus remain hidden from the students who could benefit from the knowledge the most. The omission of inequality and oppression in classroom discussions transmits the message that they do not exist and that things do not need to change in society.

The workshops and individual check-ins helped the students better connect their experiences to systemic oppression. While many students reached a deeper level of critical analysis toward the end of the cycle, it remains an important work in progress for each student participant. The emerging themes during this cycle were an awareness that lacked a connection, an awareness with some connection, and a more in-depth critical awareness. The students' awareness proved overwhelmingly more critical when it was connected to a prior experience.

### **Lacking a Connection**

The first check-in with the students helped me establish the extent to which the students had been exposed to discussions on social justice and oppression. When asked about the meaning

of oppression, most students struggled to define the term. One student recognized the word but was unable to provide an example. Miguel responded, “Yes, but I don’t know what it means” (M. Rivas, check-in response, February 21, 2020). The students equally struggled with the terms *social justice* and *classism*. Four students did not know what social justice was, and three had never heard of classism or class oppression. None of the students were able to provide an example for these two terms. The coding for the first check-in identified a quarter of the student responses as not making connections between their experiences and the systems of oppression.

### **Awareness That Connects**

Awareness of oppression, meaning being familiar with the idea and able to make some connection to it, was evident in most student responses. The category appeared nearly half the time throughout the coding of the check-ins and workshops. This theme remained relatively high throughout the cycle. When I asked whether students felt life had been fair to them, only one student answered affirmatively. Most students disagreed, and three students elaborated on their responses. Juan said, “It’s not like I get to choose what happens. Its life, like beggars can’t be choosers. Some people have it worse than me. I am appreciative of the things I have. I have a roof over my head. Other [sic] are going through worse” (J. Camacho, check-in response, February 21, 2020). Kevin responded to the question saying, “Shit, life’s fair to nobody really...I don’t know how to explain...Life isn’t really good to nobody, so I wouldn’t say life has been good to me. I am just working through it” (K. Smith, check-in response, February 21, 2020). “Working through it” is a response consistent with how the students accept their situation and perform under the circumstances.

Accepting things as they are without considering the issue further was common across the responses. When asked about social class, Miguel responded, “Oh, its bullshit. It’s damn near

part of life because you have to have classes to show who you are and what levels you become” (M. Rivas, check-in response, February 21, 2020). His response exposed a clear level of understanding of haves and have nots but without the ability to articulate the institutional causes. To some degree, students knew about classism but were unable to connect their observation and experiences to institutional and structural classism or to articulate their analysis.

The idea of Youth of Color *working through it*, as expressed by Kevin, remained with me. It presented oppression as a reality that had to be endured. They viewed oppression as part of our society that they must live with and not question. This left them to place blame mostly on individuals because they could not identify the structures.

### **Critical Awareness**

The students were able to discuss and connect with the topic of racism and were able to provide specific examples from their own experiences. Juan interpreted racism as “a way to separate us, saying racist remarks, having a stereotype because of a person’s race. I have been called a *wetback*” (J. Camacho, check-in response, February 21, 2020). Many of the discussions on racism initially described instances of confrontations with law enforcement. When asked about past experiences, Cesar stated, “Most of the time it’s police officers. In Sacramento a police officer shot and killed a guy 2 years ago. You hear it every day on the news” (Cesar, check-in response, May 10, 2020). Cesar referred to Stephon Clark, an African American male who was killed in his grandmother’s backyard. The police said they mistook his cell phone for a gun.

Kevin expressed his frustration with the judicial system stating, “It affects me a lot of ways. I am Black. I have been racially profiled. I know people who have been racially profiled and taken to court. That shit is not cool” (Kevin, home visit check-in response, May 10, 2020).

These two responses during a home visit check-in drew immediate parallels to the death of George Floyd at the hands of the police. The student's past experiences were connected to a larger debate taking place around the country.

The discussion of racism helped students begin to find a definition for oppression. During the second check-in, when asked, "What does oppression mean to you?" Kevin responded, "It affects me a lot. My grandmother's grandmother was a slave. They were from down south. They are Indian. She was there when the racism was hard. When the White people had no rules ...lynching and shit like that" (Kevin, home visit check-in response, May 10, 2020). Miguel also referenced his family's past in a historical context when asked on his view of oppression. "I am mixed Native American and Latino. As Native American I know we lost our lands and had to fight for what we have. Native Americans have been raped and sent to reservations. Growing up Latino was like I was the bad Mexican child with terrible behavior" (Miguel, home visit check-in response, May 10, 2020). The references from Kevin and Miguel of having Native American ancestry was new information for me and demonstrated a more in-depth reflection of their families' stories and a greater understanding of the injustices that they continue to face.

The study sessions on class oppression allowed the students to reframe their current home financial challenges. Poverty and the need to work were common themes. Armando spoke of poverty, neglect, and lack of opportunity. "There is a lot of poverty in my community. Little opportunities. More crime because there are not many jobs. A failing to maintain society" (A. Banuelos, check-in response, May 10, 2020). Armando also mentioned the difficulty of employment for his mother, "Finding work has been difficult. My mother worked in the fields, fast food, cleaning houses, and in motels. She has struggled to find work and to get to her jobs" (Armando, home visit, May 10, 2020). During one of the visits to Armando's house, his mother

told me that she had stopped working at low-paying jobs in motels out of fear of the pandemic. She indicated that the work was getting harder with the increase in people who are unhoused and transient families being housed in motels. The county social service agencies received additional funds from the federal government to house homeless families and contain the potential spread of COVID. This situation exposed Armando's mother to greater risk that she was not prepared to take, given that she has a young daughter and a grandchild living in her home.

The discussions on class oppression uncovered the reality that several of the student participants were affected directly by an additional layer of oppression. Immigration status as a challenge came up in different ways for three of the four Latinx students. Cesar shared about the difficulty of finding employment, particularly for his parents who are not documented. "My family are immigrants and work hard. People judge us for not trying our best. It is harder for them to get an actual job. If they want an actual job, they need papers or an actual green card or a social security" (C. Gutierrez, home visit check-in response, May 10, 2020). Cesar's parents' immigration status was another instance where students disclosed new information as a result of the growing trust and critical reflection.

The emerging themes from Cycle Two indicate a need for students to talk with each other. The student participants needed the opportunity to process their experiences through conversations and to connect their experiences to larger systems of oppression. The introduction of new information in the form of discussion on oppression provided the language they needed to place their experiences into context. The realization from the students that there was much more to their life circumstance in the form of structural and institutional inequities helped frame their struggle and encourage their advocacy toward action for the next cycle.

## **Implications**

To address the implications of the study by describing how the second cycle informed and guided my focus of practice. I discuss the implications for school leadership that emerged from the workshops. Lastly, I discuss the steps that were taken to prepare for the third and final cycle of the study.

### **Implications for the Research Questions**

The research questions about individual and collective identity guided the study, which, in turn, imply a relationship to increased self-efficacy. The extent of this possibility was dependent on the development of critical consciousness. The students connected best when they were able to relate their experience to the discussions on oppression; by building on their experiences, they could expand their understandings of the structural elements that dominated their experiences. Effective action and advocacy on the part of the students required greater self-knowledge and greater awareness of social inequities.

### ***The Need for Critical Consciousness***

The categories that emerged from the second cycle indicated the need for developing critical awareness for marginalized youth and Youth of Color in continuation high schools. Marginalized youth contend with many challenges and layers of oppression, including the stigma of failure. The student participants were not all able to embrace their individual and collective identity because of the gaps in their developing critical consciousness. The cycle revealed the need for students to make the connections between the challenges they face and larger institutional and structural systems of oppression.

This raises the question of curriculum and content in secondary education. We might presume that students living with the multiple effects of racism, poverty, immigration issues,

and/or economic uncertainty would understand how and why those things occur and how they fit into the picture. However, that is not the case; therefore, student stories connected to new content that informs their schema and is of personal interest could be a key to critical literacy (Mahiri, 2008).

### ***Creating a Plan Moving Forward***

New questions that emerged from this cycle; I needed to understand how to best channel the conversations in a direction that would prepare them to facilitate a conversation with teachers in PAR Cycle Three. Additionally, I wanted to find the best possible action given the distancing guidelines currently in place. The goal of the study was to develop self-efficacy in the student participants and engage them in meaningful action toward informing the educational community on what can work for Youth of Color in our educational system. My responsibility was to engineer that in a way that did not cause issues for the school or students.

### ***Addressing the Disconnect***

An important finding from this cycle was realizing the level of disconnect between students' lived experiences and larger institutional and structural inequalities. The disconnect plays into the false narrative of schooling that blames students for academic failure. The student's home life and past trauma becomes the excuse for the educational system's failings and the validation for segregating them into alternative programs. The students in return operated in a state of survival from not only the layered oppression but also from a complicit educational system. "Others have it worse," becomes the only recourse to make sense of the veil of White supremacy.



## **Implications for my Leadership**

The second cycle informed my leadership in several ways. The abrupt changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the need to plan effectively for uncertainty. During an emergency, it is important to identify the resources available for all students and make sure that the needs of marginalized students are addressed through direct communication or personal contact. The uncertainty required increased alignment of all parts of the education system with how to best serve Youth of Color in continuation high schools. During this cycle, I learned again the importance of pivoting and being flexible to appropriately navigate the unforeseen situations. A powerful reflection during a conversation with my advisors was that in the midst of the pandemic, my response to the needs of the students was precisely what they were asking the school system to do. I needed to identify the opportunities and adapt to the immediate needs of the students.

### ***The Opportunity***

The influx of information following the pandemic funneled to the schools from the Centers for Disease Control, the governor, state superintendent, the county health department, and the district superintendent was overwhelming. The lack of transparency and guidance from the federal government added to the confusion for schools and compromised their response. The ambiguity was discouraging and confusing for school leaders, their staff, families, and the entire community. The uncertainty during this cycle presented challenges as well as an opportunity for important learning. I had to question past practices, incorporate new ones, and leverage the voice of the students while encouraging teachers to consider new approaches.

I realized that, despite the confusion within the organizational structure, what was most important was to respond to students' needs as they expressed them. I had to resist being

overwhelmed and rather to see the benefits that the COVID-19 pandemic had uncovered—the opportunity to do schooling differently and to ensure that the needs of Youth of Color were identified and addressed. This provided me an opportunity to hear from the students on what would work best for them, but it also demonstrated that when an experience is a moving force of change for the learners, they show up. The social distancing guidelines provided the opportunity to envision and create an educational space that does not default to the inertia of traditional schooling.

### ***Adaptability***

This cycle taught me the need for increased communication and flexibility in times of uncertainty. I needed to schedule and conduct improvised check-ins, including home visits, to ensure that I was accessible for the student participants. During times of need, communication is especially important for the management and leadership of schools. In addition, the cycle highlighted the importance of “connected intelligence,” the ability to empathize with the position of the staff, families, and students who are most impacted by my decisions (Hardy, 2020).

The changing information and needs during the pandemic response taught me the importance of adapting and attending to the needs of all students. It is important to maintain focus on what needs to be accomplished particularly through uncertain and chaotic events, thinking less about *what* needs to get done and more about *how* it will be accomplished (Hardy, 2020). To best understand the needs of the student participants and work on the *how*, I had to “put the camera down.” I learned that during emergencies, actions centered on the wellbeing of the students take precedence even if they feel out of line with traditional school responses.

### **Implications for Cycle Three**

The third cycle of inquiry required that we engage the students in the planning to take meaningful action based on their learning from the previous cycles. The PAR Cycle Three aligns with stage four and five of the popular education model, the planning and taking action. Working in collaboration with the student participants, in PAR Cycle Three we will put together snapshots of the student conversations and of their learning throughout the study to inform educators on what can work for Youth of Color in continuation high schools.

### **Conclusion**

The stories of all the student participants during this cycle were a powerful testament to the effects of oppression and the many layers that Youth of Color in a continuation high school contend with every day in this country. Their experiences are laced with examples of personal challenges as well as institutional roadblocks. The students were able to connect their personal struggles and challenges to larger systems of oppression through dialogue and discussions. The students benefited from the introduction of new knowledge and vocabulary and put their personal struggles in context. Throughout this cycle, I was able to document and uncover pieces of these experiences and get a peek into the larger stories that each student embraces and which are not easy for them to express and discuss.

The analysis of the emerging themes uncovered that Youth of Color are not conditioned to question the inequities that they live with and that they blame themselves subconsciously and proceed with their lives as though there were no alternative. The default position for the students was “working through it” and, worse yet, to blame themselves. Learning and naming the different layers of oppression is a start toward “helping us stay conscious of our position as historically and geographically situated subjects, able to learn from the past as we try to meet

current conditions in the specific contexts in which we live, in more effective and imaginative ways” (Adams & Bell, 2016, p. 5).

The third and last cycle of the study prepared the student participants to take meaningful action. The students reflected on what they learned from Cycles 1 and 2. They decided as a group what they wanted to advise teachers in a training session.

## CHAPTER 6: PAR CYCLE THREE

In PAR Cycle Three and last cycle of the study, the student participants and I worked with the students to take meaningful action, the last phase of the popular education process. They wanted to inform teachers of their ideas about how to improve continuation high schools. The students agreed to plan an online teacher training. Building on the previous two cycles, the students shared individual stories and challenges and provided advice for educators who work with youth in alternative education settings. They emphasized the importance of the student-teacher connection that is often overlooked in teaching.

PAR Cycle Three occurred during the final months of a turbulent year for the United States. The context in which this short cycle occurred was critical to the students and their developing sense of how the larger systemic oppression affects them personally. The killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, shared extensively on social media, exposed the brutal and inexcusable effects of systemic racism within the institutions that swear to serve and protect. The protest and calls for justice that followed were drowned out by a presidential administration's unwillingness to acknowledge racism; this administration distorted the facts and denounced demands for social justice. The President embraced a narrative that stood in sharp contrast to the facts, human decency, and science. His positions favored corporate elites, leading to a further marginalization of Communities of Color, and the active undermining of our democracy while overlooking the corrosion of our government, society, and planet. The President's refusal to accept the election results claiming fraud a month after the elections revealed two possible conclusions: "Either the President actually believes what he is saying in which case he is crazy, or he does not, in which case he is engaged in the most cynical attack on American democracy" (Glasser, 2020).

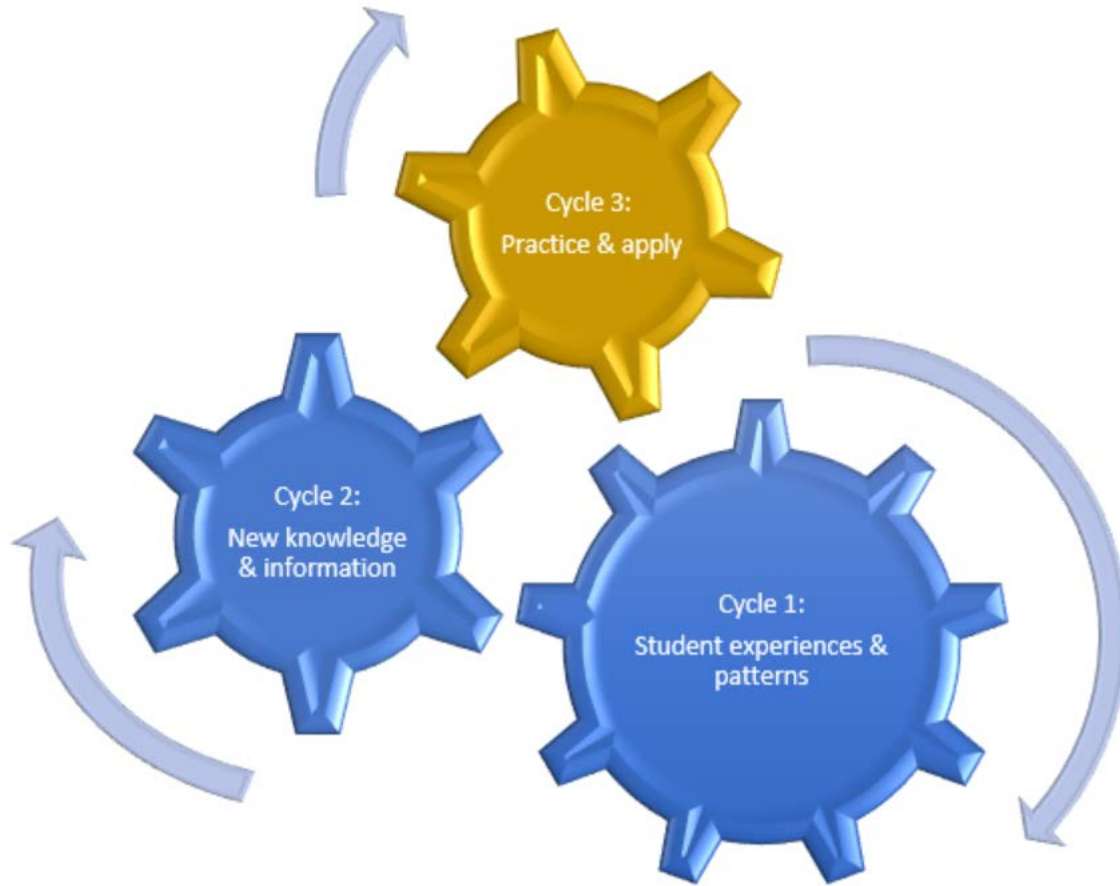
While working with Youth of Color to address issues of injustice, we had to acknowledge the prevalence of racism, including the effects it has on schooling, society, and country. The 2020 presidential elections exposed the significant support in this nation for a President who embraces divisiveness and exacerbates racial tensions. Large numbers of White Americans have condoned and enabled injustice and racism through their ongoing support of the President's "alternative facts". Many of these same White Americans teach in our schools.

PAR Cycle Three was a step forward; through reflection, action, and dialogue, students prepared educators to understand systemic racism and other forms of oppression from the point of view of the youth who experience them. They created a learning exchange for teachers that they called a listening circle.

I detail the process and outcome of PAR Cycle Three in which students planned, prepared, and ultimately took an action. I describe the process and the activities that occurred during this cycle. Then, I review the themes this cycle generated from evidence. Lastly, I address the implications of the study for the larger educational community.

### **PAR Cycle Three—Stage 4 and 5 of Popular Education**

The social distancing restrictions from the pandemic affected the planned activities for the cycle, however, the students demonstrated willingness to continue the project. During the cycle, the students planned and prepared a learning exchange for educators that engaged educators as listening learners. The format permitted students to voice their experiences and concerns to professionals who work in a continuation school setting. Figure 11 outlines the cycles of the study: Cycle 1 (Lived Experiences and Look for Patterns); Cycle 2 (Add New Information: and Cycle 3 (Plan New Strategies and Act/Apply).



*Figure 11.* Cycle three of the three PAR iterative cycles of inquiry that align with five stages of popular education.

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## **Students**

Retaining the original group of students who began the study was a significant hurdle for PAR Cycle Three of the study. Many of the original ten students who began the study had graduated and begun work. The work obligations for the remaining participants made it challenging to coordinate meeting times. I was able to continue working with six participants during this cycle. Only two of the six participants were enrolled in the continuation high school for the last part of the study.

The intersectionality of gender, class, and racial oppression weighed heaviest on the female students. Intersectionality in this case describes the reality that women of color endure specific forms of discrimination not experienced by men of color or White women (Crenshaw, 1989). The original group of students included one female Latinx, two female African American, and one White female student, none of whom were able to complete the study. Between Cycle One and Two, one Latinx female student and one African American female student could not remain in the project. Between Cycles Two and Three, one African American and one White female student left. Their voices, like those of other female Youth of Color in the school system, were silenced by life circumstances.

Two female students from the previous cycle, Andrea and Jessie, could not participate with the check-ins nor with the Zoom meetings. Andrea had moved out of state to work due to housing instability and financial needs. Andrea's work schedule and the time difference made it impossible for her to continue participating with the study. Jessie faced a similar challenge and moved out of the area with her boyfriend.

## **Process**

I worked with six students in PAR Cycle Three to apply what they learned in the past



three semesters. The students chose to plan a teacher learning exchange for educators. I recruited four educators from different alternative education schools in northern California to attend the learning exchange, all of whom I have worked with in the past.

The action was aligned with Stages 4 and 5 of the popular education model. In stage 4 participants build on the shared and collective wisdom from the critical conversations of the previous cycles. The students had acquired knowledge and had a clearer picture of their individual and collective identity. Stage 4 required that they use what they had learned from the previous stages in planning the desired action.

Stage 5 was the action taken by the students, including reflection on what they had done to inform potential changes needed for future cycles of reflection and action. The popular education model repeats the 5-stage spiral process, each time building on the knowledge learned with adjustments made as needed.

### **Activities**

The activities were designed to rely on the students' input and collaboration with the planning that would lead to meaningful action. The activities during this cycle included student planning, an online listening circle, and the post-event reflection. The students prepared a listening circle as a learning exchange process. In that circle, they wanted to relate to the educators their individual and collective stories. They wanted to use what they had learned to clarify for educators how they felt as students and how they thought that alternative education for Youth of Color could improve (see Table 10).

### ***The Planning***

The planning of the third cycle began with a review with the students of the previous work, discussions, and accomplishments. The Zoom online format did not seem applicable for

Table 10

*Fall 2020 Key Activities and Data Collection*

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12
Student individual check-ins (n=7)	•		•		•		•	•	•	•
Student small groups (n=5)		•					•	•	•	•
Zoom and listening circle with staff (n=2)			•							•

the individual check-ins nor the small groups during the planning stage. The students preferred working in person following the social distancing guidelines mandated by the state. I met outdoors with three of the students and conducted individual check-ins with the other three. We first discussed the previous problems they had related, which included scheduling conflicts, technology issues, and the need for study space.

The listening circle preparation took place as check-ins with the students and with the small student group over 4 weeks. The check-in discussions helped the student reflect and express themselves. I highlighted specific anecdotes, incidents from their past, or possible teachers that came to mind from their elementary and secondary school journeys. Each week, we focused on a specific area of discussion. We addressed the following questions:

1. Describe your past educational experience.
2. Describe your personal story.
3. What advice would you give educators working with students in alternative education settings?

I explored different ways of getting the students to prepare for each question. I asked them to text me their responses each week and to write out their response before our meetings. However, the students generated most of the work through in-person dialogue.

We devoted the fourth and final week of the preparation to working with the students on practicing their script and preparing them for the listening circle. I had the students write the script and practice reading it. After a few practice reads, I videotaped their responses with my cell phone. The practice for the listening circle was an important preparatory step that also served as further in-depth discussion about their past experiences.

Technology problems continued to be a significant barrier for the students during their preparation. One student did not have a computer nor a cell phone. I communicated with him through his mother and another participant who informed him of the meetings. Only two of the six students had computers at home with online capabilities. Although these two students relied on Chromebooks provided by the school, they still expressed problems with their WiFi connectivity. Kevin would rather do his online schoolwork from his cell phone because of the weak online connection of the school's WiFi hotspot. I realized this during one of our check-in discussions that Kevin had not been attending his online zoom classes for the same reason. I informed the school counselor who helped arrange an alternative independent study plan for him.

Much of the third cycle was taken up with adapting to these challenges. A practice Zoom meeting was scheduled in late September with educators from Patwin High School (PHS) to identify problems and prepare for the larger listening circle, which was to take place through Zoom. The major hurdle was ensuring that the student-participants had access to and could enter the Zoom meeting. I worked with the school counselor to set up two classrooms at PHS for the listening circle.

### ***The Listening Circle***

During the reflection of PAR Cycle, the students all agreed on the importance of sharing their experiences; they wanted the listening circle format so that they could share with other students and educators during the teacher learning exchange. Armando expressed it as, "Remember the TedTalk we listened to. Like when students would go out to other places and talk about their experiences to help make a change. We should have rallies and meet with other groups where we can discuss with other groups around the state" (A. Banuelos, reflection response, May 15, 2020). The listening circle format provided the opportunity for the students to

feel valued for their knowledge and allowed them to lead a discussion on their lives and provide advice to educators. Terrence Pruitt, the co-director of Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation (TRHT) who conducts virtual racial healing circles with youth in Chicago, explained it this way during a recent National Public Radio (NPR) interview: “So often, especially for people of color, the ability to share their story uninterrupted or unadulterated by someone else’s lens or someone else trying to explain their experiences—there are very few of those opportunities” (Zamudio, 2020). The listening circle provided the opportunity for students to both take meaningful action and create a space for individual and collective healing.

The listening circle online format allowed for the equitable participation of students and ensured that all students had a chance to express themselves by following the discussion in a circle rotation. During the preparation, each student answered the same three questions they had prepared during the previous 3 weeks. The educators’ task was to participate as listening learners to the stories of the student participants. In this format, the educators listened and were given a chance later to provide affirmations and ask questions of the students at the end of the meeting.

The Zoom online format for the facilitation of a conversation between students and teachers made participation of the educators more possible than an in-person session would have been. The listening circle gave the students a chance to say what they were thinking and feeling, helping to engender mutual understanding and support between the students and the teachers in stressful times (Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility, 2019). The listening circle empowered and validated the students’ voices, informed the educators, and provided a space of healing given the political, social, and environmental turmoil being endured by the entire country.

We invited educators who work in different districts. I selected them because of their experiences teaching in an alternative education setting and because of their sincere desire to improve the educational experience for Youth of Color. One educator works at the school where I serve as principal. I know the other three educators from having worked with them in the past. Their participation proved constructive because they have direct knowledge of the student population and work in alternative education programs. They are positioned to learn and act immediately on the knowledge gained from the listening circle.

The teachers expressed appreciation for the listening circle format. One teacher noted in a feedback form: “I plan to ask questions and listen better. These students were not heard, yet they yelled for help through their actions, their anger, their quietness, and their stifled determination to belong,” (I. Oropeza, listening circle notes, October 21, 2020).

### ***Student Reflection***

I wanted to be sure that the students had an opportunity to reflect on their experiences of the listening circle and of the 18 months we spent together. The reflection was used as an individual check-in with each participant. We discussed their experiences and feelings on the listening circle training and the overall study. The reflection part of the study helped celebrate and put in perspective the significant accomplishments for the students.

The students were generally pleased with the results of the listening circle and expressed an appreciation for being heard. The most powerful part of the listening circle for Armando was “being able to talk about our struggles growing up with the teachers. How they were open and could relate to us. We grew up in a similar situation with some of the teachers” (A. Banuelos, reflection response, 2020). The students felt an overwhelming sense of validation and the desire for other students to have a similar opportunity. “I would like it to go on with other students

where teachers can come together and learn from each other” (D. Jones, reflection response, October 2020). The positive affirmations from the educators provided a validation the student had never experienced in school.

After the one-on-one reflections, I brought four of the participants together for a socially-distanced barbeque in the park where we met in small groups. We talked about their current lives, families, and next steps for them. My gift to the students was an East Carolina University (ECU) baseball cap. I informed the students about ECU and encouraged them to wear the cap with pride. I told them that their voice would be a part of the research of this university to help inform future scholars and educators. “You think I can attend this university?” stated Kevin after putting on the cap (K. Smith, reflection response, 2020). I reassured him he could and that I would support him all the way.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data collected and analyzed for the cycle included the documentation from the individual student check-ins, the small group meetings, and the listening circle. I recorded and transcribed the student meetings and the online Zoom meeting. I then coded the transcriptions on a Google Doc, analyzing the data using the coding structure I had developed over the three cycles of inquiry. The repetition of the coding process allowed me to discern the categories and themes.

### **Voices of Hope**

The third cycle uncovered a closer understanding of each student’s development and learning throughout the study. This cycle required the students to reflect further on their past schooling and their personal stories. As we revisited questions and discussions from the previous cycles, students gained more confidence, which aided their ability to speak on the topics during

the final listening circle. The students were able to identify their challenges and articulate their needs as students in continuation high schools. The previously identified categories of positive and negative awareness translated to a more critical expression of what is needed to improve the educational experience for Youth of Color in alternative education.

The opportunity for educators to hear directly from the students about their experiences and ideas about how to improve the educational environment for Youth of Color in alternative education settings was critical during this cycle. The students reported important considerations that are often overlooked by educators even if they are obvious in most studies about how to work with students: teachers need to listen, fully engage, learn, and act on what they hear (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

I analyzed the themes that came up across all three cycles. I discussed these themes with the students during Cycle Three and narrowed them down to the three most important to the students. These themes were shared with the teachers during the teacher training: validation of student experiences, the need to be connected to their teachers, and the importance of more relevant learning experiences. First and foremost, educators need to listen and validate the students who enter the school environment. Secondly, they need to deeply connect with their students by having conversations that go beyond attendance, grades, and behavior. Lastly, the youth told educators that they should educate students differently by promoting relevance and guide Youth of Color toward greater self-efficacy. Student validation, teacher-student connection, and teaching differently were the themes of the final review of the study. Table 11 documents the themes that are relatively equal in importance to youth.

Teachers and school leaders have the responsibility and the power to engage in creating an organization that shifts from top-down to multi-level thinking and acting and from solving



Table 11

*Fall 2020 Themes*

Themes	Planning	Listening circle	Student Reflections	Total
Student validation	15	4	36	55 or 34%
Student connections	18	10	21	49 or 30%
Different pedagogy	24	22	12	58 or 36%

conflicts to dialogue and integration of diverse points of view (Senge, 1993). In this case, thinking of students is rarely included in planning that affects them; consequently, teachers and principals spend a great deal of time managing students in ways that are unproductive and result in conflicts with teachers instead of engaging them in co-creating a learning environment that is relevant and meaningful. Indeed, students in their teen years are in search of alternate role models, and they need the adults in their lives to “show up” differently (Özdemir & Özdemir, 2020). I discuss these three requests from students.

### **Listen and Validate**

Students feel validated when adults support and endorse them—in other words, to feel that their existence and their ideas are worth something to the adults. Student validation was present as a category 55 times or in 34% of the responses I coded from three sources. Validation was strongest during the student reflection part of the cycle. Youth in continuation high schools, because of their challenges and perceived deficits, are easily discredited and marginalized by educational professionals and the practices we use to interact with students. The failure of teachers and administrators to take time to listen and validate is a major impediment for Youth of Color in our school system and a strong driver for pushing out students. The American Promise Alliance urges us to listen to what young people have to say (Hall, 2015). Students make it clear that meaningful positive relationships start with someone simply being willing to listen to what youth have to say without judgement. Educators need to create time before, during, or after the lessons to check-in on their students. Miguel explained during a check-in the importance for teachers themselves to make sure they are checking in:

Like when teachers ask you how are you doing? Did you eat this morning? What happened this morning? What is your attitude for school today? How can I help you

change it? Did you do your homework? Do you need help with your homework? All that (M. Rivas, check-in response, August 21, 2020).

Listening to the basic needs of students is important, but unfortunately it is not occurring as standard practice in the classroom. Personalized instruction is being overshadowed by the needs for classroom management, lesson delivery, and curriculum pacing. While these needs are important, putting students before the content is the first step to making major strides toward building positive connections with Youth of Color (Brown, 2018).

Understanding the students' background and story is important for acknowledging the challenges and intervening in a supportive way. Student validation is knowing each student's story and believing they are more than the challenges they face. The stories of the students in alternative education not only deserve to be heard, but they are key for personal growth and much more. "Knowing their story is not just for education but also for survival. Knowing our past helps better understand the future," stated Donte Felder a Golden Apple Award winning educator for the Seattle Public Schools (Hua, 2020). The importance of knowing the students was expressed by Cesar to the educators during the listening circle:

Learn the kids, like their past. Like sometimes kids are actually struggling at home, and when they come to school, if they start falling asleep...but actually understand their past, because sometimes teachers just go out of their way and just start going after it (C. Gutierrez, listening circle response, October 21, 2020).

By "*going after it*," Cesar referred to disciplinary action teachers take toward a student who is perceived as not wanting to participate with the lesson and instead is choosing to sleep. "You should actually just go around and help them even if you don't understand them (C. Gutiérrez, listening circle response, October 21, 2020)," stated Cesar during the listening circle. Youth of

Color require the demonstration and support from our educational system to offset some of the systemic oppression they encounter daily.

### **Student and Teacher Connection**

A common deficit-thinking mindset among some educators and the school community is that Youth of Color in continuation high schools do not care about school or even that they hate their teachers. In many cases, these beliefs extend to notions that continuation high school students are incapable or delinquent. These deficit-thinking paradigms create rifts among educators, the school community, and the students in which Youth of Color are blamed for their disconnect and academic failure while systemic factors are ignored (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Contrary to the deficit-thinking paradigms, the students during the cycle expressed a desire for teachers to know more about them. The theme of student and teacher connection came up 49 times in the coding process. I differentiate student and teacher connection as the product of a deeper relationship that is desired by the students with the teachers. One student expressed how teachers can connect better with students, “Provide more support and time. There is a reason we are here. Counsel and meet with us. Call home and know how we are. Many are struggling with technology. It is very hard with online schooling” (C. Gutierrez, check-in response, August 21, 2020).

The teacher and student connections are fundamental for students to feel a part of the educational process. This type of caring is what Valenzuela (1999) terms authentic instead of aesthetic caring—meaning the caring is real because it is about the entire person as student instead of just about the forms and routines of school such as doing homework, attendance, or finishing an assignment. Students who feel a close connection with their teachers will place more effort on their work, which in turn enhances educational outcomes, and teachers can be both

caring and demanding and increase rigor and results (Bondy & Ross, 2008; Ware, 2006). Connecting with students requires the teachers to be deliberate with their personal and instructional approach. “Inspire and persuade your students. Inspire them with attention and purpose. I feel sometimes teachers don’t understand,” stated Armando (A. Banuelos, check-in response, August 21, 2020). Connecting with students in the classroom can take on many forms and leads to a significant impact on a child’s emotional safety, engagement, and ultimately academic success (Brown, 2018). Donald expressed during a check-in that, “Teachers need to know the students. Make the classroom interesting. Speak to the class and check for understanding, as well as making the classroom look better” (D. Jones, check-in response, August 21, 2020).

### **Different Pedagogy**

Teachers need to change current teaching practices, which tend to further alienate students. Students express that far too often teachers do things that harm Youth of Color’s self-perception without even realizing it (Simmons, 2017). Teachers must be mindful and approach the profession from an asset perspective, believing in the potential each student brings to the classroom. A major category in coding during this cycle was the need for teachers to adapt or change their teaching (58 occasions or 36% of the evidence), further giving credibility to students’ desire to learn. Students felt strongly the need for teachers to improve their practice through better instructional strategies and a discipline approach that is guided by mutual respect and self-control (Curwin et al., 2018).

The students described instances of their past instruction as teachers *just throwing* them the work. Teachers *just throwing* the work was synonymous with weak teaching practices that rely on worksheets without student discussion or interaction during class on the subject matter.

The students described few opportunities to analyze, evaluate, and create within the classroom. Kevin described his classroom experience during the listening circle as, “Some teachers just want to get their job done and don’t really care about what the students say. You have teachers just throw the work out with no help” (K. Smith, listening circle, October 21, 2020). The perception from youth as having work thrown at them translates to students not deserving deeper instruction or effort. Armando stated boldly, “Most teachers just teach cuz [sic] it’s another job so they do it as simple as possible” (A. Banuelos, check-in response, October 21, 2020).

The desire for students to be disciplined with dignity came up in the discussions (Curwin & Mendler, 1988). The students expressed feeling put down and embarrassed by how teachers address them and how they are disciplined. Instead of treating them as young adults who need to maintain their self-esteem, they are demeaned. Miguel described the problem during a check-in: “Teachers treating students differently because how they live, how they look, how they act. Mistreating them in class. Thinking that punishing them will help them but really doesn’t cuz [sic] they are not learning” (M. Rivas, check-in response, August 21, 2020).

Implicit biases from educators are a significant barrier for students (Staats, 2016). Though subtle, these beliefs and stereotypes, including regular microaggressions, create lifetime negative consequences for racially stigmatized students, ultimately causing them to distrust the teachers and disengage in the classroom (Allen et al., 2013; Hodgkins, 2016; Quereshi & Olonofua, 2017).

Cesar said, “It’s important teachers don’t single out students when they are teaching. Just because a student gets in trouble...there is more going on. Look deeper at the behavior to see what is causing the issue (C. Gutierrez, listening circle, October 21, 2020).

Students cautioned teachers about their approach and their position of power when managing the classroom. Teachers lose the respect of the students when they come across too authoritarian or call out students on minor things. “Because you’re a teacher does not mean you have full control of the classroom. If you tell them you do, they will dismiss you, and it’s just going to make the situation worse” (C. Gutierrez, listening circle, October 21, 2020), stated Cesar. The abuse of power in the teacher-student relationship can further oppress students particularly if the students continually perceive themselves being treated unfairly.

The study underscored that while Youth of Color in our schools are layered with challenges, they are not defined by them. Youth of Color need validation and a connection with their teachers to engage successfully with the learning process. Teachers must adapt their approach and teaching strategies to ensure that validation and connections are being encouraged within the instruction. The approach taken by educators with student discipline can redirect or further humiliate young minds that crave love and attention.

### **Conclusion**

The opportunity for the student participants to share their personal stories and to articulate their thoughts with the educators was an empowering experience for the students during the study. Equally impactful for the students was the feeling of being heard and appreciated by the educators during the listening circle. “It made me feel good that they appreciated and want to change and make things better for other students knowing what we went through” (M. Rivas, final check-in, October 24, 2020). The student participants overwhelmingly appreciated the study process and felt the need for similar work to be replicated or embedded within schools, at every grade level.

The *voices of hope* from the student participants expressed the need for educational

environments that validate, connect, and instruct differently. The study began with validating the knowledge of the student participants of a continuation high school. Student validation begins with listening to their voices. Through safe conversations about their past, the students learned more of each other and themselves. Supporting students to better learn about themselves will lead them to become authors of their own life stories (Simmons, 2017). The unfortunate divisive tone of our country is compromising these efforts to address the needs within the educational environment for Youth of Color. “Student validation and connections will continue to suffer as long as systemic racism is politicized in a way that continues to intoxicate our schools often through well-intentioned educators that opt to look the other way” (A. Ramos, personal memo, November 14, 2020).

In Chapter 7, I discuss the findings from the study and respond to the research questions and implications for practice, policy, and research. I also discuss how the study has helped me develop as an educational leader.



## CHAPTER 7: TOWARD HEALING AND LEADERSHIP GROWTH

*Healing from [the] trauma of oppression caused by poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and class exploitation is an important political act. Without a critical understanding of how the various structures of domination operate in our daily lives, we cannot begin to develop meaningful forms of personal and collective resistance. (Ginwright, 2009)*

The study originated as a need for professional growth and for personal healing. I needed to better understand my educational and professional journey to push back on the structural inequities persistent in our society. My healing began by reflecting and honoring my parents' journey from immigrant fieldworkers with no formal education to a mother who obtained a college degree through night school classes to become a Head Start teacher in the migrant labor camp where we once lived. The study provided a path to reflect and critically understand my educational journey as a Brown student in a school system that I successfully navigated despite always feeling like an outsider with little or no right to speak. In the course of the doctoral program, I learned the importance of not only embracing one's story but leveraging it for personal and professional growth. I learned to use my story to inspire and educate others, to give voice to the students who remain silent in the back of the classroom the same silence I once endured.

The study is a step toward validating the forgotten voices of Youth of Color in continuation high schools, schools that have been designed as one last option for a high school diploma. I worked collaboratively with a group of students sharing and listening to one another's stories, beliefs, and experiences through the use of a popular education format (Arnold et al., 1991). By the conclusion of the project and study, the students were able to facilitate a listening circle with continuation high school educators in which they informed educators about possible ways to improve education for marginalized youth. In the study, I aimed to bring awareness for the need to better support Youth of Color in our educational system. More specifically, the study

sheds light on how Youth of Color are further marginalized in alternative education programs, such as continuation high schools. The intent of the study was to reframe how we perceive Youth of Color in continuation high schools and to leverage their experiences and knowledge to improve the educational environment.

The study took place in a continuation high school near Sacramento, California, but it is a familiar story and could have been the story of far too many communities in the United States in which students of color and poor students are marginalized, overlooked, and eliminated from possibilities as they go through our current K–12 system. I invited a group of 10 students to participate. Through small study groups and individual check-ins, the student participants worked with me for three consecutive school semesters. The group was a representative sample of the school's demographics and included four young women and six young men. The activities began as group study sessions twice a month during the last class period in a school day. The school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the distancing guidelines that started in Spring 2020 reduced the in-person contact to a small, three-member group while the other members were limited to individual check-ins. I used online meeting formats, texts, and phone calls to ensure the completion of the study and the inclusion of the voice of each student.

The findings of the study underscore the importance of youth voice in public education, especially the voices of Youth of Color. The student stories exposed the need and the importance of student voice to support each other, for self-reflection, and for teacher development. In this chapter, I present the findings of the study, discuss the research questions, and propose an approach to better serving youth. I outline the implications for practice, policy, and research.

In presenting and detailing the findings, I emphasize that this is more than a story; it is a plea to listen to the voices of our young people so that their struggles, voices, hopes, and dreams

can be one with ours. The study is an example of what can be adapted and used in communities and schools across our country to listen to the people closest to the issue and rethink how we interrupt the grammar of schooling and better serve students (Guajardo et al., 2016; Tyack & Cuban, 1998). I end the dissertation with a reflection on how working to uncover the voices of hope informed my professional development and cemented my understanding of the importance for educators and administrators to work directly with students to understand their strengths, address their needs, and commit themselves to provide schooling that properly supports Youth of Color.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Educators in alternative education and continuation high schools subscribe to the idea of instructional differentiation to meet the diverse needs of their students (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2011; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). Yet, their teaching more frequently reflects a banking method of education that is unsuccessful in traditional high schools and is certainly less useful in continuation schools (Freire, 1970). The teachers replicate failed teaching strategies rather than a focus on the uniqueness of each student, and students disconnect just as occurs in comprehensive classrooms. Educators do not authentically prioritize fostering community, knowing the students, and establishing emotional safety in the classroom.

The study identified an alternative approach to more successfully engaging Youth of Color in continuation high schools. The alternative approach is to create space for dialogue between teachers and students that increases the learning for both. This perspective is based on the notion that student voices can be instigators of instructional and programmatic change. The educators in continuation high schools need to get to know them at a fundamental level and build relationships with them. Therefore, the study contributes to the field's understanding of the for

the voices of Youth of Color in alternative education. Through a process aligned with popular education, educators can explicitly foster a space for the voice of students, a voice for student self-reflection, and a voice to teach teachers. Figure 12 outlines the alignment of the study cycles with stages of popular education, the process, the evidence, and the findings.

The emergent themes from the three cycles and from the stages of popular education complement the research on the importance of empowering youth by building critical consciousness through problem-posing education and by engaging them as principal actors in their education. Freire (1970) asserts that education is a practice of freedom and liberation, that is, the ability to recognize the oppressive forces that manipulate and keep people from challenging the system and from growing intellectually. Education leads to freedom through increased critical consciousness or *conscientização*. Youth of Color can begin the process of liberation by learning of the oppression that victimizes them. The educational process for Youth of Color must begin with acknowledging the existence of racism at all levels, including in our schools. Mills (1997) posits that racism is the result of the unnamed political system created by White supremacy. Calling out White supremacy and healing from racism and other forms of oppression begin by naming the injustices and showing students how their daily lives are affected.

The study reaffirmed the importance of engaging students in a process of dialogue where their experiences are at the center of the learning. The students have the power to learn about and analyze systems of oppression. When armed with their own experiences, they are better informed and best positioned to identify the changes needed. The findings of the study support the claims that student voices are important at many levels not only as a metric of student involvement but

## GRAPHIC OF PAR STUDY

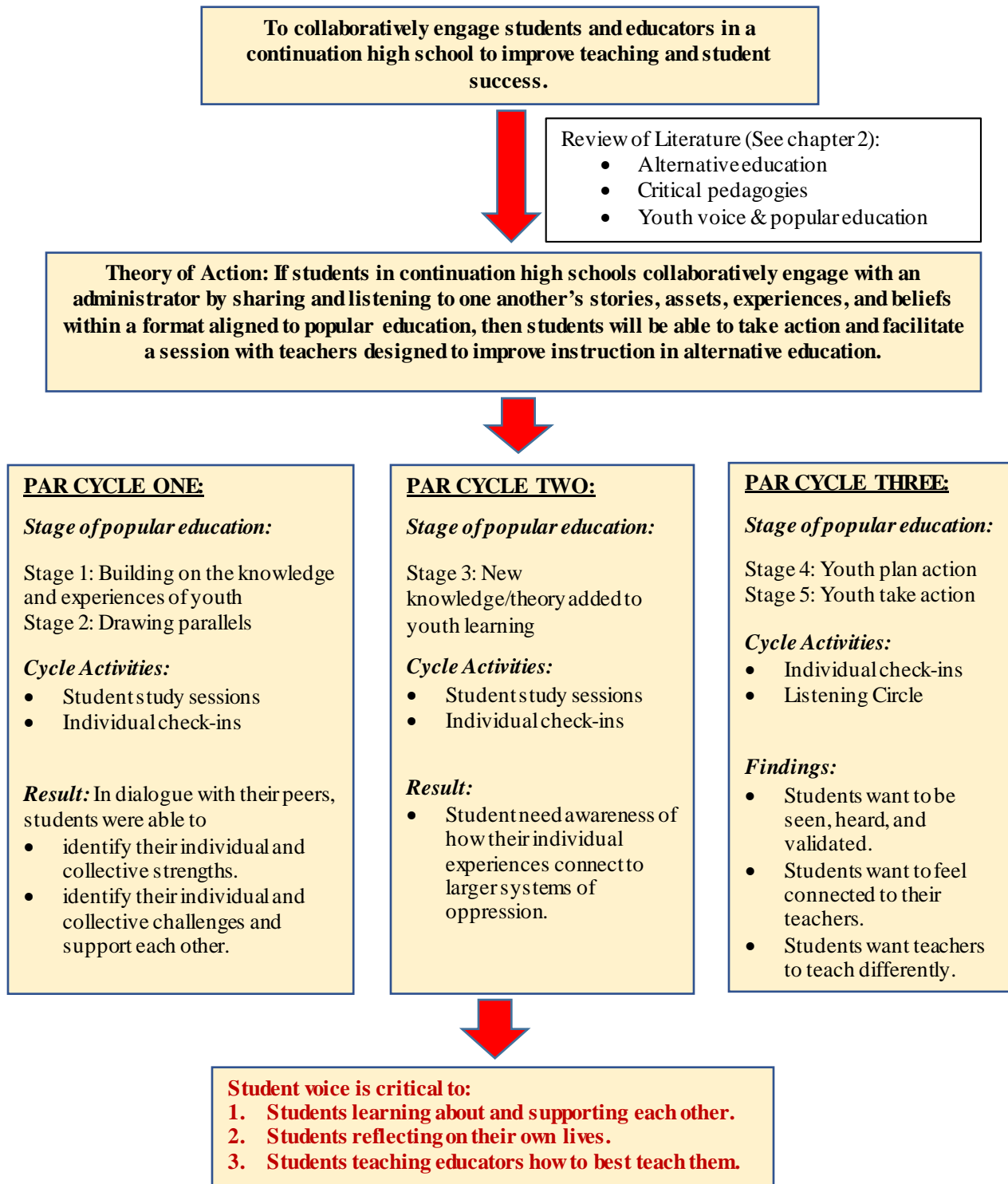


Figure 12. Participatory action research process, evidence, and findings.

rather as a strategy for critical learning and teaching. Based on the evidence from three cycle inquiry, there are three findings:

1. Students who have opportunities to work together and regularly talk to each other can use their individual and collective voices to support one another.
2. When students have a chance for guided self-awareness, they connect their experiences to larger systems of oppression; by not turning inward and blaming themselves, they can harness collective power to understand, interrogate, and advocate.
3. Students want to be seen, heard, and validated; they want teachers who listen, care, and teach in ways that support their learning (see Table 12).

In the discussion that follows, I support each finding with the extant literature.

### **Student Voices Support Each Other**

*I learned to accept people for who they are, not judge, not mistreat, not criticize.  
We all go through things. (M. Rivas)*

The opportunity for students to speak and learn from each other was important with helping them find their voices so that they can support each other and begin to interrogate their sense of self. While this finding seems self-evident, the study validated the need for the intentional use of *pláticas* and *testimonios* toward authorizing authentic student voices (Guajardo et al., 2016; Pérez-Huber, 2009). At first hesitant, through this process, the students expressed the desire and need to speak about their experiences and the opportunity to learn from each other, consistent with the research that students learn best when they can verbalize their learning. Thus, providing opportunities for students to speak and be heard supported learning as well as healing, helped students identify their individual and collective voices and strengths, a provided a place to share challenges.

Table 12

*Study Cycles, Popular Education Stages, and Findings*

Cycle of Inquiry	Popular Education Stage	Findings	Student Quotes
1	1 and 2	<p>Student Voice: Supporting Each Other</p> <p>In dialogue with their peers, students were able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify their individual and collective strengths.</li> <li>• Identify their individual and collective challenges and support each other.</li> </ul>	<p>“I learned to accept people for who they are, not judge, not mistreat, not criticize. We all go through things” (M. Rivas, reflection, 11/25/2020).</p> <p>“The work helped me talk more, express myself to other people such as to the teachers, counselors, and staff...even with my parents” (K. Smith, reflection, 11/25/2020)</p>
2	3	<p>Student Voice: Self-Reflection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student awareness of how their individual experiences connect to larger systems of oppression.</li> </ul>	<p>“I never ran across another student who was treated like me. I was always told that I was different. The difference wasn’t always a good difference” (A. Banuelos, listening circle, 10/21/2020).</p> <p>“Knowing that the system is set up against us, that racism is everywhere and how we don’t think about it. Learning how micro-aggressions work to put us down was important” (D. Jones, reflection, 11/25/2020).</p>

Table 12 (continued)

Cycle of Inquiry	Popular Education Stage	Findings	Student Quotes
3	4 and 5	<p>Student Voice: Teach Teachers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students want to be seen, heard, and validated.</li> <li>• Students want to feel connected to their teachers.</li> <li>• Students want teachers to teach differently.</li> </ul>	<p>“You have to want to understand the kids. Everybody has a good heart; they just have their own way. You may not get it because of the way you treat them. Teachers should always just be themselves and not act different as someone with power” (C. Gutierrez, listening circle, 10/21/2020).</p> <p>“My advice for teachers is to communicate more with your students, get to know them, ask them if they want to stay after class so you can get to know more. I know a lot of my teachers didn’t get a chance to sit down and talk to me and know me” (K. Smith, listening circle, 11/25/2020).</p>



### ***Stories for Learning and Healing***

The stories shared by the students were insightful, but the process of their interaction proved most important for their learning. Vygotsky (1978) conceptualized that knowledge is constructed in the midst of our interactions with others and is shaped by the skills and abilities valued in a particular culture. Higher order thinking and the abilities to form, express, an exchange ideas are best taught through dialogue, through the questioning and sharing of ideas and knowledge (Teaching Tolerance, 2020). Additionally, researchers have found that the peer instruction model of classroom instruction improves conceptual understanding (Duncan, 2005; Mazur, 1997). Thus, if we constructed classroom experiences to mirror effective student learning and relied on the tenets of critical literacy and using the stories of students, we might more fully engage students in school and learning (Freire, 1970; Mahiri, 2008; Perry, 2012; Shor, 1999). In addition, in the process, we aid students who have had difficulties in life related to their experiences or trauma. As the students in the study uncovered a desire to speak about their experiences with each other, the conversations evolved toward healing that informed and strengthened each student's individual and collective identity. From a therapeutic perspective, dialogue offers a powerful healing opportunity. Seikkula and Trimble (2005) found that when students are in dialogue with each other, they benefit from sharing healthy coping strategies with each other. They share their emotions and learn from each other about how to move beyond the pain (Seikkula & Trimble, 2005). The study process supported the students to identify their individual and collective strengths, including what worked for them at school. They were able to identify their individual and collective challenges to support each other and move ahead.

### ***Individual and Collective Strengths***

The student group sessions during the study provided a platform for safe conversations

that encouraged expression and promoted learning about their individual and collective strengths. The students were able to reflect on their past and share those experiences with the other students in the group. The students shared stories that made meaning of traumatic experiences, and the stories that helped them shape their emerging adult identities (Godsil & Goodale, 2013). The research confirms that children learn from their peers; when they share their feelings and thoughts with others, their peers learn from them (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017; Rich, 2016). They begin to understand that listening to the responses of others can help them understand and make new meaning of experiences (Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework [Australia], 2016). The conversations often had common themes that were familiar to all the students.

The opportunity to hear different stories, experiences, and perspectives in which the students felt a part of the discussion was a powerful experience for students that demonstrated what can work with in schools. When asked how they felt about the study group discussions, Armando responded, “I find the study group is very helpful. Not every student is the same; you get different perspectives. I am challenging myself and continuing to grow” (A. Banuelos, check-in response, October 8, 2019). Promoting classroom discussions among students holds promise for educators wanting to build trust and meaningful classroom engagement. Students are able to think critically and consider different perspectives through constructive engagement (Edward-Groves et al., 2014).

### ***Individual and Collective Challenges and Mutual Support***

The risk of experiencing trauma is greater for Youth of Color and a significant factor in their current overall health and future wellbeing. Youth of Color not only witness or experience physical violence in school; they also deal with constant alienation, discrimination, and

microaggressions (Henderson & Lunford, 2016). Girls of color, particularly Latina girls, experience a much higher prevalence of mental health concerns, such as like feeling sad or hopeless (47%), seriously considering suicide (26%), and attempting suicide (15%), compared to other groups (Women of Color Network, 2006). Boys and young men of color are more likely to suffer toxic stresses imposed by chronic poverty, racism, unconscious bias, brutality at the hands of the police and other institutions (Rich, 2016). According to a U.S. News report on research conducted by Rutgers University and the University of Michigan, young men of color face an exceptionally high risk of being killed by police, and that risk continues to be greater for Black men (Williams, 2019).

Approaches to address trauma need to focus on “what is right” with the victim. We view youth as playing an important role in their healing. Educators and practitioners need to listen and learn from young people who have insights that can advance how we think about trauma and healing (Ginwright, 2018). Successful approaches toward healing trauma benefit from a cultural framework that emphasizes connectedness by bringing students together to work cooperatively (Carrillo & Tello, 2008).

The group study sessions exposed the challenges and traumatic experiences with which students were grappling. During the reflection, Kevin explained what he had learned about his peers: “We had a lot of people in our group that has [sic] been through a lot of stuff, including myself. We were taught not to judge; we made a bond together, and we talked about our personal problems. We all learned and respected each other’s personal problems” (K. Smith, reflection response, November 25, 2020). The safe space for dialogue and expression of their trauma provided a form of healing for the participants. They felt supported by each other and not alone with the challenges they face.

## **Voices for Self-Reflection**

*I never ran across another student who was treated like me. I was always told that I was different. The difference wasn't always a good difference. (A. Banuelos)*

Prior to the work that we did together in Cycle Two, the students had not given much thought to larger systems of oppression such as sexism, racism, and classism. The lack of opportunity to learn about and reflect on such systems meant that students blamed themselves for their struggles. In Cycle Two, we explored three systems of oppression (sexism, classism, and racism) and looked at four levels of oppression (interpersonal, internalized, cultural, and institutional). These discussions provided critical places for students to re-adjust their ideas about blame and the shame. As they developed greater personal awareness, they expanded their knowledge about systems of oppression, heard counter-stories, and ultimately were inspired to consider actions they might take in their own lives to combat oppressive systems (Bell et al. 2016). When students have a chance for guided self-awareness, they connect their experiences to larger systems of oppression; by not turning inward and blaming themselves, they can harness their collective power to understand, interrogate, and advocate. Using student stories and then intentionally inserting learning about the key factors of oppression—the third stage of popular education—ensured that students understood their micro stories in a larger macro context.

An important piece of the study was building critical consciousness through conversations and self-reflection on oppression. Ginwright (2009) posited that critical consciousness can replace marginalized students' feelings of isolation and self-blame for challenges they encounter with a sense of agency and engagement in a broader collective struggle for social justice. Getting the student to understand how institutional and structural inequalities affect them personally was a step away from self-blame and toward agency.

Thus, students develop the possibility of inner dialogue that can counter their current inner story of blame and shame. Morin and Hamper (2012) documented the cognitive importance of inner speech during self-related thinking. The ability to verbally communicate with the self leads to increased cognitive complexity and deeper self-referential processing. In addition, using techniques from cognitive behavior therapy, introduces a process that helps gradually change the story that students tell themselves (Phipps & Thorne, 2019). The process of self-reflection provides a momentary break from the outside world to find a moment of clarity in which youth can hear a unique, internal voice that they can use to speak out (Simakovsky, 2020). Within the classroom, teachers have noted that guided reflection provides students with a means of coming to know their own power, control, and ability to resolve their own issues, leading to a sense of self-efficacy (Kirby, 2009).

Thus, through investigating concepts of oppression and marginalization, students find a new voice that is informed by the structural context, and they can begin to externalize their ideas in new ways. This second cycle of inquiry led students to gain a different level of confidence about their ability to advocate for themselves.

### **Voices to Teach Teachers**

*You have to want to understand the kids. Everybody has a good heart; they just have their own way. You may not get it because of the way you treat them. Teachers should always just be themselves and not act different as someone with power. (C. Gutierrez)*

Students have a desire to be seen, heard, and validated, and they learned through this process of communicating their experiences and desires with teachers; they want teachers who listen, care, and teach in ways that support their learning. “A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, reveals its fundamentally narrative character” (Freire, 1970, p. 71). Current instructional approaches continue to support a teaching

model described by Freire (1970) as the banking model of education in which information is deposited versus co-created with the students themselves. The students' advice to the teachers during the listening circle was their desire and need to be heard and validated. They wanted connections with their teachers, and they want to be taught differently.

### ***Students Want to Be Seen, Heard, and Validated***

The study identified in the third cycle that students want and need more validation from their teachers. Validation is the act of recognizing and affirming the feelings or perspectives of another person. It is an acknowledgement that their thoughts and feelings are true (Hall, 2012). Holmes et al. (2000) describe validation in education as a process that needs to be repeatedly used by school staff at different times throughout a student's educational experience. Validation needs to be part of how the schools operate with instructors taking the lead. Thus, students who are marginalized need a steady diet from the adults in schools that their feelings and their thinking are legitimate and welcomed.

Students expressed the desire to feel acknowledged and validated when they walk into the classroom, as expressed by Kevin. "Start with a check-in. Have a conversation about what we have done" (K. Smith, individual check-in, August 21, 2020). A common element in effective teaching is validation (Kougasian, 2019). Teachers must take steps to acknowledge and work with what students bring to the learning environment by demonstrating authentic caring (Valenzuela, 1999). Validation in schools translates to an appreciation and acknowledgement of the uniqueness of each student. The students in the study expressed not feeling important or a part of their educational experience. "Understanding the importance and how to validate the experiences of diverse student populations can provide valuable knowledge for the development

of learning environments that empower all students to succeed and achieve their educational goals” (Hurtado et al., 2011, p. 69).

### ***Students Want to Feel Connected to Their Teachers***

The students want teachers to connect with them better. They expressed that teachers do not ask them how they are doing and, in general, did not open up to them nor share their lives to them. That lack of transparency leads to distancing at the very time in the life of adolescents when they are looking to other adults for ideas about how to be adults. Hernandez (2015) supports a deeper connection between students and educators; to successfully teach students who are struggling with life circumstances and the inability to fit in traditional schooling, connection and trust come first. Teachers need to establish trust with their students and ensure that they know more about their student’s background and stories. According to Immordino-Yang et al. (2019), people often mistake casual familiarity and friendliness for deeper relationships. She advocates for a context that supports the education of the whole child, especially with the relationship of the teacher and student. Instructors must go much deeper with their students to establish meaningful connections that will lead to student engagement. Teachers need to engage with students around their curiosity, their interests, and their habits of mind. Going deeper means that adults have to be vulnerable. This may start with selective vulnerability in which teachers make decisions about what stories to share but should gradually move to increasing vulnerability. As Hammond (2015) says, vulnerability is a “trust generator” for teachers and students.

### ***Students Want Teachers to Teach Differently***

The students identified an overwhelming desire to be taught differently. The students wanted instruction that was more personalized and that met them where they were at emotionally and academically. “Teachers need to inspire. They need to open up. They need to understand

more about the kids, like their expectations of them. Students need help, instead of expecting them to be all ready” (M. Rivas, check-in response, August 21, 2020). The students expressed the desire for instruction that inspired and felt meaningful and relevant. Culturally relevant instruction holds the potential for engaging Youth of Color while making them more critical of the racial injustices that plague our society and school systems (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The development of critical consciousness is an important educational tool through which Youth of Color can both resist the negative effects of racial injustice and challenge its root causes (Seider & Graves, 2020).

While the three findings are important to us in our small context, and I will certainly use these processes in my work with students and adults in alternative education contexts, the study can be relevant for similar contexts. Most certainly, the students moved on the spectrum of student agency from being a source of data to full participation to taking leadership actions (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Combining the participatory action and activist research methodology with popular education practices is a strategy that others should find useful in their contexts (Arnold et al., 1991; Hale, 2008; Hunter et al., 2013).

### **Research Questions and Design: Adapting to Other Contexts**

In responding specifically to the research questions to this study, the findings provided a meaningful response to the questions. In addition, the research design provides a proof of concept that can be used in similar contexts, using the scaling examples of adaptation and innovation (Morel et al., 2019). Engaging the youth directly in the study helped inform the educational community and empower the participants into believing themselves capable of much more.



## ***Research Questions***

The overarching query for the study was how a group of students can work with a school leader to uncover their values, assets, and interests to better understand their individual and collective identities and become more efficacious voices for themselves and other youth. A significant advantage for me as the researcher was my work as a principal at the continuation high school where the study initiated. I knew each of the student participants and had worked closely with them. The established relationships with the students helped with both the selection and with the commitment from each student to the study. Two sub-questions guided the study:

1. Do high school students, who have been traditionally marginalized and underserved, successfully engage in a collaborative process in which they share stories about their beliefs, assets, and interests?
2. Can the students develop individual and the collective identity in order to exhibit agency and self-efficacy through this collaborative process?
3. How can the students design a collaborative project in which they can take collective action for change?

The participation and engagement for the students was successful. They recognized a benefit from the study process and the need for other students to take part in similar work. “You guys should get more groups, from like freshman or sophomore or earlier; it would help out better,” stated Kevin during a reflection on what could improve the process of the study (K. Smith, reflection response, November 25, 2020).

The students demonstrated agency and self-efficacy during the study. It was most evident during the social distancing restrictions that were put in place during the second cycle of the study. Andrea, despite babysitting for the families in her apartment complex, remained

committed to the project and responded to my texts, questions, and phone calls. Even after moving to Minnesota, she remained in contact to support the study as needed. Armando continued to meet with me individually even after he began helping his mother to clean motel rooms. Ronald and Kevin always responded to my texts and phone calls despite moving in and out of the Bay Area due to housing insecurity. Both students' biological mothers lived in the San Francisco Bay area and struggled to provide stable housing for them. They found that the study gave them a sense of hope and purpose. "I feel proud that I was chosen and had a chance to participate. Proud that we can do a change for other students. Understanding the reality of the world we face" (M. Rivas, reflection response, November 25, 2020).

The design for the collaborative project came from the students' desire after Cycle Two, to do something for other students like themselves. The students felt the experience was rewarding, and they wanted a space to speak directly with educators on ways to improve their work with youth in continuation high schools. "The steps we are taking are good. I learned a lot and think we should share this with other students and help teachers understand what we go through" (L. Jones, check-in response, May 10, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic limited our format to an online presentation that could be shared with educators or discussed directly. The initial individual check-ins during Cycle Three and the small group discussion led to the students agreeing on a Zoom training that followed the initial design and discussion format of the study sessions. The students wanted to explore further their personal stories and what they could share as advice for teachers.

### ***Proof of Concept for Expanding Youth Voice***

Proof of concept research is using a specific program or process to demonstrate its feasibility. It is a trial run, a probe to test the waters to see if a process is achievable and

reasonable and how to adapt the design principles to other contexts successfully (Chee-Kit & Seow, 2015; Riddell & Moore, 2015). Our work was proof of concept research because it “provides an attendant proof of principle that is the result of decision-making that extends across practitioners, their tools, techniques, and the problem-solving activities of other research groups” (Kendig, 2015, p. 753). Because student voice in education has consistently been a missing piece in school reform, the research effort, including the process we used to achieve results, has wider applicability than youth in continuation high schools. However, the two critical features in any adaptation are the iterative cycles of inquiry and the popular education stages that center the voices of youth in a pedagogy of dialogue.

Based on the findings from this study, educators not only should abandon harmful deficit thinking about Youth of Color as intellectually inferior and incapable of succeeding academically but also look at themselves and their teaching. As the youth in this study shared and the literature supports, they need teachers who validate them, create meaningful relationships with them, and change their teaching from rote learning to student-focused dialogue. While these are familiar recommendation, we all need to do a better job of doing what Ferlazzo and Sypniewski (2018) argue:

Looking at students through the lens of assets and not deficits guides what we do in the classroom and the choices we make about how to do it. Instruction that is culturally responsive and sustaining explicitly challenges the “deficit” perspective. Rather, students are viewed as possessing valuable linguistic, cultural, and literacy tools. Recognizing, validating, and using these tools—in our experience—ultimately provide the best learning environment for our students and ourselves (p. 352).

The outcome of the study points to the need for opportunities for youth to voice their ideas and a teaching framework that is mindful of the importance of emotional safety and that centers student voice. Ginwright (2016) describes such an approach as healing justice, the commitment of addressing the institutional causes of trauma, along with improving instructional spaces in schools and communities that support student safety and academic growth.

### **Implications**

Next, I turn to the implications for practice, policy, and research. While the research is limited to one continuation high school and a small group of students, the study provides an opportunity to look deeper into what has not worked in the education of Youth of Color in continuation high schools. The findings of the study underscored the importance and possibility of youth voice as a vehicle for changing instructional practices. The study provides an opportunity to revisit our educational system from the student's perspective and to build on what can prove effective for Youth of Color in our classrooms. More importantly, the study advocates for the direct participation of youth when working toward improving practice, policy, and research.

#### **Implications for Practice**

The implication for practice calls for educators in all school settings to approach teaching from a social justice lens. Teachers must seek the full and equitable participation of all their students, regardless of race, class, gender, and sexual identity to meet their needs. In addition, educators need to emphasize educational justice for all students, positive behavior, and effective learning through careful attention to the needs of their students (Lalas & Valle, 2007). Effective teachers in this increasingly diverse society must be social actors with a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others, with education, their

society, the environment, and the broader world in which we live (Bell et al., 2016). Teachers play an important role in either sustaining the status quo that underserves Youth of Color or instead working to counter the injustices.

### **Implications for Policy**

The implication for policy at the macro level begins with the understanding that current education policy is further exacerbating the inequities in our schools and further marginalizing Youth of Color. The economic motivations behind an education policy of preparing students for competition in a labor market economy counters the democratic aims for schooling (Trujillo & Howe, 2015). In addition, the strict accountability measures of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that continued with President Obama's Race to the Top initiative failed to bring about improvements as measured by state accountability metrics. Thus, in addition to the classroom changes, policymakers need to revisit the purpose and effectiveness of standardized curriculum, high stakes testing, and strict accountability policies (Slater & Griggs, 2015). Minthrop and Sunderman (2009) noted the effects of high stakes testing on the lives of student in marginalized communities. Schools in high poverty areas have the most difficulty passing test benchmarks and are most susceptible to sanction-based consequences. Education policy at the macro level must center on the inclusion of young people, their parents, and community members to truly address the needs of the schools (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017).

At the meso level, the implications of the study point to the need for improving teaching and learning by better preparing and developing the educators working with Youth of Color in all settings, which hopefully would reduce the numbers of students recommended for alternative settings. Teacher preparation programs have struggled to effectively arm teacher candidates with effective pedagogies to meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student population (Allen et

al., 2017). In the Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012) report, *Raising the Bar, Building Capacity*, they found that teachers in continuation high schools often mentioned the need for skill development in working with diverse learners, defusing behavioral disruptions and mastering classroom organization and management practices specific to their instructional environments. The report additionally noted the need for teachers to learn how to build trust with their students, “many students come to continuation settings after experiencing unfair or disrespectful treatment in their prior setting” (Ruiz de Velasco & McLaughlin, 2012, p. 19). School districts also need to invest in cultural competency professional learning and prioritize the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. Investments in high quality credentialing programs and a diverse teaching workforce is repaid in reduced teacher turnover and improved learning and achievement for all students (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

The micro level implications highlight the need for youth voice in the classroom and in their schools. Students need to both have the opportunity and feel comfortable speaking in the classroom. Promoting curricula that is culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) and instructional delivery that capitalizes on dialogue are powerful strategies that build on the knowledge of the students. Effective instruction for Youth of Color engages them in the process of learning, builds from their experiences, and makes connections to the content. Hernandez’s (2015) *Real Talk Pedagogy* points to the importance of talking with students in a way that is mindful of how students perceive and make meaning of the world, society, their neighborhood, or school. *Real Talk Pedagogy* centers the voice of at-risk youth: “Educators examine each student’s language perception to create meaningful, relevant curriculum, and learning environments, inclusive of each student’s learning needs (Hernandez, 2015, p. 17).

In this study, the pedagogy I used with the students was rooted in dialogue. They learned from each other through hearing each other's stories. They used a popular education model to put their experiences in the context of larger systems. Their shift in consciousness and growth through this process shows what is possible when we change the ways in which we work with all students.

### **Implications for Research**

The implications for research underscore the need for more youth participation and voice when researching ways to improve the education of Youth of Color. Ginwright and Cammarota (2007) have noted that “research on African-American and Latinx youth has been dominated by studies that focus on ‘problem’ adolescent behavior: youth crime, delinquency, and violence as individual pathological behavior or cultural adaptations stemming from social disorganizations in their communities” (p. 693). Research on the potential of Youth of Color holds promise when it centers on engaging students directly with solving the challenges they face. Cammarota and Fine (2008) proposed Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as one successful approach. Their publication, *Revolutionizing Education*, provides a compilation of examples of how youth take action to resist the normalization of systemic oppression in their communities and schools. Engaging students in praxis (critical and collective inquiry for action), proved to be a powerful approach toward youth development and social justice (Freire, 1970). Research specific to continuation high schools is limited and necessary to begin to shed light into the importance of redefining the negative perspectives that surround most programs and begin the conversation on how to improve them.

## **Leadership Development**

*Even when we try to build up the self, we subvert it for the sake of discipline and conformity. It is almost as if schools demanded, leave yourself, your self-esteem, the confidence accrued from learning to walk and speak, at the door (Bateson, 1994, p. 67).*

My leadership development during this study has been a journey of building up my “self” and contextualizing my experience and role as administrator in an organization that often works counter to its stated goals. It was a process of understanding myself as a person and as a school leader to successfully advocate for the needs of underserved students. It was a journey of reflection that I described when I entered this program as a “battle of emotions,” that is, identifying and coming to terms with those details of my life that have made me who I am and that continue to inform my professional work. I learned to embrace and find courage from my upbringing and from a better understanding of where I am and why I focus on marginalized youth in education. I learned to embrace my parents’ immigrant struggle for integration and to process my challenges as a Brown student navigating an educational system that required me to leave myself, my self-esteem, and confidence at the door.

This journey was one of critical reflection and learning of the shortcomings of our educational system. I learned the importance of engaging Youth of Color in continuation high schools and the hope their voice can bring to the educational system. I describe how the study process reinforced my purpose by making me a more deliberate, engaging, and effective school leader.

### **Deliberate Leadership**

I became a teacher after experiencing the unmet needs of students in a county education program for expelled students. The school was adjacent to my office where I worked after college as a job developer transitioning students from school to work. My first teaching



assignment was in a group home for previously incarcerated youth, a radical concept at the time among my colleagues and family. The stories and life circumstances of the students, primarily Youth of Color, inspired me to pursue a career teaching in alternative education. The need was great and the supports in place were not only inadequate and but, in many cases, counterproductive to the learning of the student. My success as a teacher came from my teaching approach that validated the students for who they were and what they brought to the classroom. My purpose and focus were to give hope to the students by deconstructing the content that seemed foreign to them and ensuring their understanding of the concepts.

Reflecting on my past teaching, I learned that educating Youth of Color requires being radical in our approach as well as radical with our hope. Radical hope, according to Lear (2006), encourages the ability to envision possibilities beyond those handed down by our existing school system. What makes this hope radical is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.

I learned that, as educators, we must believe in the “future good” and in the importance and the potential of all students. Having hope, finding that common ground, and being open to learn from the diverse voices of my students made me an effective educator. Teaching is also about being mindful of our interactions. “The gift of personhood is potentially present in every human interaction, every time we touch or speak or call one another by name, yet denial can be very subtle too, inflicted in the failure to listen, to empathize, to attend” (Bateson, 1994, p. 62).

Every interaction is important in the classroom. They provide opportunities to connect with students and building relationships to leverage their experiences, even negative ones, toward conversations of possibility, personal growth, and future potential. The program and the

study process helped me better understand the needs of the students in the continuation school and to understand the flaws of our educational system. I learned that to truly create the meaningful forms of resistance that Ginwright (2009) refers to, we must have a critical understanding of the structures of domination. I better understand how policy at all levels affects the learning environment and impacts the performance of marginalized youth.

### **Engaging Leadership**

Becoming a more engaging school leader was an important area of my growth during the study. I learned that to better understand and address issues in our schools and improve the educational space for students, we need to engage with all the stakeholders and that I needed to be vulnerable and open to model that for young people. I learned to consider new approaches toward effective leadership that respect the context and the wisdom of the community. An effective engagement in the process of school improvement “respects and honors the local context and wisdom of elders and youth, presses for an asset-based approach rather than a constant focus on deficits, and ultimately leads to highly functional partnerships among schools, students, families, and communities” (Guajardo et al., 2016, p. 70). My approach of “working with” informed the methodology of the study and helped guide my direct involvement of the voices of the students in proposing a more effective educational approach in continuation high schools. The culminating activity from Cycle Three brought together educators from different districts to learn directly from the students. As one educator shared after the listening to the advice of the students:

In light of current challenges, which only compound issues for many students, especially students in alternative education settings, I need to incorporate social-emotional learning practices daily. The circumstances are constantly changing, which makes teacher–student

relationships paramount to the academic success of the students. When considering stakeholder input, student input is often overlooked, but they are the ones most impacted by the decisions of others. (H. Sanchez, listening circle response, October 21, 2020)

My leadership grew from understanding how to effectively engage and work with teachers and students to create opportunities for dialogue between and among teachers and students to improve student and teacher learning. Effective dialogue enables teachers and students to be active in the construction of shared understandings by making explicit the overlap between the perspective held by the student and by the teacher (Kinchin, 2003).

### **Effective Leadership**

In the course of the different job assignments and the research study working directly with youth in a continuation high school, I learned the importance of creating opportunities to engage directly with the students we serve. Improving instruction is more than covering standards and aligning curricula; it is leveraging the voices of students and making them part of the learning process. Becoming an effective instructional leader requires knowing the students and understanding their needs so that I can lead staff toward successfully engaging all students in the classroom. It means knowing where I can be most effective, staying true to my core beliefs, and ensuring that the voices of youth are part of the curriculum and instruction. The project and my leadership journey have shifted my thinking about what is most important and how we might achieve durable results for youth who have been marginalized.

I began the program subscribing to the idea of increased rigor and student engagement through standardization and curriculum alignment, both initiatives mandated by the school district at that time. In my first writing assignment when I began the program, I cited the Center for Public Education (2016):

“It goes without saying that students are not likely to learn subject matter they are not taught. Achieving educational equity, therefore, demands more than just distributing funds more fairly. We must also guarantee that students have equal access to high-level curriculum.”

Guaranteeing equal access to high-level curriculum for me translated primarily to working towards an A-G course alignment, (courses approved for college transfer by the University of California and California State Colleges) that provide the opportunity to college, from the continuation high school where I worked as principal. The approach was more about following a directive and less about understanding the needs of the students. The delivery of rigorous course work aimed at college preparation in the continuation high school took precedence over the needs of the marginalized.

Defining what are rigorous standards for myself and for my staff throughout these past three years has been an area of growth. A report from the Association of California School Administrators (2018) on continuation high schools states that we should apply “more rigorous standards to yourself as an administrator and your faculties than those imposed by the state or district,” is foremost to improve alternative education. I learned that increasing rigor must include conversations with the students that include building their critical consciousness and engaging them directly with the learning process. Relying on the state and district standards to provide the guidance or support will place me at a disadvantage for the immediate work that is required. The study highlighted the oversight that standardization and a focus on test results creates for students when we expect more and fall short on the interventions and on the educational space needed for Youth of Color.

In the course of the study, I have worked in three different administrative positions. I went from site principal to district administrator and now back to site principal. I had mixed emotions about the most recent change. I felt comfortable with my previous position of director of student services, overseeing all aspects of student supports, interventions, and discipline. The position was a commendable professional step; however, the work seemed disconnected from my values and from the actual needs of the students. I recalled feeling that:

My role as a district official [is] more about protecting the district and in some cases covering flaws from site administrators rather than doing what is just and equitable. It is about supporting the school sites with avoiding a public relations mess so that things are perceived as running smoothly. (A. Ramos, personal memo, October 14, 2019)

The job required me to compromise my beliefs for the benefit of the organization. The structures and policies in place did not value the direct work with the students and families but rather focused on sustaining the systems and people in place. That humbling experience taught me the importance of working within an organization that both explicitly and implicitly shares common values (Schwartz, 1992). I have found that working at the site level currently gives me the level of autonomy and authority to be myself and guide teachers in creating an educational space that embraces all the students. I have been able to use my current research as leverage for classroom and school improvement. My leadership is not about subverting my “self” but rather speaking out and advocating aggressively for the needs of marginalized youth with the confidence of knowing intimately their needs.

### **Conclusion**

Through the process of the study, I sought to validate, acknowledge, and honor the hundreds of voices of Youth of Color whom I have taught in juvenile halls, group homes,

community day schools, and continuation high schools. Their voices continue to inform my professional and personal journey. The study provided a platform for personal and collective resistance with and for the Youth of Color in the continuation school where I worked. The findings of the study indicate that it is time to question the perceived need to “continue” instructional delivery in continuation high schools that may serve the interests of the educational system but does little to critically challenge and empower the student.

The findings of this study indicate that youth voice in the schools is of significant importance for the learning process—a learning space where students can speak and learn with and from each other. Youth voice is equally important as a form of self-reflection and personal growth for students in the classroom. The importance of the voices of youth in the classroom is more than a democratic endeavor but rather a moral imperative for teachers to be open to learning from their diverse students to create the equitable learning environments needed in any classroom.

The work is bigger than an isolated principal or teacher. The need to constantly reflect, identify, and challenge oppressive educational practices through the voices of their students is an ongoing challenge that all education practitioners at all levels need to undertake. The absence of student connections and validation in the educational experiences of Youth of Color translates to a micro-aggressive instructional delivery within schools that further marginalizes their presence and voice. We need to humanize the educational environment for Youth of Color by validating and celebrating them. Only then can we improve and heal our society and collective humanity.

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## APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



**EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY**  
**University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board**  
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682  
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834  
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 ·  
[rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/](http://rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/)

### Notification of Amendment Approval

From: Social/Behavioral IRB  
To: [Alejandro Ramos](#)  
CC: [Matthew Militello](#)  
Date: 12/4/2020  
Re: [Ame1\\_UMCIRB 19-001606](#)  
[UMCIRB 19-001606](#)

Listening to the students we are failing: Engaging student voice in continuation high schools.

Your Amendment has been reviewed and approved using expedited review on 12/4/2020. It was the determination of the UMCIRB Chairperson (or designee) that this revision does not impact the overall risk/benefit ratio of the study and is appropriate for the population and procedures proposed.

Please note that any further changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a Final Report application to the UMCIRB prior to the Expected End Date provided in the IRB application. If the study is not completed by this date, an Amendment will need to be submitted to extend the Expected End Date. The investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

#### Description

Study end date extended to 5/21/2021

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

## APPENDIX B: DISTRICT LETTER OF SUPPORT

**BOARD OF EDUCATION**  
Jackie Thu-Huong Wong, President  
Coby Plizzotti, Vice-President  
Preston Jackson, Clerk  
Norma Alcala, Trustee  
Sarah Kirby-Gonzalez, Trustee

**SUPERINTENDENT**  
Linda C. Luna



**DISTRICT OFFICE**  
930 Westacre Road  
West Sacramento, CA 95691

TEL (916) 375-7600  
FAX (916) 375-7619

www.wusd.k12.ca.us

8/26/2019

To Whom It May Concern:

The Washington Unified School District recognizes the benefits of participating in relevant, well-designed research studies proposed by qualified individuals. Approval for conducting this particular study and request is based primarily on the extent to which substantial benefits can be shown for the school, Yolo High School, and its mission of educating students.

The purpose of this letter is to notify you of the **approval** to conduct your dissertation study titled, "Student voice in a continuation high school" with participants in Yolo High School. We also give permission to utilize an agreed upon space between the researchers and the administrator at Yolo High School to collect data and conduct interviews for his dissertation project: Student voice in a continuation high school.

The project meets all of our school/district guidelines, procedures, and safeguards for conducting research on our campus. Moreover, there is an available space for Alejandro Ramos to conduct his study and his project will not interfere with any functions of Yolo High School.

Finally, the following conditions must be met, as agreed upon by the researchers and Yolo High School:

- Participant data only includes information captured from the state data collection strategies.
- Participation is voluntary.
- Participants can choose to leave the study without penalty at any time.
- Any issues with participation in the study are reported to the school administration in a timely manner.
- An executive summary of your findings is shared with the school administration once the study is complete.

In addition to these conditions, the study must follow all of the East Carolina University IRB guidelines. We are excited to support this important work.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Linda Luna".

Linda Luna  
Superintendent



## APPENDIX C: STUDENT ASSENT FORM



### *Assent Form*

*Things You Should Know Before You Agree to Take Part in this Research*

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IRB Study #

Title of Study: Voice of Hope: Youth of Color in continuation high schools.

Person in charge of study: Alejandro Ramos

Where they work: Washington Unified School District

Study contact phone number: 530-383-4683

Study contact E-mail Address: ramosa18@students.ecu.edu

---

People at ECU study ways to make people's lives better. These studies are called research. This research is trying to find out how students can, by learning more about themselves, inform school leaders on a collaborative process that engages student and educators toward improving continuation high school campuses.

Your parent(s) needs to give permission for you to be in this research. You do not have to be in this research if you don't want to, even if your parent(s) has already given permission.

You may stop being in the study at any time. If you decide to stop, no one will be angry or upset with you.

#### **Why are you doing this research study?**

The reason for doing this research is to bring more attention to continuation high schools and to improve the learning that occurs for students.

#### **Why am I being asked to be in this research study?**

We are asking you to take part in this research because you can provide an important perspective to this study.

#### **How many people will take part in this study?**

If you decide to be in this research, you will be one of about ten students taking part in it.

#### **What will happen during this study?**

The study will be composed of group meetings, discussions, interviews, and some observations. The focus will be to learn about the students in a continuation high school, while teaching them to know more about themselves. The activities will be designed to improve the self-efficacy of the student participants.

Check the line that best matches your choice:  
\_\_\_\_\_ OK to record me during the study  
\_\_\_\_\_ Not OK to record me during the study

This study will take place at Yolo High School. It will last three semesters.

**Who will be told the things we learn about you in this study?**

The information collected of this study will remain in a locked location. Your real name will not be disclosed in the study in order to avoid anybody being able to identify you. No other person will have access to the information.

**What are the good things that might happen?**

Sometimes good things happen to people who take part in research. These are called “benefits.” The benefits to you of being in this study may be more informed of your place in society. You will develop tools for advocating for yourself. There is *a good chance* you will benefit from being in this research. We will tell you more about these things below.

**What are the bad things that might happen?**

We don’t know of any risks (bad things) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life.

**What if you or your parents don’t want you to be in this study?**

If you or your parents don’t want you to be in this study, you may be able to help with the logistics of the study. You can help with communication and the setup of the meeting space.

**Will you get any money or gifts for being in this research study?**

You will not receive any money or gifts for being in this research study.

**Who should you ask if you have any questions?**

If you have questions about the research, you should ask the people listed on the first page of this form. If you have other questions about your rights while you are in this research study you may call the Institutional Review Board at 252-744-2914.

-----

If you decide to take part in this research, you should sign your name below. It means that you agree to take part in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sign your name here if you want to be in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print your name here if you want to be in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Assent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Assent  
of Person Obtaining Assent

## APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM



### **Informed Consent to Participate in Research** Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: Voice of Hope: Youth of Color in continuation high schools.

Principal Investigator: Alejandro Ramos  
Address: 949 Ireland St. Winters CA, 95694  
Telephone #: 530-383-4683

---

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

#### **Why am I being invited to take part in this research?**

The purpose of this research is to learn deeply about students in continuation high schools. The study will see how two groups of students working with a school leader can uncover their values, assets, and interests in order to better understand their individual and collective identity. In doing so, how can they lead a collaborative process that engages other students and educators to improve continuation high schools?

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about ten students from two different groups to do so.

#### **Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?**

I understand I should not volunteer for this study if I am not a student at the Yolo High School.

#### **What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?**

You can choose not to participate.

#### **Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?**

The research will be conducted on the Yolo High School campus.

#### **What will I be asked to do?**

You will be asked to do the following:

- Meet as a group six times per semester, during the course of the year (September 2019 – December 2020). These meetings will be no more than 1 hours long, and will consist of additional interviews, workshops, or debrief of the activities.

- Interviews may be recorded to ensure accuracy of data collection. No one, other than I, will have access to the recorded interviews.
- Observation notes, pictures, and artifacts from group activities may be collected as data. This data will be kept until the dissertation is complete and submitted, no later than December 31, 2021.
- Complete a reflection or questions about the group process and activities.

### **What might I experience if I take part in the research?**

We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

### **Will I be paid for taking part in this research?**

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study. However, appropriate beverages and snacks will be provided during our interviews/debriefs.

### **Will it cost me to take part in this research?**

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research.

### **Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?**

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates human research. This includes the Office for Human Research Protections.

### **How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?**

The information I collect will be held in password protected electronic files and/or locked file cabinets until the completion and defense of the dissertation. The information will be kept no longer than December 31, 2021. Electronic data, artifacts, and notes will be destroyed by December 31, 2021. Recordings will only be used for the purposes of research, and triangulation of data. All data will be stripped of identifiers prior to inclusion in the research study.

### **What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?**

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop, and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

### **Who should I contact if I have questions?**

The people conducting this study will be able to answer any questions concerning this research, now or in the future. You may contact the Principal Investigator at 530-383-4683 at any time.

If you have questions about your rights as someone taking part in research, you may call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at phone number 252-744-2914 (days, 8:00 am-5:00 pm). If you would like to report a complaint or concern about this research study, you may call the Director for Human Research Protections, at 252-744-2914.

**Is there anything else I should know?**

Most people outside the research team will not see your name on your research record. This includes people who try to get your information using a court order.

Your information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future studies.

**I have decided I want to take part in this research. What should I do now?**

The person obtaining informed consent will ask you to read the following and if you agree, you should sign this form:

- I have read (or had read to me) all of the above information.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions about things in this research I did not understand and have received satisfactory answers.
- I know that I can stop taking part in this study at any time.
- By signing this informed consent form, I am not giving up any of my rights.
- I have been given a copy of this consent document, and it is mine to keep.

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<b>Participant's Name (PRINT)</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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**Person Obtaining Informed Consent:** I have conducted the initial informed consent process. I have orally reviewed the contents of the consent document with the person who has signed above and answered all of the person’s questions about the research.

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<b>Person Obtaining Consent (PRINT)</b>	<b>Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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