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How performing arts high school students experienced involvement in a Black, student-created and student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists: A critical phenomenological study with implications for culturally responsive and sustaining educational practices

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How performing arts high school students experienced involvement in a Black, student-created
and student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists: A critical
phenomenological study with implications for culturally responsive and sustaining educational
practices

by

Shaneka Ferrell

A Dissertation submitted to the Department of Leadership,
School Counseling & Sport Management
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Doctor of Education

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This dissertation entitled, *How Performing Arts High School Students Experienced Involvement in a Black, Student-Created and Student-Led Organization Focused on Uplifting Black Art and Artists: A Critical Phenomenological Study with Implications For Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Educational Practices*, is approved.

Dr. Christopher Janson, Committee Chair

Dr. Pamela Williamson, Committee Member 1

Dr. Paul Parkison, Committee Member 2

Dr. Tammy Hodo, Committee Member 3

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to Christopher Canaday.

Dear Daddy,

I guess God needed you more than me. But every day, I have made intentional strides to make you proud and uphold the goals and plans we once discussed. You and God must be homeboys up there because I definitely think I have accomplished way more than I could have imagined in these few years you have been gone. But the one goal I knew had to be achieved was becoming Dr. Shaneka R. Ferrell. No matter how hard the days became or how many tears I cried, I knew I had to see this through for you. Thank you for being my angel. Thank you for whispering words of encouragement throughout this entire process. Thank you for sliding in our favorite songs while writing and listening to Pandora (Country Grammar Forever). I miss you so much, daddy. I wish you were here. Life hasn't been the same without you, but I know that you have always been near. Daddy, I did it. We did it. I love you more than words can describe. Your daughter is officially Dr. Shaneka Ferrell

*Love always,
Pumpkin*

This is dedicated to Black Arts.

Dear Black Arts Creatives,

You are the epitome of Resiliency. You are the embodiment of Courage. You are the essence of Black Joy. The way you all revel in the face of adversity and advocate for the needs of the Black community is commendable. I feel an overwhelming need to tell you thank you for never giving up and for always standing in your Black truth. Each day you all showed up and shared your voice, your vision, and what being unapologetically Black truly meant. Your calls for liberation and justice sparked a fire in me that I will never let dim. I pray that I did your voices and experiences justice within my dissertation. So I honor you. I celebrate you. As a Black Arts member said, "We no longer have to fit the mold, because we are the mold." And that's on PERIODT.

*Love Always,
Dr. Ferrell*

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Abstract

This critical phenomenological study aims to understand the perspectives and experiences of members of Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists. The following research question guided this inquiry: What are the experiences of students involved in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists? In addition, three sub-questions will be explored: (a) How do students experience their involvement in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting African American art and artists in ways that uplift and magnify their voices and agency? (b) How do student experiences in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists, inform deficit perspectives often held toward Black students and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted? (c) How do student experiences in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists, inform deficit perspectives often held toward Black art and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted?

Arts-based Culturally Responsive and Sustaining conceptual framework served as the pedagogical lens for understanding members of the Black Arts organization's experiences. The data collection methods utilized to collect data from nine participants were semi-structured interviews and Community Learning Exchanges. The data was analyzed with the use of a phenomenological approach of Colaizzi's (1978), a method for bracketing and analyzing data through utilizing a multi-step process.

The exploration of this under-researched area lobbied for the influence of culturally responsive and sustaining practices at performing and visual arts schools as well as K-12 schools serving a diverse population of students. The findings provided insight into four main themes: (a)

Student perception of school: Inside and outside of Black Arts, (b) emancipatory resistance, (c) collective action, and (d) art as transformation. The findings are presented along with suggestions for future research to build upon culturally responsive and sustaining practices in K-12 and performing and visual arts schools.

Chapter I: Introduction

“We are your legacy even as we establish our own. We innovate: we will not ventriloquize the desires of society. We build society. We excel in every word, every brush stroke, every beat and step and music note. We carry art like we carry crowns on our heads. All us artists: may we live long. may we identify ourselves in every space we enter. may we venture where no one dared to before. May we elevate each other, always. May we amplify, legitimize, and idealize, vindicate and exemplify: Black Art.”

– Black Art Member

Achieving educational equity in schools with diverse learners is a national challenge that, among other things, requires effective culturally responsive and sustaining practices within classrooms, schools, and school districts. Equity challenges exist in most K-12 schools, but the challenges in performing and visual arts schools are distinct. Like most school cultures and norms, regardless of the racial and ethnic compositions of students and staff, those in performing and visual arts schools often reflect White, Western European cultural traditions, and histories (Unkefer et al., 2021). Irvine (2002) explained that the predominately European curriculum requires transformation by incorporating culturally responsive practices where the subject matter is viewed from multiple perspectives, including the lens of oppressed and disenfranchised groups.

Boykin (1994) posited that typical U.S. schools and classrooms are comprised of Eurocentric paradigms, with certain philosophies, systems, and perspectives that are deeply engrained in school processes, practices, and policies. Performing and visual arts are no different in this respect. These Eurocentric school and classroom paradigms, philosophies, systems, and perspectives create barriers for students who are not from European ethnic backgrounds. One strategy researchers and scholars have identified to help address the challenges experienced by students of color is the use of culturally responsive and sustaining practices. For example, Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2002) argued the strong need for culturally responsive

practices in schools and classrooms. Culturally responsive practices function in ways that “acknowledge the specific academic, cultural, and social needs of culturally unique, minoritized students” (Khalifa, 2013, p. 64). Culturally sustaining practices builds on this pedagogy by viewing schools as a place where a student’s language and cultural ways of being within their communities of color are sustained (California Department of Education, 2022).

While research has illustrated the important impact of culturally responsive and sustaining practices in schools generally, less is known about the ways in which performing and visual arts schools can respond to the cultural backgrounds and artistic gifts of students from diverse backgrounds. Performing and visual arts schools encourage students to make artistic choices and engage in artmaking as individuals and as a group, allowing students to be the center of their learning (Moore, 2016). Culturally responsive and sustaining practices encourage a student-centered approach that promotes a multicultural learning environment that can motivate diverse students to excel. When taught through students’ cultural lens, ethnically diverse students are more likely to succeed (Hammond, 2015).

This study aimed to learn about and from the perspectives of former performing and visual arts students who together share experiences through their involvement in an anonymized Black Arts organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists. For the continuation of this research study, the Black Arts organization will be referred to as the Black Arts organization. Students originally developed the Black Arts organization to address inequities they perceived within their school in terms of public opportunities to showcase their art and gifts. Over the years, similar sentiments and motivations have sustained the organization. Over this time, this organization has figured prominently among diverse students within the school as well as diverse community members and culminates each year in two days of highly acclaimed performances.

As a researcher, my motivation for this critical phenomenological research study, focused on surfacing and examining student experiences being a part of this Black Arts organization, is rooted in the idea that more formal or traditional educational practices in this school and other performing and visual arts schools like it, as well as any high school serving diverse student populations, might be informed by the practices developed and enacted by the diverse youth and the Black cultural perspectives, values, and approaches they represent. This chapter describes the focus of practice for this study, overview statement of my research purpose, overview of the conceptual framework and research methodology, and the significance of this research.

Focus of Practice

The focus of practice is to understand the perspectives and experiences of former members of Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization whose mission is to uplift Black art and artists. Supporting literature stated the importance of educator-student relationships and considers the importance of relational trust in schools (Rooda et al., 2011). Fostering a ‘sense of belonging’ aligns with increased student motivation (Walton & Cohen, 2007), engagement (Mitra, 2009), and self-efficacy (Love, 2010). Recognizing and celebrating students' cultural and linguistic values, beliefs, traditions, and customs, strengthens their sense of belonging and increases student voice and agency (Highlander Institute, 2021). Mitra (2018) asserted that improving student agency and creating opportunities for student voice leads to more meaningful school-based experiences.

In recent decades, an increased amount of research and scholarship has focused on understanding how public education can better serve racially diverse student populations. The notion of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy has gained prominence in this era, led by scholarship of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), Bell Hooks (1994) and Geneva Gay (2000).

These “scholars outlined the principles of education as a practice that questions: What is knowledge? Whose knowledge is the ‘right’ knowledge? Who gets to teach it and who gets to learn? And most importantly: Who benefits from (this) knowledge?” (Martin & Smolcic, 2019, p. 1). The aim of these questions is to reframe the educational practices and curriculum that were created and sustained to benefit those of European descent. Despite the large number of scholarly articles and studies that have been done on improving educational equity in K-12 schools, there is a gap in the literature that specifically focuses on educational practices at performing and visual arts schools as well as culturally responsive and sustaining practices specifically for Black students.

Performing and visual arts K-12 schools are growing at a rapid pace across the United States (Daniel, 2000). These schools were created to provide students with an intensive artistic curriculum that focused on a specific arts area: cinematic arts/film, creative writing, dance, instrumental music, theatre, visual arts, and vocal music. It is recommended that students spend at least 40% of their school day engaged in arts education (Daniel, 2000). As found in K-12 educational systems, the curriculum in performing and visual arts school raises concerns that curriculum is delivered from white or European norms (Kraehe et al., 2018) which has a direct correlation with student’s lack of sense of belonging and engagement, that may contribute to the academic achievement gap (Mitra, 2009).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this critical phenomenological study is to obtain an understanding of the perspectives and experiences of former members of Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists. Through a critical phenomenological research design, I provided opportunities for participants to share and reflect

on their artistic, academic, social, and emotional experiences during their membership in the Black Arts organization. How participants make meaning of their experiences may hold implications for performing and visual arts schools and public K-12 schools serving racially and ethnically diverse students to become more culturally responsive and sustaining.

Research Questions

The following research question will guide this study:

- What are the experiences of students involved in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists?

In addition, three sub-questions will be explored:

- How do students experience their involvement in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting African American art and artists in ways that uplift and magnify their voices and agency?
- How do student experiences in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists inform deficit perspectives often held toward Black students and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted?
- How do student experiences in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists inform deficit perspectives often held toward Black art and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted?

Overview of Conceptual Framework

For this critical phenomenological study exploring how students experienced their membership in the Black Arts organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists, I developed a conceptual framework from extant literature on culturally responsive and culturally sustaining pedagogy and educational practices. At their core, conceptual frameworks are interconnected

sets of constructs that may have originated from social or educational models, theories, or other existing literature. I then synthesized these constructs in order to conceptualize how the phenomenon that are the focus of the research functions. Conceptual frameworks serve several purposes in educational research. First, they help the researcher determine and develop the research design and aims of their studies. Second, it details the core constructs of a study and the relationship between them (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Third, the conceptual framework is used during the data analysis process to help frame researcher meaning-making efforts. Across these purposes, the conceptual framework is an integrating process that generates the focus of the research as it is informed and shaped by it (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016).

In developing this study's conceptual framework comprised of ideas and constructs affiliated with culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, I used the Highlander Institute's (2021) Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogy (CRSP) Conceptual Framework's principles of culturally responsive practices to develop three themes: student sense of belonging, student voice and agency, and Black joy. The rationale for the inclusion of these themes or constructs from the CRSP framework to create the conceptual framework for this study is that they each seem to reflect sentiments that have been expressed by students who have been members of the Black Arts organization as well as by audience members attending their annual performing and visual arts performances. The research posited that these same constructs will assist in the development of the research design for this study, help situate the literature review, and provide a valuable lens through which emergent themes or findings from this study might help inform the education of Black students in performing and visual arts schools and contribute to the critical discourse and development of culturally responsive and sustaining practices and procedures in schools.

Overview of Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used to explore the experiences of participants who were members of the Black Arts organization nested at a predominately white performing and visual arts high school. The specific methodology chosen for this study is rooted in critical phenomenology. Phenomenological research describes and understands individuals' subjective accounts of their lived experience about a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gupta, 2021). Further, by incorporating a critical lens, this study will draw on many of the elements of critical pedagogy and critical constructivism through its emphasis on systems of power and emphasis on social justice and agency, as well as the intersubjectivity across study participants.

I used purposeful sampling to identify participants for this study. Selection criteria included being a member of the Black Arts organization for at least one year, and graduated from the performing and visual arts high school in which the organization was created. The number of participants was nine to create the conditions of saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collection methods included Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs), semi-structured interviews, member check interviews, and reflective memos. All CLEs and interviews were conducted via Zoom as this platform generated both recordings and transcriptions. These transcriptions were reviewed and compared to the recordings for accuracy. Data analysis began with the implementation of Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological approach, a method for bracketing and analyzing data through utilizing a multi-step process. Data analysis continued with the development of codes, which lead to the development of higher-level theoretical constructs, or categories, which in turn lead to the development of themes through which I explored "patterns, connections, and higher-order themes" (Saldaña, 2021, p. 271). Lastly, I

created the conditions for participant validation strategies (Barbour, 2001) including member checking regarding emergent categories and themes.

Significance of the Research

One of the ways educational equity is pursued is by educators employing culturally responsive practices which allows educators to connect with students in meaningful, relevant, and effective ways (Gay, 2000; Griner & Stewart, 2012). “Teachers not only acknowledge but also celebrate and incorporate the cultural heritages of students within instruction, they recognize varied learning preferences and styles, and they implement a variety of instructional strategies to teach all students” (Reif & Grant, 2010, pp. 100-101). While many educators believe that culturally responsive practices are a vital link in educating diverse learners (Griner & Stewart, 2012), there is a gap in the literature of clear examples and tools for culturally responsive and sustaining practices employed at performing and visual arts schools as well as practices specifically pertaining to Black students. This study is designed to examine and learn from participant experiences as members of Black Arts, an innovative organization that was birthed because of student perceptions of pervasive racism in their school, including discriminatory practices in their arts discipline training and courses, as well as an unrepresentative multicultural curriculum. These participant experiences are important for several reasons. First, the creation and continuation of the Black Arts organization of which all participants were members represents a powerful example of student voice and agency - two components of student development that are increasingly identified as being associated with positive outcomes for students, schools, and communities. Lastly, this study has implications for performing and visual arts schools and other K-12 schools serving Black students, striving to better engage student

voice, activate student agency, and develop more culturally responsive and culturally sustaining practices in schools and classrooms.

Organization of the Study

This study aimed to explore the experiences of students involved in the Black Arts organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists. Chapter 2 of this study is a review of professional literature associated with elements of this research topic and research questions. Chapter Two will begin with a review of literature that supported the development of this study's conceptual framework involving an arts-based culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy. Key themes synthesized in this conceptual framework utilized for this study were sense of belonging, student voice and agency, and Black joy. Next, the literature review will analyze literature related to performing and visual arts schools in the United States. Last, the literature review will include a description and review of pertinent historical contexts of Black artistic movements in the United States. These historical contexts will include analyses and discussion of Black Americans' fight for liberation through the utilization of performing and visual arts, followed by how the performing and visual arts can enhance a Black aesthetic that sought to remove the white gaze from art.

Next, Chapter Three of this study described the methodological design for this study, including the rationale. This description included an exploration of important components of the critical phenomenological methodological approach. This methods chapter described the study's proposed researcher practices and procedures, including participant recruitment and selection procedures, data collection processes and sources, and finally, data analysis. This chapter will conclude with the researcher identifying their positionality and limitations to the study. Chapter Four presents the findings of the study, while Chapter Five contains a discussion of the findings

and their relevance to arts education and culturally responsive practices, as well as recommendations and implications for practice, and research.

Chapter Summary

Existing literature strongly indicates the importance of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy (CRSP). When students who identify as Black know and see that their cultural values and beliefs are recognized within the classroom and at their school, their sense of belonging and their identity develops which in turn could positively influence their educational outcomes. The culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy conceptual framework used highlights the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging, developing student ownership through student voice and agency, and promoting Black joy, to build the capacity of teachers and students to disrupt inequitable systems and create more responsive and self-directed learning environments (Highlander Institute, 2021). The potential consequences of educators' failure to implement CRSP could be detrimental to the learning of students of color (Bond, 2017). As such, this study aims to understand the perspectives and experiences of former members of the Black Arts organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists and how participants make meaning of their experiences may hold implications for performing and visual arts schools and K-12 schools serving racially and ethnically diverse students to become more culturally responsive and sustaining.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

This qualitative study aimed to explore how an emergent Black Arts organization that focused on uplifting Black art and artists and its implications for culturally responsive and sustaining educational practices. This chapter outlines the contextual framework, and explores and analyzes scholarly literature in several pertinent domains, including Black arts in the United States the context of performing and visual arts schools and arts education.

Chapter Two begins with identification of the contextual framework, culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, and the key components of sense of belonging, student voice and agency, and Black joy will be discussed. Next, I examined Black artwork and art forms in the United States, Black artistic movements, and how these movements enhanced Black identity, thus leading to a Black aesthetic. Lastly, I present the literature on the history of performing and visual arts schools. This exploration includes a discussion of performing arts in the United States, establishing performing and visual arts schools, and concludes with race relations in arts education.

Conceptual Framework: Arts-Based Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Framework

Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2002) stated that there are cultural factors that educators must be cognizant of to maximize the educational success of Black students and other students of color. The culture of schools in the United States were created based on the norms and values of white, middle-class families, and practices have been woven into the fabric of the educational system and are evident today (Paris & Alim, 2017). The lack of cultural synchronization between school culture and the cultures represented by students may lead to inadequate instruction, misunderstanding of actions, stereotyping, and viewing from a deficit lens (Howard-Vital, 1991; Irvine, 1990).

As the sociocultural makeup of the United States has become more racially, ethnically, culturally, linguistically, and economically (RECLE) diverse, public-school classrooms are mirroring the demographic shifts. The National Center for Education Statistics' enrollment data indicates that 52% of the nation's public K-12 students are students of color. Yet, while the population of students in U.S. schools has continued to become more diverse, the historical 'colorblindness' (Irvine, 2002) of education has produced greater achievement gaps between white students and students of color (National Education Policy Center, 2014). In response to the shift, researchers urge educators to look deeper than a students' gender and race and determine how to '...bridge divides between students' experiences in their homes and communities and those in their classrooms and schools" (Darvin, 2018, p. 2). To bridge divides, educators must work to develop and implement pedagogies that are adaptable to meet the diverse needs of students, where their cultural multiplicities are recognized, incorporated, and sustained (Polleck et al., 2021).

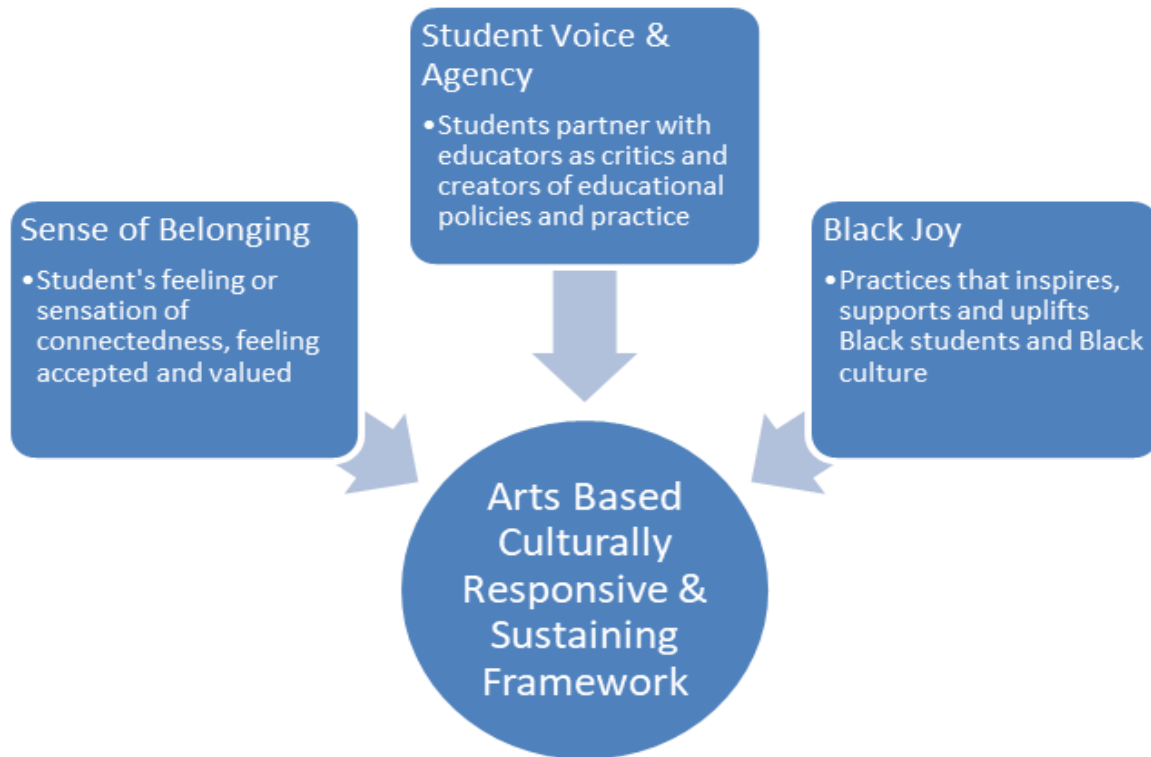
The conceptual framework within which this study is situated is informed by the Highlander Institute's Culturally Responsive & Sustaining Pedagogy (CRSP) Framework to serve as a foundation to build upon the framework to explore how CRSP can foster conditions of teaching and learning of Black students and other students of color. Grounded in the prior research of scholars such as Gay, Ladson-Billings, Alim, and Paris, the authors outlined four major themes within their framework: 1) *awareness*, 2) *community building*, 3) *cognitive development*, and 4) *critical consciousness*, and how these interrelated factors build the capacity of teachers and students to disrupt inequitable systems and allow students to take ownership of their learning process (Highlander Institute, 2021). *Awareness* encompasses educators uncovering their biases, acknowledging their own sociopolitical position, and how to affirm the

multifaceted identities students bring to the classroom. *Community building* encompasses fostering a socially and intellectually safe space through developing teacher-student and student-student relationships that develops trust and a sense of belonging. *Cognitive development* encompasses knowing how to strengthen and expand student's intellectual capacity by building on their personal and cultural strengths. *Critical Consciousness* encompasses engaging in critical action to recognize systems of inequalities and work to disrupt these systems, while students feel motivated to promote justice.

Culturally responsive and sustaining practices build on the cultures of traditionally marginalized populations and utilize it as a strength to make learning more relevant while sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2017). This section provides a framework for the expanding body of literature that seeks to make not only teaching, but rather the entire school culture, responsive and sustaining to the educational needs of students of color. Building on this contextual framework through a culturally responsive and sustaining lens, based on the literature the researcher will expound on the necessity of a sense of belonging, student voice and student agency, and Black joy. Figure 1 provides a visual representation on how each of these tenets relate to an Arts Based Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Framework.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

To understand the spirit of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP; also referred to as culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally responsive instruction, or culturally responsive teaching), the researcher turns to seminal scholars in the field of study, such as Ladson-Billings' *Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy* (1995) and Gay's *Culturally Responsive Teaching:*

Figure 1*Arts-Based Culturally Responsive & Sustaining Conceptual Framework*

Theory, Research, and Practice (2010). Ladson-Billings coined the phenomenon of culturally responsive pedagogy during a study of eight highly effective African American teachers. The study sought to test whether teachers can accept and affirm students of color's cultural identity while helping develop the skills necessary to maximize their prospects for academic success (Borrero et al., 2018). As additional literature on surrounding topics such as institutional racism, equity, and academic achievement of students of color grew, culturally responsive pedagogy continued to develop and expand. Gay hypothesized that students feel heard, validated, have a greater capacity to learn, and are more willing to be involved in their learning environment when educators are responsive to their diverse needs (Abacioglu et al., 2020).

During the early 1990s, researchers recognized that educators have historically underestimated the potential for academic success and viewed students of color through a deficit lens (Will & Najarro, 2022). Black students were not receiving equitable educational experiences when compared to their white peers, as educators held lower expectations and recognized cultural differences as barriers rather than assets to learning (Muñiz, 2019). Culturally responsive pedagogy involves practices that acknowledge, respond to, and celebrate different cultures, and offer full equitable access to education for a diverse student population (Alhanachi et al., 2021). Literature suggests that with the growing diversity in K-12 schools (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022), educators should effectively implement a culturally responsive approach to meet the needs of students of color (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019a) as it aids in addressing the achievement gap and bridges divides between experiences outside and inside of school (Alhanachi et al., 2021). This process requires educators to use the “cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (Abacioglu et al., 2020, p.737).

Culturally responsive pedagogy is validating, emancipatory, and comprehensive (Gay, 2000). As students construct their own knowledge, a constructivist practice, their learning becomes an emancipatory process (University at Buffalo, 2022). Culturally responsiveness helps to keep students from being subject to Paulo Freire’s ‘Banking’ concept of education where educators are depositing information into students (Freire, 1970). Instead, educators are leveraging students’ cultures and funds of knowledge to demonstrate learning in ways that sustain their cultural identities.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Many educators and researchers have demonstrated the utility of culturally sustaining pedagogies (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Watson, 2012). A goal of culturally sustaining pedagogy is to empower historically and socially marginalized students through various teaching strategies, including using curricular content that is connected to students' lives and experiences outside of school (Gay, 2000), honoring, respecting, and validating students' home culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and engaging students (in partnership with their teachers) in a collective struggle against the status quo. Ladson-Billings (1995) argues that for teachers to do this effectively, they need to have prolonged immersion in the culture in which they teach and must be cognizant of themselves as political beings.

Deficit approaches to education views languages, literacies, and cultural ways by students of color as deficiencies that should be replaced by learning the dominant language, literacy, and cultural ways of schooling (Paris, 2012). These mainstream practices are aligned with those of the white, middle-class norms and anything outside of those norms were deemed as less-than and unworthy of a place in schools (Paris, 2012). The artistic work, language, and cultural practices that highlighted Black reality, Black joy, and Black identity was to be replaced with what was viewed as superior.

Vast research demonstrates the importance and effectiveness of culturally sustaining pedagogy for improving outcomes for students of color (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Boston Public Schools, 2106; California Department of Education, 2022; Hammond, 2015; Paris & Alim, 2017). Culturally sustaining pedagogy requires practices to be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences but requires educators to not only honor the culture and practices students bring to the classroom but also seek to sustain and strengthen them (Paris,

2012). The public school district in Boston, Massachusetts believes in the importance of culturally and linguistically sustaining practices to be implemented and requires this of all educators per their annual teacher evaluation. Teacher's annual evaluations requires them to "intentionally seek racial and cultural equity and pluralism in order to deliberately tailor district-wide norms, policies and practices to affirm the identities of and expand opportunities for historically marginalized students" (Boston Public Schools, 2106). By going deeper than connecting to a student's cultural heritage and connecting to their current life (Freeman & Freeman, 2004), it seeks to honor and maintain a student's cultures, literacies, and backgrounds (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Sense of Belonging

Decades of empirical research on the construct of belonging highlights that students who have a sense of belonging are more likely to have positive outcomes academically and psychologically (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021; Gray, et al., 2018). The need for social belonging, or seeing oneself as socially connected, is a basic human motivation (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Strayhorn (2019) defines belonging as:

Sense of belonging refers to students perceived social support, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to a faculty, staff, and peers (p. 4).

A significant number of studies have focused on Black students and their lack of belonging at predominately white, post-secondary institutions (Hausmann, et al., 2007; Park-Taylor, 2022; Parker & Flowers, 2003; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Members of historically excluded ethnic groups are more likely to view schools as a place where they are numerically under-represented, especially in positions of authority (United States Census Bureau, 2019), encounter overt and

subtle forms of prejudice (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Harber, 1998; Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005), and receive lower grades (Grotsky & Pager, 2001; Steele, 1997).

How students feel about their school culture and climate impacts their educational involvement and achievement (Bottiani & Bradshaw, 2016). These views suggest that to engage and be successful in school, it is essential that students from ethnic minority groups develop a sense of belonging in the school setting. Creating a strong sense of belonging requires educators to do more than celebrate diversity (Bond, 2017). Practices that affirm students' multifaceted identities and sustain cultural knowledge and norms are critical (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Borck, 2020). Culturally responsive and sustaining practices (CRSP) must be implemented by all educators and must move beyond implementation in the classroom setting, but also creating spaces that could cultivate and extend the culture, history, and experiences of students (Nguyen, 2020).

Culturally sustaining practices focuses on nurturing a culture of trust and belonging (Highlander Institute, 2021). Studies have found that culturally sustaining spaces embedded within culture organizations (some literature calls them affinity groups) and community-based organizations that are created with students of color, help develop their cultural identity and increases their sense of belonging (Nguyen, 2020; Weaver, 2021). These spaces protect students' cultural realities (Ngo, 2015) and allows engagement with socio-political issues plaguing their community (Nguyen, 2020). Tatum (2003) posits that cultural groups are necessary for a healthier educational setting. "Racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism. Joining with one's peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy (Carter, 2007)." They can become a space for mobilization, where

students learn and critically think about policies and practices affecting them in and out of the school environment.

Additional studies focused on sense of belonging through the enactment of cultural groups found: Oto and Chikkatur (2019) cultural groups must be created when students of color are unable to engage in culturally affirming practices that challenges norms of conventional education; Watson (2012) stated that cultural groups found on the praxis of love, community, and belonging can empower students of color and support them to realize their full potential, while Weaver (2021) found that students affirm their racial identity and are able to “renew their spirits and recover themselves” (p. 42) within these groups. These cultural groups create a culturally sustaining space environment centered on students of color cultural identity and experiences which develops a stronger sense of belonging (Nguyen, 2020).

Education reform efforts often overlook or minimize the importance of school climate and sense of belonging to student achievement (Berkowitz et al., 2017). Educators and stakeholders have held the notion that Black students need additional enrichment initiatives to minimize the achievement gap, however more recent studies highlight the greater focus should be on improving racial equity through school connectedness and belonging (Reginal, 2021). Students whose home culture is reflected in the school culture are more likely to experience belonging, while those whose culture is neither represented nor sustained in the school culture are more likely to experience marginalization (Borck, 2020). Understanding the sense of belonging as it relates to students of color is essential, as studies show that students of color are more likely to question their level of belonging in an educational setting (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Implementing culturally responsive and sustaining practices, such as cultural groups, aids

in the development of student's sense of belonging which supports the reimagining of educational systems that has systematically oppressed, and silenced students of color.

Student Voice and Agency

Integration and equality movements of the 1960s sought educational reform for students of color to access the same resources and supports as their peers. Despite these efforts, educational experiences, and outcomes for students of color have been less favorable when compared with the majority (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). An analysis from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2022) Data Collection highlights the continuing wide disparities in experiences and opportunities in public schools in the United States. Students of color often internalize this script of individualized failure as they are not offered an alternative lens or explanation to view their school experiences that are a result of school processes that are not culturally responsive and sustaining (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). However, empirical research demonstrates that when students are exposed to alternative lenses of analyses, they are more likely to reframe these thoughts of "individual" failures and form partnerships with adults to organize on issues in the school (Youth United for Change, 2011).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire emphasizes the difference between practices created *with* the oppressed versus *for* the oppressed. Members of the oppressed population need to be "engaged in the fight for their own liberation" and "be among the developers of this pedagogy" (Freire, 1996, pp. 35-36). Interest in student voice and student agency has been advocated for decades (Morgan, 2011) but more recently has surfaced as a priority in secondary and higher education (Black & Mayes, 2020). Turning attention to student voice stipulated the students' right to have a level of say on matters impacting their lives (Flutter, 2007), as well as their views and thoughts being given consideration in decision making (Lundy, 2007).

Partnerships between youth and adults are established in a variety of organizations such as businesses, government agencies, and community-based organizations. Within these partnerships, youth are granted an opportunity to participate on advisory councils, develop projects, and advocate to implement change (Mitra, 2009). Despite the growing number of organizations creating platforms for student voice, it is often absent in the institutions of greatest importance to youth, schools.

Students of color hold intimate knowledge about the policies and practices that reproduce institutional racism in educational settings. Studies indicate that educators historically hold lower expectations for students of color, which may impact academic and social/emotional outcomes (Zeldin et al., 2007). Possibilities arise to address manifestations of systemic racism when students of color engage in student voice efforts (Bertrand, 2014). Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011), youth activist scholars, highlight high school youths' capacity for "strategic thinking, decision-making, and collective problem-solving. Many youths of color experience contradictions between mature, adult-like roles they play in their families—caring for siblings, contributing to family income, or translating for parents—and their limited roles in school" (Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011, p. 1636).

Student voice in schools is a set of approaches that grants students the opportunity to partner with educators as critics and creators of educational policies and practices (Cook-Sather, 2020). This work entails positioning students to "identify and analyze issues related to their schools and their learning that they see as significant (Fielding & Bragg, 2003, p. 4) and to have their voices considered regarding their learning and learning environment (Quinn & Owen, 2016). Student voice in conjunction with student agency allows not only students insights to be

heard but grants students the power to be a part of meaningful processes of analyzation of teaching and learning and school culture and climate (Cook-Sather, 2020).

Student voice initiatives have demonstrated positive developmental outcomes including increases in student agency, sense of belonging, and competence (Cook-Sather, 2020; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011). The development of student agency positions students as “social actors and experts on their own lives” (Nelson, 2015). Student voice and agency in school does not aim to replace educational professionals but rather to give students the opportunity to work alongside educators to share their experiences and perspectives to maximize and democratize education:

By sharing power with students, by listening to them and seeking to follow their advice, we have learned that educators, researchers, and policy makers are more likely to promote contexts through which the voiceless have voice, the powerless have power and from such spaces hope can emerge. (Freire, 1996, p. 491)

Research has pointed to a promising interface bridging student voice, student agency and the concept of closing the achievement gap between white students and students of color. Mitra (2018) studied the role of student voice in secondary school reform. It’s noted the ways in which the United States is distinct and lagging other countries in the incorporation of student voice in educational decisions. Student voice efforts can improve student learning and agency (Conner & Slattery, 2014), deepen implementation of reform efforts (Kushman, 1997), enhance school culture (Lynch & Lodge, 2002; Scales et al., 2004), and spark teacher learning (Cook-Sather, 2001). Research also argues the need for educators to expand their thoughts of what is considered voice as it should also include forms of art such as, “poetry, hip-hop, and protest” (Mitra, 2018, p. 480; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2014).

One of the most prolific models of student voice and agency is the “Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together” (YATST) organization created by Helen Beattie. In this secondary organization educators and students work in tandem to understand, analyze and problem-solve issues impacting the learning environment (YATST, 2022). YATST fosters engagement through student-led faculty meetings where they presented their 4-Rs framework (rigor, relevance, relationships, and shared responsibility), disaggregated school data, initiated student feedback surveys that focused on classroom instruction, and student-led principal roundtable discussions that included student representatives in the decision-making process (Cook-Sather, 2020; YATST, 2022).

These student voice and agency efforts are examples of secondary students’ capacity to offer their perspectives on their learning experience and inform decisions that will make a positive impact. “A school is just a building. Schools become places of belonging and agency when all the different voices are heard” (Riley, 2019). While these research approaches are essential for all students, they are particularly paramount for students of color (Mitra, 2018). The development of educator-student relationship fosters an environment where educators view student perspectives and identities as a learning asset (Highlander Institute, 2021), can improve self-efficacy, academic achievement, sense of belonging, and produce Black joy (Love, 2019).

Black Joy

“Black joy is finding your homeplace and creating homeplaces for others”
(Love B. , 2019)

Students of color experience race across the emotional spectrum, from hate to joy to desolation to sorrow. Joy can be defined as “the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). “Joy” does

not often appear in research about Black students' experiences in secondary schools. However there has been an increase in studies pertaining to positive post-secondary outcomes; including culturally responsive and sustaining practices such as sense of belonging (Hausmann et al., 2007; Parker & Flowers, 2003; Strayhorn, 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2007), and student voice and agency (Cook-Sather, 2020; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Lundy, 2007), which are related to students' joy:

Choosing joy for Black scholars is the act of choosing to be whole in spite of what the Academy would rather us be: finding delight in self-expression when our voices are often interpreted as combative or aggressive, reveling in the reaction of the intended audiences of our work rather than the critiques of those who would intentionally misunderstand it, wearing our hair however we please in spite of the pressure of respectability. (Stringfield, 2022, p. 19)

Bettina Love (2019) describes Black joy as collective memories of resistance, trauma, survival, love, and cultural modes of expression, which push and expand antiracist practices and pedagogies. She writes:

The hashtags #BlackGirlMagic, #BlackBoyJoy, #BlackGirlsRock, #CareFreeBlackKids, #BlackManJoy, and #BlackJoyProject are not just social media gimmicks or trends; they are what's needed for resistance, freedom, healing, and joy. Joy is crucial for social change; Joy is crucial for teaching. Finding joy amid pain and trauma is the fight to be fully human. A revolutionary spirit that embraces joy, selfcare, and love is moving towards wholeness. Acknowledging joy is to make yourself aware of your humanity, creativity, self-determination, power, and ability to love abundantly. (Love, 2019)

Love (2019) argues that students should not only be educated on the torment and oppression faced by Black people, but also about the resilience, creativity, and humanity of this community of people. Given the continuance of racism in society (Bell, 1992) and the educational inequities Black people endure (Bond, 2017; Du Bois, 1903; Gay, 2000), Black joy is necessary. Black joy involves resistance, love, feeling seen, and the feeling of being Black and free (Dillard, 2019; Love, 2019). When students of color feel seen, included, and supported by their teachers and peers it nurtures a strong academic mindset and creates a culture of thinking, which are components of Highlander Institutes Culturally Responsive and Sustaining framework (2021). Salmon (2008) conducted a study on promoting a culture of thinking in youth where she found that students who are a part of classrooms with strong cultures of thinking are found to be more engaged, eager to engage in exploration of new concepts, and are better situated for higher-order thinking and problem solving (Highlander Institute, 2021).

Educators must commit to an educational system that embraces Black joy, while disrupting and enlarging normative practices (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017) in education. By acknowledging the antiblackness of traditional education and how Black students exist in, relate to, and encounter varying qualities of normative schooling (Brown & Brown, 2021), a greater focus can be placed on enabling antiracist practice and dismantling the inequitable practices ingrained in educational policies, procedures, and curriculum. Centering Black joy within antiracist pedagogies allows Black students to be more than their struggles and setbacks, and to see Black folk creativity, imagination, healing, and ingenuity as a vital part of liberation (Love, 2019).

“The opposite of anti-Blackness is not pro-Black, it’s Black joy” (Love, 2010, p. 155).

Poet Nikki Giovanni said:

Style has a profound meaning to Black Americans. If we can't drive, we will invent walks and the world will envy the dexterity of our feet. If we can't have ham, we will boil chitterlings; if we are given rotten peaches, we will make cobblers; if given scraps, we will make quilts; take away our drums, and we will clap our hands. We prove the human spirit will prevail. We will take what we have to make what we need. We need confidence in our knowledge of who we are. (Giovanni, 1994)

Educators must know their student's cultural and linguistic makeup and transfer that knowledge to the academic setting. This culturally responsive and sustaining practice is showing Black culture, art, music, histories, and cultural means of resistance, survival, and Black joy; it's showing Black people's liberation (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Love, 2010; Paris & Alim, 2017).

For students, Black joy is liberation and freedom; a space of honoring one's present while imagining alternative realities:

More than a method to endure, however, Black joy allows us the space to stretch our imaginations beyond what we previously thought possible and allows us to theorize a world in which white supremacy does not dictate our everyday lives. (Johnson, 2015, p. 180)

Black students can begin envisioning their world, their life, their art, without the white gaze. Lu and Steele (2019), in their study of Black orality and expressions online posited Black song, storytelling, and art to be essential tools of liberation and joy historically and presently.

Black joy is transformational. It can be expressed in various forms, but it is a liberatory experience that is needed to revolutionize community building within the schools that honors and celebrates Black students. Sealey-Ruiz (2020) encourages educators to first begin with

understanding and acknowledging the anti-blackness paradigms embedded within the educational systems. This time of internal work aids educators to become more equipped to serve students of color. By conjuring up educational spaces that are committed to Black joy, stakeholders are making strides to an education that is culturally responsive and sustaining promotes Black joy.

Centering Black joy within artistic forms allowed Black artists to be more than their struggles, and to see Black people's creativity, and restoration. To exercise Black joy is to commit to unifying, building, and strengthening Black communities and to commit to show up for others (Community Foundation of San Carlos, 2020). The Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement was a collective space where artists wrote, performed, and painted their future of resistance and Black joy. Despite the violence, racism and discrimination challenging the Black community, community members aimed to not let stereotypes define them. Instead, they brainstormed ways to challenge expectations and highlight Black joy and community. Roy DeCarava, the first Black photographer to win a Guggenheim fellowship, aimed to illuminate Black joy, Black love, and resistance through photography (Shakur, 2018).

As Black people experienced oppressive policies and practices, they focused on the concept of joy as being revolutionary. Focusing on Black joy was not a tool to dismiss the history and reality of Black struggles but a commitment to not let the struggles to define or limit the Black population. Poet Michelle Williams (2022) describes Black joy as:

Black joy is...

Ms. Louise Bennett's belly laughing Patois poetry- mi love fi mi language

Mummy's storytelling freedom fighters coming alive inna fi her tongue

Me reciting the Ballad of Sixty-Five poem in 2nd grade

learning about Paul Bogle, a Jamaican national hero
 singing Forward Forever United national heroes' song
 with Nanny of the Maroons
 a Black woman centered in the fight!
 rocking to Bob Marley's One Love, Get Up Stand Up for Your Right, and
 Redemption song
 Daddy playing on the turntable every Sunday Reggae and Black Soul
 music
 teaching me Black love
 worshipping at church singing negro spirituals-Swing low, sweet chariot
 coming for to carry me home
 Black drama on the Jamaican stage
 satirical and cathartic musical pantomimes speaking back
 crafting and retelling Anansi stories to the delight of my younger siblings
 hand clapping, jump roping, dandy shandy aka dodge balling
 seeing me in art laughing
 being seen in art laughing
 laughing not always hurting
 telling the truth about the struggles but giving me the tools
 for holding on to joy...

Artistic works during the Harlem Renaissance era told stories to convey, preserve, and reproduce knowledge. The artwork told stories and coded it into knowledge through performance, poems, songs, and visual artwork. This created an environment that empowered

young and elderly artists to use their art and their voice for audiences to obtain a greater awareness of the Black reality, while gaining insight into the social, historical, and cultural perspectives of Black art, Black joy, and Black community (Vereen et al., 2013).

Summary

Culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy is the conceptual framework for this study. This lens will uncover and acknowledge the policies and practices to teach to and through the strengths of students of color (Gay, 2000). Embracing diversity and affirming it through creating a sense of belonging (Cook-Sather & Curl, 2016), establishing partnerships for student voice and agency (Mitra, 2018), and highlighting and celebrating Black Joy (Love, 2010) are assets that aids in dismantling coloniality within education. This research study continues with a focus on Black art in the United States and how Black folk fought for liberation through performing and visual arts; followed by the establishment of performing and visual arts schools and race relations in arts education.

Black Art in the United States

Black Art in various forms has long been used by people in the African Diaspora to fight for liberation through artistic movements, enhance the Black aesthetic, and promote Black joy. Black art did not begin gaining appreciation in the art community until the 20th century (Agnello, 2010). Black art strives to celebrate, expose, educate, engage, and entertain audiences by presenting culturally relevant artistic forms of African descent. Members of the mainstream culture have upheld deep-rooted prejudice against Blacks' and other persons of color artistic gifts, which has led to elitists discounting their creative and intellectual competences (Patterson N., 2020). The discount of their abilities and lack of acceptance stem from White elites' "quality perceptions, style conformity, and racial prejudice" (Agnello, 2010, p. 56). Elite culture were

cultural forms and institutions that were exclusive to only social elites. College-educated social elite, wealthy, privileged persons have typically only consumed highbrow art with a “selective openness” towards a wider range of genres (Patterson, 2020).

Highbrow art are artistic forms that are considered serious, desirable, and sophisticated. It refers to specific styles and genres of music mostly implying classical and opera, creative writing that focuses on fiction and poetry, cinematic arts films in the arthouse line, and theatrical performances or comedy that require a high-level understanding of analogies (Chan, 2010; Levine, 1990). The term highbrow is considered by some as discriminatory or overly selective. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argues that no examination of art is performed with naïve inspection. Although elite persons aim to approach art in a naïve way, their cultural background makes it difficult to comprehend all art. Thus, artwork that is outside of highbrow art is least understood and not appreciated (Montalban-Anderssen, 2015).

President Thomas Jefferson considered Blacks “musically unsophisticated and intellectually inferior to Whites,” and White elites criticized persons of color for failing to “imitate the art of their civilized neighbors” (Feagin, 2013, 64-65). The challenges of Black performing and visual artists are woven in to the fabric of slavery and its displays of racial prejudice and inferiority. During the slavery era, Blacks were confined to specific practices and consistently denied opportunities of personal expression. Both during and post-slavery, Black art was often compared to the styles and values of the mainstream White society (Agnello, 2010). Black artistic forms were judged as lowbrow, inferior, and discredited by the White community (Lewis, 1990). Lowbrow art, of which Black artistic forms were considered, refers to genres rooted in marginal groups in terms of ethnicity, region, and religion (Lopez-Sintas & Katz-Gerro, 2005).

Black Artistic Movements

Black artists have experienced discriminatory practices and racism that pushes them out of social and political systems because of lack of opportunities, redlining, and explicit prejudice (Banks, 2010). Tracing back to the 1920s, members of the Black community sparked city, state, and national movements to interrupt predominately White spaces, and to combat racial inequality, specifically in the performing arts. It was the aim of these artistic movements to have Black art “accepted as valuable, and to be objectively positioned in valued spaces, such as exhibited in prestigious museums and galleries” (Banks, 2010, p. 278).

Black artistic movements were a collection of cultural renaissance movements with distinctive significance in the United States where performing and visual artists were serious about equity, expression, and fearlessness of being unconventional. Black artists sought to transition from reinventing themselves dishonestly to gain acceptance by Whites (Jackson, 2007) to disrupting Eurocentric notions of identity (Lewis, 2019). These movements called for the creation of poetry, novels, music, visual arts, and theater that reflect a pride in Black history and culture. This focal point was an affirmation of the autonomy of Black artists to create Black art for Black people to awaken Black consciousness (Foster, 2014) and “promote racial solidarity and incite community activism against racist social and institutional practices” (Forsgren, 2015, p. 136). This era of flowering Black art took precedence in the 20th century during movements such as the “Harlem Renaissance” and “Black Arts Movement.”

Harlem Renaissance

Harlem was credited as the nation’s largest urban Black community in the 1920s (Berkovi, 1924), as it was home to African Americans of all socio-economic backgrounds: intellectuals, artists and poets, professional elites, and blue-collar workers. In the mid-1920s,

Alaine Locke, noted as the ‘Father of the Harlem Renaissance’, writes his interpretation of a typical Harlem Street scene in his essay entitled, “Harlem:”

“It has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American, has brought together the Negro of the North and the Negro of the South, man from the city and the man from the town and village, the peasant, the student, the businessman, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer, worker, preacher and criminal, explorer, and social outcast. Each group has come with its own separate motives and its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another...”

(Locke, 1925, p. 629)

The Harlem Renaissance was an artistic liberatory movement of Black Americans’ cultural expression, spearheaded by “New Negroes” who created and boldly made public new forms of literature, music, art, and entertainment for diverse audiences (Boyd, 2021). This asset-based approach encouraged voice and agency through art. It allowed participants to honor their present while imagining their reality to audiences of not only the Black community but to those of the European descent as well. This population of Black people “promoted a renewed sense of racial pride, cultural self-expression, economic independence, and progressive politics” (The Library of Congress, 2009, p. 1). This change in mindset led to a greater sense of unity and community amongst Black people.

A strengthened community was formed through the layering of artistic and cultural steppingstones to assert pride in Black life and identity and propose independence from the hegemonic Western cultural aesthetic to allow a freedom of expression through the arts (Lewis, 2019). Through various forms of visual and performing arts, participants produced art that was

both grounded in modernity while incorporating Black history, folk culture, and negritude (Jordan, 2011). Themes such as the African past, slavery, freedom, lynching, and migration figure powerfully in their art (Lewis, 2019), while aiming to also create art that centered on Black Joy, Black love, and resistance (Shakur, 2018).

The Harlem Renaissance was a golden age for African American artists, writers, and musicians. It gave these artists pride in and control over how the Black experience was represented in American culture and set the stage for other Black artistic movement. “So that they’re not just giving one story to what being black is” (Pringle, 2020). This creative space gave Black folk freedom of expression without feeling the need or urge to conform to European eccentrics or standards. This was an opportunity for storytelling as a method of resistance and liberation.

Storytelling Through Art

During the era of slavery, slave owners aimed to detach Black people from their African culture and traditions to maintain authority and power. This was an effective means of control to suppress the collective identity of Black folk. As a result, storytelling became a way of transmitting tradition and knowledge, eventually giving rise to oral culture, a trait that characterizes Black heritage and remains an important motivator (Lee, 2016). The power and effectiveness of storytelling through spoken word inspired generations of Black people to engage in arts and to express themselves through performance, visual arts, poetry, and speech.

The art of storytelling as a tradition of Black folk is well-documented. Artists have drawn upon stories and memories of the past and remade them into work with distinctly narrative qualities (Peabody, 2013). Contemporary artists work in various mediums, to retell and reconstruct stories in their distinctive voice (Lee, 2016). Artists who engage in storytelling use it

as an opportunity to speak out about the past, to re-claim and re-constitute it to shine light on relevant happenings in the present. The art of storytelling was not only an opportunity to pass on traditions of the culture but was also a powerful way to engage audiences in difficult and confronting conversations (Peabody, 2013). Gergen and Gergen (2011) believed that storytelling through art created a space to not only “motivate interest and action but it enhanced dialogues on important societal issues” (p. 295).

A frequently employed method of artistic storytelling is performative counter-storytelling. This engaging method of storytelling aims to dismantle stereotypical and oppressive representations of marginalized populations while offering balanced and more complex accounts of experience (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Baker et al. (2020) characterized artistic storytelling as an “aesthetic of interruption” to the dominant narrative. Storytelling through art allows “transmission of culture and heritage, creates space for discourse, present and celebrate alternative ways of knowing, challenges one-dimensional narratives as it relates to marginalized populations, and remember and archive the past while exemplifying Black joy” (Martinez, 2017, p. 112).

Black Arts Movement

Larry Neal, one of the most prominent spokesmen for the Black Arts Movement, declared that the goal of the movement was to “destroy the double consciousness—the tension that is in the souls of the Black folk in order to stake a claim for a uniquely Black form of artistic expression” (Nielson, 2014, p. 1). W.E.B. DuBois, who coined the term double consciousness in his book *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Du Bois, 1911) stated that it ascribed to “the Negro...in this American world.” An almost morbid sense of personality, where every American Negro lived separately as a Negro and as an American (Du Bois, 1903).

The Black Arts Movement was an era in the 1960s to foster work that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America (Nielson, 2014), to direct attention to the aesthetics of the Black community, and to promote Black joy and cultural pride in the midst of historical devaluation of Black life, culture, and art (Lewis, 2019).

Pioneer of the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka, expressed that the desire of Black America was liberation. In the final stanza of “Black Art,” the poem that inspired the name of the movement, Amiri Baraka (2022) articulates what he and others of the Black community hoped would be the relationship between art and those desires:

We want a Black poem. And a Black World
 Let the world be a Black Poem
 And Let ALL Black People Speak This Poem
 Silently
 or LOUD.

Art creation has been vital to Black liberation movements. The Black arts movement was essential in the Black community as it enabled individuals and groups to express their feelings and shared experiences through various forms of art without basing it on white standards (Mack, 2017). Malcom X stated “once we see that all these other sources to which we have turned have failed, we stop turning to them and turn to ourselves” (Cone, 1991). The emphasis for Black folk to work collectively was an affirmation for Black artists to create Black art for Black people to awaken Black consciousness and achieve liberation. In these liberatory movements:

Artwork has been used to provide parallels between movements of the past and present. Artists provide new perspectives, visual languages and help us envision new ways of living. History of Black liberation is archived in many forms and

knowing the history of art across the Diaspora is crucial to understanding the nuanced struggles of Black folk. (ISE-DA, 2022)

To be a part of a network of individuals that shared similar ideas and experiences, created a collective spirit that was the heartbeat of the Black Arts Movement (Lewis, 2019; Mack, 2017). Collective spirit enlightens and upholds a sense of responsibility to sustain the cultural fabric of a community. Tommie Shelby (2002) coined the term, collective self-determination theory, that encouraged Blacks to collaborate as a unit of oppressed people, a group with their own distinctive racial, ethnic, cultural, and/or national identity; and as a people, with a collective spirit of becoming a self-determining group. To liberate Blacks from the burden of racial oppression, Black leaders have frequently called on Black Americans to become a more unified collective agent for social change (Shelby, 2002). Frederick Douglas (1847) stated:

We are one with you under the ban of prejudice and proscription—one with You under the slander of inferiority—one with you in social and political disfranchisement. What you suffer, we suffer; what you endure, we endure. We are indissolubly united and must fall or flourish together.

Holding true to Frederick Douglas' thoughts of Black people flourishing together, by 1963, during the Black Arts Movement, John O'Neal, Gilbert Moses, and Doris Derby partnered to "bridge the gap between the political and the poet in the disenfranchised South" (O'Neal, 1968, p. 71). Their efforts to bridge the gap was done by partnering with youth and created the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNVCC). During the Black Arts movement, O'Neal saw the need for youth to have an opportunity to learn how to become engaged in society and increase their value of what theatre was. O'Neal (1968) found the performing arts to remain true to oneself and the concerns as an artist while engaging in the political responsibility as a member

of the Black community. The objective of the SNVCC was not designed as entertainment but rather using theatrical skits that demanded participants to discuss issues, engage the work, and brainstorm ideas for taking action in the community.

The SNVCC organization that was birthed from the Black Arts Movement utilized student voice by positioning students to identify and analyze political issues affecting the Black community (O'Neal, 1968), to incorporate student voice to inform education, and develop student agency. When student voice and student agency operate in tandem it not only creates a space for student voices to be acknowledged but also grants them agency in having the power to influence analyses, and decisions on policies and practices (Cook-Sather & Curl, 2016).

Individuals associated with the Black Arts Movement, although the movement was short lived, laid the foundation of creating a collective spirit and sense of community. It was a liberatory movement that not only spurred political and economic independence, but also led to cultural and psychological freedom and liberation (Mack, 2017). The Black Arts Movement gave gracious space for Black folk to express their voices, their art, their acting, their films, and their music in the mass media as well as become involved in community to create and enhance Black identity and a collective spirit.

Black Aesthetic

The importance of a Black aesthetic junctions with other movements which includes Black power, Black radical, Black freedom, Black consciousness, and Black arts movement where each movement proposed a “radical reordering of western cultural aesthetics” (Neal, 1968, p. 184). Artistic movements made intentional efforts to root out white fingerprints from Black art in order to establish a clear space to cultivate a truly Black aesthetic (Lewis, 2019). Poets,

playwrights, artists, dancers, and musicians advocated for a Black aesthetic that fostered racial solidarity and prompted community activism (Forsgren, 2015).

Publications distributed by participants of the Black arts movement called for a Black-centered aesthetics and the transformation of the Black consciousness. Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka wrote in their book, *Black Fire*:

Most contemporary black writing of the last few years, the literature of the young, has been aimed at the destruction of the double consciousness. It has been aimed at consolidating the African American personality. And it has not been essentially a literature of protest. It has, instead, turned its attention inward to the internal problems of the group. The problem of living in a racist society, therefore, is something that lurks on the immediate horizon, but which cannot be dealt with until certain political, social, and spiritual truths are understood by the oppressed themselves, inwardly understood. (Neal, 1968, p. 647)

It centers the breadth of Black experiences within a society influenced by racial orders. Du Bois suggests that despite political and social advances within the Black community, Black folk "are still ashamed of ourselves and are thus estopped from valid objection when white folks are ashamed to call us human" (Du Bois, 1933, p. 73). He proposed that members of the Black community struggle with their Black identity due to seeing oneself through the eyes of others. Studies suggest that those from the Black community experienced a split identity or double-consciousness, one that is authentically "Black," and one that operates within and for the white world. To destroy this split-identity, the Black Arts Movement aimed to "destroy" double-consciousness and amplify the Black aesthetic through art (Nielson, 2014).

Black aesthetic was used to describe works of art, literature, poetry, music, and theater that centralized Black life and culture. The values of Black aesthetics serve as a political and artistic pursuit committed to Black self-determination and collective liberation. The values included focusing on the lens of the Black aesthetic, strove to evoke a commonality, a sense of belonging, and affirmation of culture and Black joy.

Performing and Visual Arts Schools

Performing and visual arts instruction and arts education have endured a historical struggle for importance and access since the early stages of this nation. High culture arts organizations came to the forefront in American society and were institutionalized in the late nineteenth century. DiMaggio (1982) describes high culture organizations as being established by urban elites who forged an institutional system that embodied their ideas and perception of high arts or quality arts. During the late 1800s, predominately upper-class citizens had access to education that incorporated industrial arts-themed courses. Like most other American institutions and organizations, Black people were excluded from these institutions and organizations both indirectly, through educational discriminatory policies, and directly, through exclusion from white circles of art appreciators (DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990). This systematic exclusion required communities of color to engage in and experience art primarily through individual artists and small organizations rather than from formal structures. However, these organizations were short lived, as institutional racism played a central role in access to funding and artistic training (DeVos Institute of Arts Management, 2015).

Horace Mann, considered by many to be the father of the modern American educational model (Carelton, 2009), posited that visual arts, instrumental, and vocal music should be taught in schools, as they add value to the curriculum and enhance learning (Gullatt, 2008). John

Dewey, an advocate for progressive education, believed “arts education was a foundational part of the curriculum because it developed creativity, self-expression, and an appreciation of the expression of others” (Heilig et al., 2010, p. 136). Dewey’s progressive education approach theorized that the process of inquiry that is sparked through arts education has the potential to expand one’s perception of the world, thus leading to a will for action (Goldblatt, 2006; Heilig et al., 2010). It was during this era that certain states began funding select school districts with earmarked funds for arts education. This led to the first visual arts courses to be embedded in a Texas curriculum, where they emphasized its importance and how it should ‘never be allowed to become a dead subject’ (Texas State Department of Education, 1922-1923). However, this effort was short lived, as the Great Depression required thousands of school closures and teacher pay deductions, resulting in most school districts cutting their performing and visual arts programs (Efland, 1983)

In August 1961, President John F. Kennedy stated “we must come to accept the arts as a new community responsibility” as he dealt with a cultural and financial crisis with the Metropolitan, the United States’ leading opera company (Congressional Record, 1997). It was urged that the federal government take up the new responsibility of prioritizing performing and visual arts to be alongside health, welfare, and education. The National Endowment for the Arts, established by Congress in 1965, took a focus on advancing equitable opportunities for arts participation and arts education. Despite national efforts to create equitable opportunities for arts education, the policies did not impact all schools on the same level. During the 1960s era, some schools in the U.S. were still segregated. Black schools that were not integrated during this time received fewer resources and funding compared to white schools, as well as having limitations on what could be taught (America's Black Holocaust Museum, 2022).

As arts education began being woven into the fabric of public education, “the National Standards for Arts Education were developed by the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations under the guidance of the National Committee for standards in the Arts” (Blakeslee, 1993, p. 142). According to Blakeslee (1993) the Standards say that students engaged in an arts curriculum:

- Should be able to communicate at a basic level in the four arts disciplines: dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts.
- Should be able to communicate proficiently in at least one art form.
- Should be able to develop and present basic analyses of works of art.
- Should have an informed acquaintance with exemplary works of art from a variety of cultures and historical periods.
- Should be able to relate various types of arts knowledge and skills within and across the arts disciplines.

For art education to be taught in a way that embodies the standards addressed by Blakeslee (1993), some researchers contend that an atmosphere designed to assist in the development of students as expressive, creative, and productive individuals must be established (Sabol, 2017). Art education must incorporate opportunities for students to focus on creating art, learning to analyze or appreciate art, or a combination of them all. The need and belief in the benefits of an arts education led to the creation of dedicated performing and visual arts schools.

Establishment of Performing & Visual Arts Schools

The first performing arts high school in the United States, Arts High School, was founded in Newark, New Jersey, in 1931 and still is in operation today. Importantly, it was conceived prior to the Brown versus Board of Education (BOE) decision. The Brown vs. BOE ruling was a

landmark 1954 Supreme Court case in which the justices found racial segregation of children in public schools to be unconstitutional (DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990). Arts High School was initially an all-white performing and visual arts school. In this era, opportunities for Blacks to have access to artistic programs and arts education was limited and segregated (DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990). Racial exclusion, both explicitly and implicitly, characterized the policies of most northern arts institutions. In addition, Black artists were prohibited from all predominately white artistic organizations (DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990; Woodson, 1934). Even with some Black artists receiving notable recognition and achievements despite facing discrimination, racial exclusion from arts performances and programs did not fully subside until the 1960s (Cruise, 1967; Cureau, 1977; DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990; Marable, 1983).

The Arts High School did not grant equitable access to all students, but it did pave the way in the performing arts community by being the first secondary institution to create curriculum and a school model for students who are artistically inclined in the performing and visual arts (Sabol, 2017). The founding principal, Harrison E. Webb, stood on the notion that art should stand akin to core subject areas such as mathematics, science, and world language (Newark Board of Education, 2022). The Arts High School set a foundation for the establishment of more performing and visual arts schools that would include a greater breadth of artistic opportunities.

In 1973, the first performing and visual arts magnet school was established. The School for Creative and Performing Arts (SCPA) in Cincinnati, Ohio was founded as one of the first magnet schools in Cincinnati and became the first school in the country to combine a full range of performing and visual arts studies with a complete college-preparatory academic program for elementary through high school students (The School for Creative and Performing Arts, 2022).

Of the approximately 283 performing and visual arts schools in the United States, SCPA has been cited as a model for both racial integration and for arts programs (Vaccariello & Pyle, 1993, p. 103).

The growth in the number of performing and visual arts schools reflects the desire of families and the larger community to offer students the choice of attending an academic and artistic program, to provide the highest quality education possible (Daniel, 2000). Contributing to the growth of performing and visual arts schools is the large population of Americans who believe that all students benefit from an arts education. A 2005 Harris poll reveals that 93% of Americans believe that the performing and visual arts are vital to providing a holistic education.

“To answer the needs of gifted and artistically talented students while at the same time recognizing that these students have an immense capacity to learn, many communities are forming dedicated arts schools as a new, exciting form of education... for students at arts high schools, this is the best possible form of education and it makes a significant difference in their lives...” (Galbraith, 2010, p. 3).

Performing and visual arts schools establish a well-designed career pathway centered on the arts, serving as a dynamic and emergent vehicle for workforce readiness for youth (Davis-Cotton, 2022). Additionally, they grant students the opportunity to access rigorous academics and an intensive arts curriculum within a standard school day. Research shows that the arts promote positive development in the academic, social, and emotional realms. Students who take performing and visual arts courses learn not only artistic content, but also develop new ways of thinking, communicating, and evaluating (Lieberman & Parker, 2019).

Performing and visual arts schools vary in programs offered, grade levels served, and educational and artistic goals. The International Network of Performing and Visual Arts Schools

defines a school of the performing and visual arts as one in which at least 40% of the school day is devoted to arts education (Daniel, 2000). Arts education courses may include subjects such as cinematic arts, creative writing, dance, instrumental arts (band, orchestra, guitar, piano), theatre (musical, performance, technical), visual arts, and vocal performance. A U.S. Department of Education study revealed the following 10 characteristics common among the schools recommended by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Arts for excellence in their arts education programs, as well as their academic programs (Daniel, 2000):

1. The school has a philosophy/vision of education that holds that a strong arts curriculum is basic to a well-balanced educational program.
2. The leadership of the school is passionate about and committed to the value of high-quality arts education.
3. The schools are student-centered, guaranteeing access, equity, and success for all students, while maintaining differentiated levels of instruction for students with talent and motivation.
4. The curriculum is balanced and includes music; dance; drama/theater; creative writing; and visual, media, and technical arts.
5. The curriculum is skill-based, sequential, multicultural, interdisciplinary, and rigorous.
6. Instructors from high-quality arts institutions are sought to teach. They include artist/teachers, arts specialists, and highly trained classroom teachers.
7. School administrators realize that the arts need to be allotted time, space, and financial and administrative support.

8. The "school climate" is so positive that visitors often express the wish that they had gone to the school and next want to know how their children, grandchildren, or the children of friends can attend the school.
9. Strong community ties to parents, businesses, and other arts organizations characterize these schools. These schools generate excitement in their communities and support for education, generally.
10. A variety of assessment and evaluation procedures exist in these schools, including portfolios, videos, performances, auditions, visiting judges and critics, competitions, contests, art exhibits, paper- and pencil-tests, and traditional norm-referenced tests

In the 21st century, arts education in public K-12 schools has taken a prominent stance in its integration into schools and academic curriculum. This expansion can be attributed to empirical studies that suggest arts education gives students the opportunity to learn in different ways and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills that are necessary to succeed in post-secondary education and the workforce (Daniel, 2000). Over the last three decades, there has been a ten-fold increase in schools of the performing and visual arts at elementary, middle, and high school levels (Daniel, 2000). There are currently 283 performing and visual arts schools across the nation (K12 Academics, 2020). School districts across the nation have developed arts schools as private, magnet, or specialized schools. Some of the schools range from Grades K–5, 6–8, 6–12, or K–12, or as a traditional high school educating students in Grades 9–12. Each school has its unique requirements, but they all share the mission of teaching excellence in the arts and the academic subjects (Daniel, 2000).

Race in Performing and Visual Arts Education

Historically, in the United States, most students who attended performing and visual arts schools self-identify as white, with the schools reflecting a teacher demographic of the same race (Farinde et al., 2015). However, more performing and visual arts schools are being established in major metropolitan areas, which has led to a growing minority student enrollment (Rod, 2000, p. 43). Performing and visual arts schools are growing at a fast pace, with most major metropolitan areas having at least one arts-focused school (Rod, 2000, p. 43). These major metropolitan areas tend to be highly racially and ethnically diverse, and are continuing to increase in population (Frey, 2011). With the increase of minority students engaged in the performing and visual arts, arts communities are fielding demands for more diverse representation and inclusivity in hiring, casting, retention, and content of arts educators (James, 2020, p. 131). With an increase in representation of students of color at performing arts schools (Rod, 2000), coupled with the rapid expansion of performing and visual arts schools in the United States (Daniel, 2000), greater consideration and attention should be given to researching policies and practices that empower students of color and dismantle coloniality within educational practices (Will & Najarro, 2022).

Historically, most scholarship in this area has largely focused on arts advocacy, with efforts to recognize and address practices in which the arts operate in relation to and are implicated in white supremacy (Gazatambide-Fernández et al., 2018). However, more recently, there has been an increase in research providing a critique of arts education that includes race and integrates anti-racist work as an important aspect of social justice education. Examples of this literature includes music education, theatre education (Ngo, 2017); visual arts education (Hindle et al., 2011); and dance education. Collectively, these studies examine how performing and visual arts are necessary for social reconstruction and recommended social justice practices

for specific arts disciplines. However, literature has not been accompanied with a similar increase in research on the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogies in the arts (Gadsen, 2008).

Chapter Summary

In chapter Two, I identified the conceptual framework of an arts based culturally responsive and sustaining framework. This lens identified three interrelated factors: sense of belonging, student voice and agency, and Black joy. These factors were identified through my review of literature of culturally responsive practices and Black artistic movements in the United States. The constructs of sense of belonging, student voice and agency and Black joy, can aid in building the capacity of teachers and students to disrupt inequitable systems that are based on a Eurocentric framework. I explored the scholarship on Black arts in the United States, and how Black people used art as a form of resistance and liberation to build a Black identity and aesthetic that eliminated the white gaze and amplified Black joy. Additionally, I investigated the history of performing and visual arts schools, and how race plays a role in arts education.

In Chapter Three, I provide the research design, methodology, qualitative data analysis, and data collection process, as well as a justification for its selection and detailed procedures.

Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand and gain insight from the lived experiences of high school graduates who were members of a Black Arts organization at a performing and visual arts school. Specifically, this study aimed to understand how study participants' involvement in Black Art impacted their perspectives about their voices and agency as students, their beliefs about how Black students were perceived within the school, and their beliefs about Black artists and art and how they were perceived by others both within and outside of the school. The central research question which guided this study was *what are the experiences of students involved in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists?* The three sub-questions I developed to further extend the central research question were 1) How do students experience their involvement in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists in ways that uplift and magnify their voices and agency? 2) How do student experiences in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists inform their perspectives of deficit perspectives often held toward Black students and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted? 3) How do student experiences in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists inform their perspectives of deficit perspectives often held toward Black art and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted?

In this chapter, I discuss key elements of my study methodology, including its design, approach, and methods. As I was interested in examining the perspectives participants held toward their lived experiences, I used a critical phenomenological methodology and approach. In the next section, I describe my critical methodological approach. This section includes a

description of defining characteristics of critical phenomenology research and my rationale for using it for this study. Additionally, in this chapter I also describe the selection process and criteria for study participants, as well as all data collection methods I used. These data collection methods included participant interviews and the use of Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs), which were convenings of multiple participants during which I used protocols designed to build community and relational trust among participants as well as protocols designed to elicit their individual and shared perspectives in engaging ways. Next, I describe the data analysis procedures I used for the study. Following this, given the relational and qualitative nature of the study, I describe my positionality as a researcher.

Research Design

Ravitch and Carl (2021) describe qualitative research as involving a “systematic and contextualized research process to interpret the ways that humans view, approach, and make meaning of their experiences, contexts, and the world” (p. 4). Qualitative research seeks to uncover how isolated situations can come together forming a collective story that brings multiple perspectives together. In this study of Black Arts members at a performing and visual arts school, the researcher examined their experiences in the organization and ascertained meaning from those experiences through a rigorous research process designed to first surface and then analyze the phenomenological perspectives from and among study participants. Guba and Lincoln (1981) describe the research process as “layers of an onion,” because it allows the researcher to investigate multiple meanings with participants and bring them together layer by layer to produce multiple truths intrinsic to a phenomenon (p. 57).

As a researcher I sought to understand and learn from participant experiences of being part of a student-created, student-led organization developed to uplift Black art and artists at their

performance arts high school. As it was their subjective experiences I was interested in learning from – both as individuals and as a collective during the course of the study, I developed and used a critical phenomenological methodological approach. Phenomenological research provides opportunities to form meaning through evoking a state of wonder and reflection about a phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). A phenomenological approach focuses on how individuals understand their lived experiences and the meanings they make of them (Latorre, 1996). Further, a *critical* phenomenological approach is used when researchers are striving to understand a phenomenon not simply through the idiosyncratic perspectives of individuals, but through the intersubjectivity of how people make collective meaning through their interactions with each other and the world itself (Salamon, 2019), as was the situation for my study.

I constructed my critical phenomenological study design to investigate multiple meanings across and among participants regarding their experiences with the Black Arts program. My design included the development and use of engaging data collection methods designed to provide participants with individual and collective opportunities to explore and share their perspectives around their experiences in relational and artistic ways. As this is a critical phenomenological approach, data collection methods were designed to surface both individual participant subjectivity and the intersubjectivity among participants. Specifically, I collected data through semi-structured interviews, storytelling opportunities with individual participants, and story-sharing and meaning-making gatherings of multiple participants facilitated through Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs). These forms of data collection were designed to allow participants to freely share their ideas in creative ways, through the use of open-ended prompts, questions, and activities. These approaches and methods were designed with the intention of creating a sense of productive ambiguity. In other words, I wanted participants to be able to

interpret these prompts, questions, and activities in ways in which their own sharing of their experiences would not be constrained. This design element was in keeping with a fundamental principle shared by some in qualitative research where studies and inquiries are not constrained to a predetermined starting point or a fixed sequence of steps (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) but rather “involves interconnection and interaction among the different design components” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 3). As such, this study's specific components – particularly in data collection approaches – were designed to be able to adjust with emergent meanings. This allowed phases of the research process to shift as I began to collect data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Phenomenology and Critical Phenomenology

“Learn from life, learn from our people, learn from books, learn from the experience of others. Never stop learning.”- Amilcar Cabral

Phenomenological research is a method of qualitative inquiry that seeks to describe and understand individuals’ subjective accounts of lived experience about a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Gupta, 2021). Phenomenological research emerged from the philosophical phenomenological movement. Richards and Morse (2007) refer to phenomenology as one of the most important philosophical movements of the twentieth century. Phenomenological research approaches aim to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of several individuals who have experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019). In this study, the researcher will seek to describe and make meaning from the subjective and intersubjective experiences of participants as well as the meaning they make from their experiences being involved in their school’s Black Arts organization (Fuster-Guillen, 2019).

For this study, I used a phenomenological and critical phenomenological research design, and, because the research involved participant perspectives regarding experiences that involved

issues of race and power, as well as my commitment for data collection to center on relational and collective convenings of participants, I chose to add a critical research lens to the design. Research from a critical perspective “goes beyond uncovering the interpretation of people’s understandings of their world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 9) and considers issues of intersubjectivity and power in the research questions and analyses. Participants in this study were selected due to their involvement in a student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists in their school. The oral history of this organization was rooted in the belief that Black art and artists had been continually marginalized within the school. Additionally, as each of the participants except for one identified as being Black or a person of color (a minority student population within the performance and visual arts high school) it was important to me to build in study design elements that could help me understand the perspectives of mostly minoritized students and their experiences within an organization designed as a way for Black students and their allies to craft and voice a counternarrative within a school.

A critical phenomenological approach to research invites consideration and inquiry into how individual and collective experiences and subjective perspectives of those experiences are mediated by power relations that are socially and historically situated (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005) as well as working from an understanding that individual meaning is constructed through interactions with others and as a result the intersubjective meaning around a phenomenon warrants exploration. These additional layers to this critical phenomenological research study were important as I sought to understand how participants' experiences with the student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artist might inform culturally responsive and sustainable practices in their performing and visual arts schools and schools in general. Van Manen (2016) contended that the phenomenological framework is transformative,

as it can lead to a transformation of consciousness that may ultimately yield sociopolitical change:

While phenomenology as a form of inquiry does not prescribe any particular political agenda suited for the social-historical circumstances of a particular group or social class, the thoughtfulness phenomenology sponsors are more likely to lead to indignation, concern, or commitment that, if appropriate, may prompt us to turn to such a political agenda. (p. 154)

Phenomenological research can lead to sociopolitical action because it cultivates intimacy through reflection (Gupta, 2021). Engaging in reflection and action in phenomenological research aligns with conscientização, as described by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire (1968) posits that emancipation requires members of the oppressed and the oppressors to engage in reflective discourse regarding the realities of social injustice, through which they gain conscientização (p. 28). These reflective discourses should involve participant's intimate, personal examples of oppression (Freire, 1970).

In order to create opportunities for the nine study participants to engage in deep reflection and generous story sharing about their experiences, I designed data collection for this study as a combination of Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs), a collaborative, community-based exchange of ideas where participants learn from each other to enact school and community change (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2019b), and participant interviews, which will create opportunities for reflective discourse. These allowed participants to “reconstruct his experience within the topic of study (Seidman, 2013, p.14). In sum, the critical phenomenological design and corresponding data collection methods with the Black Arts

organization participants provided me with a rigorous and comprehensive approach to both elicit and understand participant perceptions and lived realities based on the Black Arts experiences.

Context of Study

The site that nested participant experiences for this study was a secondary performing and visual arts school in an urban school district, in the southeastern United States. The International Network of Performing and Visual Arts Schools defines a performing and visual arts institution as a school that dedicates a minimum of 40% of the regular school day to arts education (Daniel, 2000). I refer to this school as the performing and visual arts school, rather than by its specific name in order to protect the identity of the participants. This performing and visual arts school was selected because of the establishment and continuance of a Black Arts organization that is a Black, student-created and student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists. This organization, which I refer to as “Black Arts” was birthed 21 years ago to showcase the artistic talents of Black students due to student perceptions that they were underrepresented and undervalued in school-directed performing and visual arts programs, recitals, and productions.

The performing and visual arts school itself has a rich history. The school was formed in 1922 as a school for the first through ninth grades and, for a number of years, was the only school that welcomed Black students. In the 1950s, it became one of its district's three segregated Black high schools. After being repurposed two more times, once as a satellite campus for a local community college and once as a seventh-grade center, it became a performing and visual arts magnet school in 1985. Magnet schools are public K-12 schools that offer specialized programs

to students outside the school's normal attendance boundaries (Florida Department of Education, 2022).

The racial demographics at the performing and visual arts school indicated a discrepancy between student demographics and those of the faculty and staff. In this context, the term faculty and staff refer to full-time instructional teachers, part-time instructional teachers, and non-instructional workers such as clerical staff and security. Empirical studies suggest that the teacher demographics should mirror those of the student demographics (Egalite & Kisida, 2018; Gershenson, et.al, 2016). See Tables 1 and 2, which includes student demographics compared to faculty and staff demographics.

Table 1

Performing and Visual Arts School Student Race Demographics

School Year	Asian %	Black %	Hispanic %	Multi Racial %	White %
2018-19	3%	22%	9%	5%	61%
2020-21	3%	22%	10%	5%	60%
2019-20	3%	21%	10%	5%	61%
2021-22	3%	22%	11%	6%	58%

Table 2

Performing and Visual Arts School Faculty and Staff Race Demographics

School Year	Asian %	Black %	Hispanic %	Multi Racial %	White %
2018-19	2%	5%	5%	1%	86%
2020-21	2%	6%	4%	2%	86%
2019-20	2%	13%	2%	2%	81%
2021-22	2%	13%	2%	1%	82%

The performing and visual arts programs offered at this school were band, cinematic arts, creative writing, dance, guitar, musical theatre, orchestra, performance theatre, piano, technical theatre, vocal music, and visual arts. The performing and visual arts school was an audition-only secondary school. This audition consisted of pre-selected works of art, where current art-specific faculty members judged applicants. Once admitted into the school, students follow an art-specific curriculum that includes four to five artistic courses each year.

The performing and visual arts school perennially aimed to be a nationally recognized performing and visual arts school. To keep the identity of the performing and visual arts school anonymous, the researcher will paraphrase two key belief statements that are posted on the school's Mission, Vision, and Beliefs page on the school's website:

- Performing and visual arts have the power to unite and bridge the cultural divide.
- Policies and practices must be evaluated annually to ensure it is meeting the needs of all students.

These belief statements were selected due to their relevance to the phenomenon of this study, which includes the intention behind Black Arts, a student-created and student-led organization. This organization within the school was developed by Black students who believed they were not being treated equitably in their arts-discipline courses which were evident in their underrepresentation in student performances, showcases, productions, and concerts.

Each performing and visual arts department hosted at least three school-level performances annually. Participation in these performances was determined based on class attendance, class performance, and/or an audition. Historically the selection committee for these performances included the director of the specific artistic department. The lack of representation of Black students in the school performances led to the birth of the Black Arts organization,

whose mission was to create a space to uplift Black art and artists and to showcase the artistic abilities to an audience.

As a result of these sentiments, the Black Arts organization was created out of a Harlem Renaissance program led by a teacher in 1995. The oral history of Black Arts holds that the teacher created the Harlem Renaissance program and included games, artistic performances, and guest speakers for it. It was hosted during Black History Month with an aim to educate and entertain. Due to the event's success, students expressed the need for this type of structured event to continue due to Black students finally feeling a sense of belonging during the Harlem Renaissance program. Students were insistent on taking the lead on this newly established organization as they spearheaded recruitment of student participants, creation of the artistic works, and execution of the final product. The once weeklong Harlem Renaissance program, initially designed solely for an audience of students, morphed into a year-round organization which prepared an annual performing and visual arts performance that hosted over 400 audience members, including students, faculty members, families, and community stakeholders.

The Black Arts organization yearly comprises ninth-12th grade students from all artistic disciplines, with an average membership of over 70 students of various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Although the vast majority of student participants in Black Arts have historically been Black, the organization is inclusive and a diverse array of students from many racial and ethnic backgrounds are involved. The students prepare and practice throughout the school year for an annual two-day performance that transforms the predominately white performing and visual arts school to the epicenter of the Black community.

The Black Arts annual performing and visual arts performance is a student-created and student-led production that is orchestrated and directed by Black Arts members. The

performance consists of various artistic forms, such as spoken word, dance, cinematic arts, music, vocal, rap, step, and visual arts. The performance is an opportunity for Black Arts members to pay homage to Black history, shine a light on the Black experience, and engage the audience in celebrating Black culture.

Participants

Participants in this study included nine high school graduates who were alumni of the performing and visual arts school and had been members of the Black Arts organization. Selection criteria included membership or involvement with Black Arts during at least one of their years at the performing and visual arts school. Seven of the nine participants in the study were Black or African American, one of the participants was multi-racial, and one of the participants was White. As the Black Art organization was originally created to provide Black students with opportunities to showcase their performing and visual arts prowess in ways they believed were denied to them in the traditional school performances, I purposefully recruited mostly Black students. However, to incorporate more non-Black voices, I invited two additional non-Black participants but those invitations were not accepted.

In addition to their membership in the organization, I strove to recruit some participants who held leadership positions, such as co-director, executive, or section leader, within Black Arts. I chose this based on my conjecture that including participants who held a leadership position could be useful because those roles required them to implement recruitment methods that reached racially and ethnically diverse populations, and their positions required them to collaborate with faculty and administration to advocate for both organizational and student needs. It was my hope that during CLE convenings and during the other methods of data

collection, these participants would be able to expound on the dynamics of these partnerships as well as their recruitment and retention strategies of diverse populations.

Finally, I delimited study participants to graduates from the graduating classes of 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022. The intentional selection of this cohort of Black Arts members was because of their experiences as students occurred either during or after the Spring semester in 2020, when racial unrest at the performing and visual arts school seemed to reflect that which was happening elsewhere throughout the United States. During that Spring 2020 semester, a wave of protests, testimonies, walk-outs, and communications within the school protesting perceptions and experiences of anti-Black racism were led by many members of the Black Arts organization members. For some participants, their social actions within the school mirrored the waves of civil protest involved with the movement for Black lives across the United States. As such, I believed that these participants could have distinct insights regarding the racial and ethnic challenges faced by students of color within the school and how it affected the Black Arts organization.

When I recruited the nine participants for the study, I provided them with informed consent forms documenting and describing the purpose of the study, data collection processes, and measures I used to maintain their confidentiality. In addition, participants either selected or were assigned pseudonyms in the transcripts, data artifacts, and the dissertation itself. An overview of the participant demographics is presented in Table 3. To help ensure participant names remained confidential throughout the duration of the research inquiry, all data was stored and maintained within password-protected data files. I was the sole person with direct access to all confidential information pertaining to the participants. All work for this study was conducted with the authorization of the University of North Florida's review board.

Table 3*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Artistic Area	Number of Years in Black Arts
Augusta	Black	Female	Visual Arts	3
Dylan	White	Male	Vocal	1
India	Black	Female	Band	3
Langston	Black	Male	Visual Arts	1
Larry	Black	Male	Creative Writing	2
Lauryn	Multi-Racial	Female	Vocal	3
Louis	Black	Male	Vocal	3
Sheryl	Black	Female	Theatre	3
Zora	Black	Trans	Vocal	3

Data Collection

To explore student experiences with the Black Arts organization, I developed research tools, methods, and procedures to maintain sufficient open-endedness as to allow participants to freely express their perspectives and explore their own meaning-making of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data were collected through:

- Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs), settings where participants learned in public through the implementation of protocols that elicited group discourse (Hughes, 2017),
- semi-structured interviews, where I prepared a limited number of questions in advance and asked pertinent and extending follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), and

- reflective memos, which aimed to capture and process my ongoing ideas and discoveries as a researcher. (Ravitch & Carl, 2021)

The data collection methods of the CLEs and semi-structured interviews aligned with my critical phenomenological design, which aimed to explore the participant's consciousness, to understand the phenomenon itself, the way of perceiving life through experiences, and the meanings around them (Fuster-Guillen, 2019). Data collection consisted of two virtual CLEs using Zoom and one-on-one interview with selected participants. My approach to collecting research data is demonstrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Data Collection Processes



Each of the participants were involved with at least one data collection event. For instance, I had one data collected experience each with Lauryn, Larry, and Louis. Each of the other seven participants were involved with two or more data collection events, with Augusta being involved with all four: both CLEs, an individual interview, and a Member Check Interview.

Table 4

Data Collection by Participant

Pseudonym	Community Learning Exchange #1	Community Learning Exchange #2	Individual Interview	Member Check Interview
Augusta	X	X	X	X
Dylan	X		X	X
India	X		X	X
Langston	X	X	X	
Larry	X			
Lauryn			X	
Louis	X			
Sheryl	X	X		X
Zora	X	X		

I carefully constructed each of the data collection events to correspond with one or more of my research question and sub-questions. For instance, I designed the CLEs and individual interviews to correspond with my first research sub-question, “*How do students experience their involvement in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists in ways that uplift and magnify their voices and agency?*” These data collection events each produced data sources. For instance, CLEs produced data sources including CLE protocols, artifacts, and transcripts. Interviews generated interview transcripts.

Finally, each of these data sources were triangulated with others including member check interviews and the transcripts they yielded, as well as reflective memos I wrote throughout the duration of this study. Each of these data collection events and the data sources they produced are described in the following sections.

Table 5

Research Questions and Data Sources

Research Sub-Question	Data Sources	Triangulated by
How do students experience their involvement in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists in ways that uplift and magnify their voices and agency?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CLE Protocol • CLE Artifacts • Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective Memos • Member Checks
How do student experiences in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists inform their perspectives of deficit perspectives often held toward Black students and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CLE Protocol • CLE Artifacts • Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective Memos • Member Checks
How do student experiences in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists inform their perspectives of deficit perspectives often held toward Black artists and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CLE Protocol • CLE Artifacts • Interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective Memos • Member Checks

Community Learning Exchange

A Community Learning Exchange (CLE) provides an opportunity for diverse community members to engage in a collective leadership act and meaning making (Guajardo et al., 2015). Originally designed to assist community organizers, leaders, and educators engage in transformational change processes, CLEs have been increasingly used to inform and support social and educational research (Militello et al., 2021). Participants engage in protocols that invite the sharing of their stories, wisdom, and experiences. CLEs provide a framework that allow for facilitators to purposefully create and implement a Gracious Space which participants can engage in deep learning. Hughes (2017) suggest that CLEs should encourage “a spirit and a setting where we invite the stranger and learn in public.” Furthermore, CLEs are guided by 5 rational axioms or guiding elements (Guajardo et al., 2015):

1. *Learning and Leadership are a Dynamic Social Process:* Social relationships are at the core of leadership and effective school and community change efforts.
2. *Conversations are Critical and Central Pedagogical Processes:* Gracious space and healthy relationships are focal to the meaning-making process, where storytelling and conversation are the mediating tools.
3. *The People Closest to the Issues are Best Situated to Discover Answers to Local Concerns:* This learning process grants participants an opportunity to find their voice and places the power of conversation and change onto the CLE members.
4. *Crossing Boundaries Enriches the Development and Educational Process:* Engaging in learning and meaning-making processes allows the participants to experience a world outside of their daily comfort zone. During this process

crossing boundaries such as geographic borders, economic borders, age, culture, racial borders, gender, and faith, expands curiosity and imagination.

5. *Hope and Change are Built on Assets and Dreams of Locals and their Communities:* By empowering communities to develop a language that describes their experiences language, encourages reframing of their daily conditions from deficits and helps create alternate possibilities and solutions.

I designed CLEs for this study by honoring the guiding CLE axioms. This included the use or development of a variety of protocols and strategies which I then used to intentionally foster collective learning, with a focus on dialogical means. Others have noted that “the CLE axioms create conditions by which doctoral students can engage in purposeful data collection strategies specifically focused on connecting with often marginalized voices” (Militello et al., 2021)

For this study, each CLE followed a semi-structured process which included a community building activity to help establish relationship and trust between the participants. I began each CLE with a review and discussion about the purpose of the CLE, an activity to help invoke and co-create Gracious Space norms with the opportunity to co-construct additional norms as needed, and collaborative learning and dialogic, art-based protocols, including the use of learning circles. These CLEs generated varied data and artifacts from participants, which were then used to determine themes that were further explored and discussed in follow up participant interviews and the subsequent CLE. SAs Stringer (2014) stated, researchers can obtain a significant amount of information by reviewing documents and artifacts. Examples of artifacts collected from CLEs include individual and group notes, co-constructed images, and transcripts.

Semi-Structured Interviews

In addition to the data collected through and from CLEs, this study also included semi-structured interviews with participants. For most participants, these interviews took place following their participation in the CLEs. These individual interviews provided opportunities for participants to reflect further around their experiences in Black Arts in ways unencumbered by others. These interviews provided additional opportunities for me to pose other questions that reflected constructs and themes that arose during the CLEs. These interviews following CLEs supported an iterative reflective process designed to allow participants to explore their experience in the Black Arts organization as it relates to the phenomenon of study as well as how they experience the developmental process embodied by the CLEs and how they relate to the research questions (Stringer, 2014)

Interviews are one of the primary data collection methods for qualitative, phenomenological studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). For this study, the researcher recruited a subset of five participants from the CLEs to take part in either one or two one-hour interviews. Each of these interviews were conducted through Zoom and they were recorded and stored digitally in the researcher's secure OneDrive. The purpose of these interviews for this research study was to allow the researcher to have in-depth conversations with those closest involved in the Black Arts organization and process and can "challenge long-held assumptions and help recast ineffective public policies" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These interviews created additional opportunities for participants to provide a more detailed account of their experience of the phenomenon under study (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 142). These interviews were very useful as they provided rich and nuanced perspectives of each participant's views, thoughts, and

remembrances. This allowed me to put together descriptions from various interviews to create portraits of complicated processes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 3).

The interviews were semi-structured and organized around three predetermined questions with the remaining questions having been formulated following the analysis of the CLE data. The semi-structured interview consisted of three larger questions based on the areas of inquiry related to the three research questions. The first area of inquiry, related to their experiences at their performing and visual arts schools. The second area of inquiry, related to the topic of creating student voice and student agency, The third area of inquiry, related to affirming the assets of Black youth, Black artists, and Black community.

The semi-structured format was beneficial because it allowed me to respond in a way that follows a customized conversational path with each participant as the participant's worldview and new ideas on the topic emerge (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Van Manen (1990), the interview should unfold as a conversation and the participant becomes a co-investigator. This allowed me to develop holistic descriptions of experiences and realities of the phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The semi-structured design also helped me in my efforts to strive for consistency of information obtained but also allowed me with the flexibility to ask follow-up questions (Patton, 1990). In sum, these semi-structured questions provided me and participants with opportunities to explore to great depth how they experienced Black Arts.

Interview Artifacts

Data collection was qualitative and took the form of individual semi-structured interviews with five participants. Four participants were asked to select one artifact (song lyrics, poem, painting, or picture) that is participant-produced or published that defines their Black Arts experience. As the participants presented their artifacts, the interviews were conducted using a

semi-structured interview plan and as themes arose in their description, additional probing questions were asked. The use of artifacts in this research process afforded in-depth insight of how the participants made meaning of their experiences through artistic form. Data was analyzed thematically. Qualitative researchers have praised the use of visual imagery aiding in increasing the efficiency of knowledge sharing (Wallwey & Kajfez, 2023).

Reflective Memo

In qualitative research, data collection processes are not linear but rather iterative and inductive as each process builds and influences one another (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Reflective memos are a central tool in qualitative research as they can be a part of any phase throughout the study, and this form of phenomenological note-taking captures the meaning-making of the researcher in real time and then provides data to refer to and consider the refinement of your thinking over time (Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Reflective memos used for data collection serve as ‘connective tissue’ between the collection and analysis process (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this study, these first-person notes allowed me to document my experiences and reflections throughout each phase of the process. I wrote reflective memos throughout the study, including during the pre-cycle and design process. While reflective memos are mainly conceptual (Miles & Huberman, 1994), at the data analysis stage of this study they assist the researcher in moving from raw data to explanations and meaning making.

Memos are not limited to thinking about a phenomenon but are textual representations of the question(s) the researcher ask themselves as they analyze the data (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1995). Memos may also include “observations and reflections about various aspects of the study, including interactions with participants, data collection instruments, skill as the researcher, and

ways that the researcher think they are influencing the data” (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p. 108).

For this study, I drafted reflective memos immediately after the Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs), participant interviews, and when reading and coding CLE and interview transcripts.

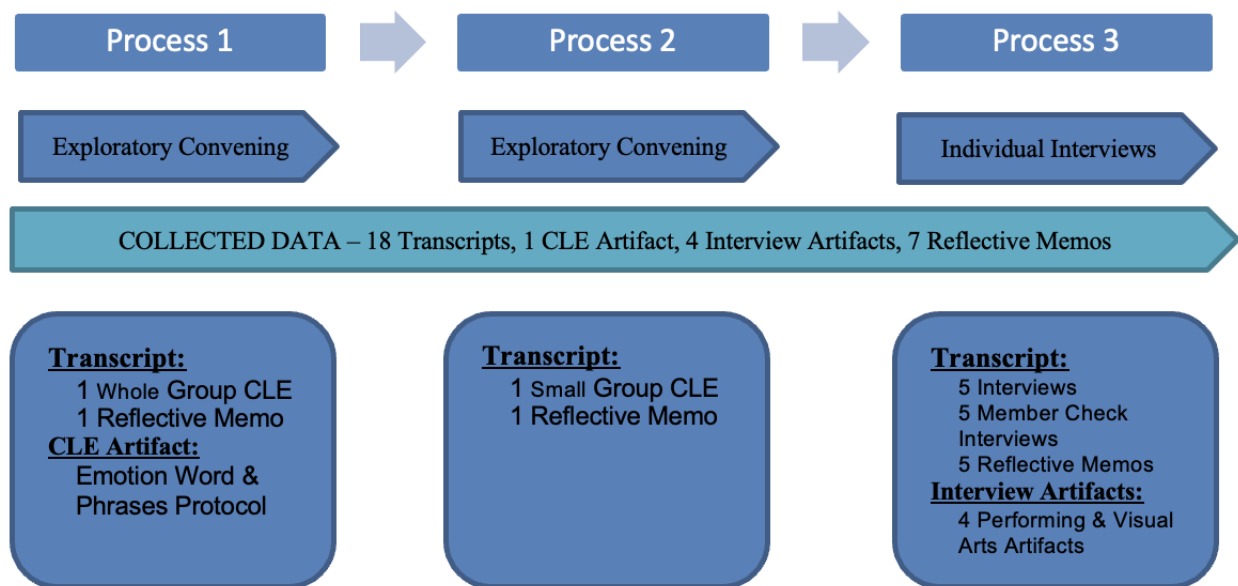
Through reflective memos, I sought to uncover what was occurring in the data collection and analysis process to enhance the opportunity for the reader to gain an experiential understanding of the case in an ongoing interpretive role (Stake, 1995).

Research Process

As shown in Figure 3, I generated and collected data through community learning exchanges (CLEs), semi-structured interviews, and reflective memos.

Figure 3

Research Study Data Collection Process



During Process I of this study, I collected and analyzed one transcript of a whole group CLE convening and a CLE artifact which included a protocol activity where participants identified emotion words and phrases that described their experience in the Black Arts organization and then emotion words and phrases that described their experience in their academic and artistic courses at the performing and visual arts school. The rhythm of the whole group CLE convening started with participants introducing themselves, followed by an activity where I asked the participants in advance to bring an object or something digital that represents or captures their experiences or invokes a strong memory during their participation in the Black Arts organization. This was followed with the emotion word and phrases whiteboard compare and contrast protocol to allow the participants to use emotion words or phrases that capture and communicate their experiences in the Black Arts organization and the emotion words or phrases that capture and communicate their experiences at their performing and visual arts high school. After all participants included their words and phrases the participants selected words and phrases from each column they wanted to explore with the other group members. Guided by probing questions, participants engaged in storytelling and reflection to provide context to how their experiences connected to the words.

During Process II of this study, I generated the agenda based on the themes from Process I that I wanted to explore more closely, ranging from empowerment and mentor-mentee relationships to fear and microaggressions. I intentionally scheduled this CLE in a smaller group to include participants who represented the various racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identity demographic backgrounds from the first CLE. Additionally, selection criteria were determined by their level of depth in their responses to the emotion word and phrases compare and contrast protocol completed in the first CLE. Operating in a small group increased equity of voice and

collective learning. Additionally, the writing of a reflective memo after the CLE was used for data collection.

As I moved into Process III of this study, I interviewed four participants and conducted five follow-up interviews. These interviews generated transcripts as well as performing and visual arts artifacts, all of which were collected during the individual interviews. The individual interviews were in a semi-structured format with questions that aligned with the research questions:

- Lead Question: What are the experiences of students involved in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists?
- Sub Question: How do students experience their involvement in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists in ways that uplift and magnify their voices and agency?
- Sub Question: How do students experience their involvement in Black Arts, a Black student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists inform deficit perspectives often held toward Black students and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted?
- Sub Question: How do students experience their involvement in Black Arts, a Black student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists inform deficit perspectives often held toward Black art and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted?

All participants were asked the same general questions, however, probing questions varied per participant.

Before the interview, I tasked each participant to identify something created by them or by someone else that represented their experiences in Black Art. Two of the four participants provided lyrics to songs, one participant provided a self-written poem, and the fourth participant provided a painting. During the interview, I asked the participants to share their meaning or connection to the artistic piece and its significance. I requested participants to share these interview artifacts and explore their meaning with me to align my data collection methods with my commitment as a researcher to participants' opportunities to express themselves through their art.

Participant interviews, interview artifacts, reflective memos, and community learning exchanges were the data collection methods used for this study. These methods took on a social justice and activist approach that empowered participants to speak their truth unapologetically and without fear. These processes yielded four themes:

- student perception of school: inside and outside of Black art,
- emancipatory resistance,
- collective action, and
- art as transformation.

Data Analysis

An early advocate and developer of phenomenological research, Van Manen (2016) posited that the level of effectiveness of data analysis predicates on the initial phenomenological question or questions. The questions should begin with “an element of wonder” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 298). The wonder of this research study is *what are the experiences of students involved in Black Arts, a student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists?* This section begins by considering the phenomenological approach of Colaizzi’s (1978)

method for bracketing and analyzing data through utilizing a multi-step process. As I collected data throughout this study, analyses of these qualitative data sets was ongoing.

Many researchers have developed models for analyzing qualitative data. For instance, Praveena and Sasikumar (2021) outlined four steps in the analysis of data in descriptive phenomenological research: (a) bracketing, (b) intuiting, (c) analyzing, and (d) describing. For this study, employed Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step analysis process:

1. Each transcript is read on multiple passes, to obtain a deeper understanding of the content.
2. Critical statements that pertain directly to the phenomenon under study are extracted from the transcripts.
3. From the extracted critical statements, meanings and themes are formulated
4. Organize the meanings and themes into clusters or categories
5. Integrate the findings into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study
6. Members check the findings with the participants to determine if the universal description compares with their personal experiences.
7. Incorporating any changes offered by the participants into the final description of the phenomenon.

Following Colaizzi's seven-step process allows the researcher to generate an interpretation that symbolizes or translates the data (Colaizzi, 1978). Utilizing this process, after transcripts have been reviewed for multiple cycles (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the researcher will code the transcripts for emergent concepts, themes, and examples (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Theming the data is the most appropriate coding method for phenomenological studies that utilize interviews and participant-generated artifacts (Saldaña, 2021). This approach utilizes two specific analytic

lenses: “what something is (the manifest) and what something means (the latent),” as per Saldaña (2021, p. 268). For this research study on how students experienced their involvement in a Black Arts organization within their performance and visual arts high school, the data analysis process began by developing codes, which led to the development of higher-level theoretical constructs and categories, where the research can explore “patterns, connections, and higher-order themes” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 271).

Throughout the data analysis phase of the study, I engaged in reflective memo writing about the coding process (Saldaña, 2021). This coding process prepared me to combine concepts and themes to generate a description of the phenomenon (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Finally, I created the conditions for participant validation strategies (Barbour, 2001). Participant validation strategies, such as member checks, give participants an opportunity to react to the researcher’s interpretations of their reality (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Through virtual follow-up meetings facilitated by me, participants were able to provide their perspectives on the data analysis and findings by reflecting on and critiquing codes and emerging theories presented (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The value of implementing participant validation comes when the researcher responds to participant’s critiques and amendments to enhance the final description of the phenomenon of study as well as the trustworthiness of the study (De Chesnay, 2014; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research methods, the relationship between the researcher and the research is key (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). The identification of researcher positionality is critical to ensuring the credibility of this research. The researchers’ beliefs, value systems, and moral stance are inseparable from the research process. I am a 31-year-old, Black

female from the northeast region of the United States. I am currently in my eighth year as an educator at a performing and visual arts high school in the southeast region of the United States. I am embedded in the school site of this research study where I hold the position of a school counselor. Maxwell (2013) noted the personal experience as a source of motivation (p. 24). Within this context, my role as a school counselor is to improve student success for all students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program through academic development, social and emotional development, and post-secondary readiness (American School Counselor Association, 2022). Given my position at the performing and visual arts school, alumni may be both eager and reluctant to share their experiences. There are some who will see this study as an opportunity to improve the educational experiences of Black students, while others may be hesitant to speak in front of a school counselor who is currently employed at the school site. My interactions with these former students and Black Arts organization members during their matriculation at the performing and visual arts school sparked the research study and research questions.

It is essential for me to consider how my personal biases may have impacted the research. The researcher's interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In articulating the aims of this study with former students, I expressed the shared role in the co-constructing of data and acknowledged them as experts of their own experience (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Additionally, given my strong passion to advocate for marginalized populations, I relied on critical friends group to engage in dialogic engagement (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). During regularly scheduled monthly meetings, we engaged in reflective protocols to confront biases and challenge thinking as it relates to issues of power and equity (Frey, 2011; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Chapter Summary

The intention of this study was to examine the experiences of students involved in Black Arts, a student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artist. I elected to use qualitative methods to explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and reflections from their perspective using Community Learning Exchanges and participant interviews. The data collection process involves obtaining information from the performing and visual arts school alumni who participated in the Black Arts organization in terms of what they experienced and the context in which they experienced it. The phenomenological framework explored the lens to which I will use to collect and analyze data. Data analysis will be conducted utilizing Colaizzi's (1978) seven step analysis process followed by Saldana's coding process to interpret the data. Lastly, as the researcher my personal and professional stance was also described to contribute to the credibility of the research.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This qualitative research study explored what I can learn from the experiences of members of a Black, student-created, student-led organization called Black Arts that focused on uplifting Black art and artists. The study was designed to understand how the participants' experiences may have implications for culturally responsive and sustaining practices at performing and visual arts school, and K-12 schools serving racially and ethnically diverse student populations. I developed and utilized a research methodology that allowed me to amplify their voices as individuals while allowing them to collectively make meaning of their experiences. Participants' perspectives of their experiences, and the findings that resulted from my analyses, hold implications for culturally responsive and sustaining practices. The following themes emerged, including:

- student experiences: inside and outside of Black Arts,
- emancipatory resistance,
- collective action, and
- art as transformation.

The first theme, *student experiences: inside and outside of Black Arts*, characterized participants' perceptions of how they experienced the Black Arts organization and the school environment at the predominately white performing and visual arts high school. Experiences within the Black Arts organization were described as a welcoming and inclusive environment where participants felt their authentic selves, while participant's experiences outside of Black Arts and within the school context were described as having a lack of Black representation and consumed with microaggressions. This section continues to describe the obstacles they faced in the Black Arts organization and how they impacted them as Black students and artists.

The second theme, *emancipatory resistance*, were acts described by the participants that created a sense of belonging and enhanced Black solidarity among the Black Arts organization members in order to find comfort and acceptance in their educational environment. To foster a sense of belonging, participants built community through creating a family dynamic amongst its members. Their efforts to create a safe and validating space through love and solidarity made Black Arts members feel a part of the family.

Collective action demonstrated how the participants viewed the student-created, student-led organization as a community where each member had value to bring to the Black Arts organization. This was created through creating a shared learning culture, community building, and acknowledging that Black Arts members are best situated to take action to pose solutions.

Finally, *art as transformation* was described by the participants as their interpretation of how their understanding of the purpose of art evolved during their participation in the Black Arts organization. Participants used their membership in the Black Arts organization to go against what European-based ideologies deemed as high-quality art and instead engaged in artistic exploration grounded in their interests and culture.

Student Perception of School: Inside and Outside of Black Art

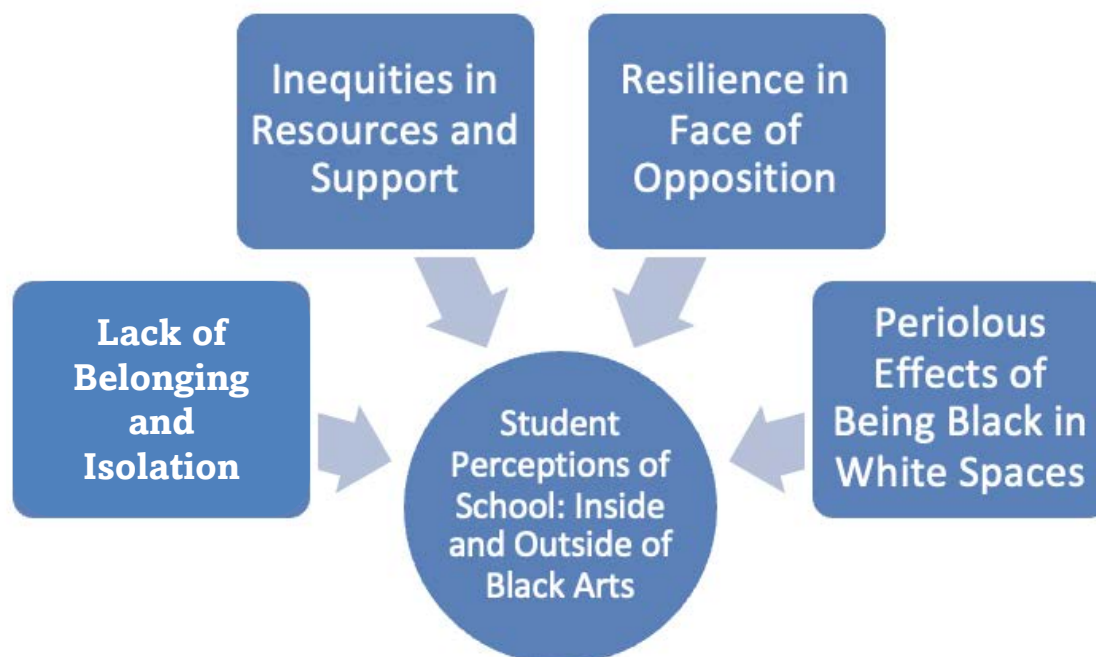
“[Black Art] meant being able to share Black joy, to share our Black spaces, and to be vulnerable in our Black spaces, because there weren't many Black spaces for us to go into and be able to be free and to be seen.” – Sheryl, study participant.

Students in the Black Arts organization shared about and reflected on how their involvement profoundly impacted their lives while they were a part of the organization as well as in ways that have endured since. Study participants also drew sharp contrasts between their personal and collective experiences as organizers and performers in the Black Arts organization, and their experiences in the school otherwise, including their experiences in their school art area

departments, their academic courses, and in the school generally. Just as they experienced the Black Arts organization as a space where they could feel included and recognized for who they were, they often shared that they frequently felt discouraged, minimized, and sometimes even disrespected during the other facets of their experiences in their school. Further, participants in the study expressed a keen awareness of how the school, which nested the Black Arts organization and many of the teachers and administrators in the school and school district, sometimes behaved in ways that were viewed as threats to the survival and persistence of the organization. These included threats of shutdown and the systematic denial of resources and support that participants believed other comparable programs in the school received. Further, the sharp contrast between what participants experienced in the Black Arts organization and outside of it and what they perceived as resistance to the organization by teachers and administrators impacted them in ways that they explored and disclosed during this study. This section will explore participants' feelings of belonging and isolation within the school, inequities of resources and support within the Black Arts organization, their resistance in the face of threats to end the organization, and the perilous effects of being Black in predominately white spaces at their school. Figure 4 is a visual representation of the subthemes for *student perceptions of school: inside and outside of Black Arts*.

Figure 4

Theme: Student Perceptions of School: Inside and Outside of Black Arts



Lack of Belonging and Isolation

Study participants often discussed feelings of belonging while describing their experiences in the Black Arts organization and isolation while describing their experiences at the performing and visual arts school. Participants identified that the constant feeling of isolation and lack of belonging was one of the reasons why the Black Arts organization was first created. It was established as an organization created to give participants a space of belonging, given that many participants reflected on feeling there were limited spaces or settings on the school campus where Black students felt represented and welcomed. Study participants expressed that this lack of belonging had a negative impact on their well-being. For example, India noted,

You know, it's just so that I can use all their (the performing and visual art school's) available resources. And that rendered a lack of belonging because, in the ensemble I was

in, I remember only having three Black people in the jazz band. And there were and still are no black faculty in the music department. So, it became very isolating.

Aligned with India's experience, participants found that lack of representation in the artistic and academic classrooms often led to feelings of isolation. This had a ripple effect on participants' lack of belonging at the performing and visual arts school. Some participants perceived the feeling of isolation as an intentional act to diminish the collective power of Black students. Sheryl stated, "As long as they keep telling us that we don't belong and keep putting one Black person in each AP (advanced placement) class, and, you know, continue to divide us, then that's where we lose our strength." Their perception of losing strength was indicative of feeling out of place in predominately white spaces. Participants felt that within the performing and visual arts school, there was an absence in Black solidarity in that space due to a lack of a critical mass of Black students and an assumption that non-Black students were not looking out for their best interest. "If you isolate a black person, we don't have anything to connect with, I just see a bunch of white people in a room." As Black participants have navigated predominately white spaces, they shared that they often must portray a different version of themselves, as most white spaces are based on Eurocentric ideals and standards. In return, this has led Black participants to feel outcast or uncomfortable. Sheryl added, "If I walk into a space, and I see only white people, I feel kind of out of place."

India described the performing and visual arts school as not being the close environment she hoped for. "A part of me was like, man like I signed up to join this community and whatnot. But I just feel like basically my value and my worth here (at the school) is placed in my talent, or how much I can contribute to the music making that was classical music." The participants perceived that a Black student's worth is defined by their artistic and/or academic contribution to

the classroom. Students described some educators as having a deficit perspective regarding the Black students' academic or artistic abilities. "I came across a lot of teachers where I could just already tell that there were biases and predispositions that they already had. And you could hear it in their language and how they spoke to you." This preconceived notion of their capabilities added to Black students' feelings of isolation and a disconnect between them and educators within the school.

Participants agree that there were various moments when they believed that educators were not creating inclusive spaces. Sheryl stated, "They kept telling us that we don't belong." Sheryl continued with the topic of the lack of inclusive spaces in her reflection of requesting a resource for musical theatre, a staff member advised her to ensure that a white student made the request alongside her as it may increase her chances for approval of the resource.

When we were trying to get The Hands production added into a school-wide performance, she (school staff) told us make sure you're clear, and you're concise. Make sure you bring a white student with you so you're not too intimidating.

The notion that Navigating classrooms with a lack of Black representation or navigating school environments where Black students must make intentional strides to overcome teachers' deficit perspectives has led to Black participants feeling isolated and lacking belonging. These feelings of isolation were then magnified once they became members of the Black Arts organization, due to their observations of inequities of resources and support being provided to the organization.

Inequities in Resources and Support

Being part of a student-led organization that is heavily community supported but low on school support required participants not to get easily frustrated but rather learn how to be resourceful. Compared to other clubs and organizations established at the performing and visual

arts school, participants perceived that their organization received fewer financial resources and less educator support than traditional academic or artistic-based clubs and organizations.

Reflecting on her three years in the Black Arts organization, India noted:

There was always some sort of fashion of trying to make ends meet...like there was always something that we were lacking, whether it was time, resources, or people.

There's always something missing and a lot of stuff almost falling apart in the beginning. Given the lack of educator support, if financial or logistical resources were needed, participants perceived that school faculty and staff hesitated to provide organization members with the requested accommodations or supplies. Langston's belief on faculty and staff's reservations to support the Black Arts organization were:

I think sometimes we forget how hard it is to go against authority or go against perceived power. I think it's very daunting for a teacher to decide, hey, I'm going to go against what a majority of faculty and staff wants to do and support something that they might see as harmful. And the teachers that decided to support are very brave and very loving. I also don't think that most teachers were against it, but maybe some of it was just, this is what I'm supposed to do. This is what I'm supposed to say, so I'm going to say it because that's what's in my job description.

In addition to the possibility of some school faculty and staff members being hesitant to support the organization due to concern of what their colleagues might say, participants also believed that some school faculty and staff did not fully support the organization due to their non-approval of the participants' artistic selections, which often displayed the racial tension and experiences the Black students were facing.

Unlike other clubs at the performing and visual arts school, this organization was student-led, which meant that there was no direct adult overseer; therefore, it was the responsibility of the leaders of the Black Arts organization to seek assistance from community stakeholders and specified teachers who had expressed interest in the organization.

“We’re kids,” says Sheryl, as she shared her frustration with educators rejecting the opportunity to support their growth as students. As new members of the Black Arts organization that focused on uplifting Black art and artists, participants assumed their enrollment at a performing and visual art school would incline educators to want to be a part of their artistic growth and innovation. However, during their membership in the organization, participants came to realize that most educators did not support the mission of the organization and it was up to them as students to become more creative to meet organizational needs.

Sheryl’s reaction to the dearth of support from performing and visual arts educators exhibits frustration and disappointment: “You’re not sponsoring your own student who is learning from you? You’re supposed to support how I branch out, learn, and grow.” There was a consensus among participants that their dedicated arts discipline (music, dance, visual arts, or theatre) teachers did not support the Black Arts organization in ways they believed were necessary for their growth and success. “I can’t say that my own performance theater teacher, or my own musical theater teacher, was involved in this process, or at least came into one rehearsal and critiqued our pieces like how we would do in a regular class.”

The standards for quality artistic expression held by educators at the performing and visual arts school tended to reflect a bias towards European and classical traditions. However, since the Black Arts organization is rooted in Black artistic forms that were not Eurocentric in nature, participants perceived this as a possible reason why educators did not support their

organization. Participants believed that most educators did not see them and their artistic abilities as comparable to those of their white peers. “It was as if they didn't take us seriously,” Larry noted. The feeling of not being taken seriously made the participants believe that teachers had preconceived notions of who Black students and Black artists were. India’s perception echoes this observation::

I think that most teachers on the first day of school see a black student and will probably think that they're loud or might be disruptive throughout the year. I might need to pay attention to that student a little bit more. That student might end up being the class clown. I think most of the time they think that the student might not take their work as seriously as other students...being one of two or three Black students in my AP (advanced placement) world history class, sometimes based on the teacher’s response, I think it's a little surprising for them to hear eloquent Black students. I think it throws them off guard.

The assumptions held by Black participants and non-Black participants as to why some educators did not support or value the Black Arts organization varied considerably. As a non-Black participant, Dylan emphasized his frustration and lack of understanding as to why an educator wouldn't support the organization or possessed certain prejudices regarding the capabilities of Black students. Dylan stated, “There was a disconnect...and there's no reason not to give full-fledged support.” Other participants characterized the rationale for the lack of support in terms of the application of European-based artistic standards that the school promoted as markers of quality. Therefore, anything that deviated from those traditional norms was not held in high regard. Langston explained, “I think that comes down to the teachers in the areas of the arts were brought up in a way that they are set in the artistic expectations that they came up with, which may be inherently against us.” Still others added the suspicion that arts discipline

teachers were concerned that the Black Arts organization would receive more praise than their school-mandated artistic performances. Augusta alluded to this line of reasoning:

I honestly think that is, it's rooted in a lot of jealousy and envy. We are disrupting the traditional power dynamic. Traditionally, performances are teacher-led, and students don't have as much creative control. And so, with Black Arts, when you flip that on its head, people get scared, and people are scared of what it's going to produce and if it will be better than their traditional version.

Zora's reflection spoke to the notion that some people of the mainstream race were scared or fearful of publicly offering full support to the organization. This perception of fear included educators at the performing and visual arts school as well as non-Black students. "They (non-Black educators and students) would offer support, in very reserved ways. They didn't want to engage with Black Arts too much just out of fear of perception. They would set some distance between the actual club and themselves." Participants described this group of people as "hidden supporters," which include those who would not openly engage and interact with the members of the Black Arts organization yet were willing to consume their art by attending their annual performing and visual arts performance. "I would see them at the performance, but when it came to interacting with them outside of the performance, actually to engage beyond just consuming, that never really happened. I just feel like most of them are just kind of scared of engaging."

Regardless of whether they had some resources or no resources, or some educator support or no educator support, the Black Arts organization found creative ways to persevere and sustain the life of this organization. As stated by India, "There was always something that we were lacking, whether it was time, resources, or people," which led participants to navigate the

execution of the organization each year with limited resources, educator, and student support, forcing them to rely more heavily on each other to keep the organization afloat.

Resilience in the Face of Opposition

Black student organizations have been championed as a safe space in predominately white educational settings; however, research participants believed that Black organizations often endure hardships that leads to the closure of the organization. Through critical reflections about their experiences that occurred during their membership in the Black Arts organization, participants shed light on their encounters with school leaders and school district officials' efforts to limit or dismantle the organization. Despite the challenges and opposition that members of the organization faced, they remained resilient as they held on to the mission and purpose of the Black Arts organization. This section discusses how participants remained resilient during their experiences of opposition.

“They belittled us and tried to threaten us,” said Larry, describing the impudence the Black Arts organization received from school leaders during his junior year at the performing and visual arts school. When asked why participants believed they were belittled or threatened, their responses centered around the white gaze. Participants noted that they attended a performing and visual arts school with predominately white educators and school leaders; therefore, the white gaze and white perspective was a lens constantly looked through on the school’s campus. Langston stated that educators and school leaders saw the Black Arts organization members as invasive species through the white gaze.

I think the root of it is, when you see something that may be beautiful but different, you don't want it to move about on its own, right? Almost like an invasive species. Pythons are beautiful creatures but let loose, they go out of control because nothing keeps them in

check. I think that this organization, and then to some extent, Black people in general, are kind of seen that way.

Langston continues by adding commentary on what he perceives educator's thoughts are regarding the Black Arts organization.

Yes, our organization is beautiful, but it is also student-led. We're (educators) kind of giving kids the opportunity to run loose with barely any adult supervision. And I think that is scary. On top of the idea that these are a bunch of Black students. What are they going to say?

It was the fear of Black truth that the participants perceived as a possible reason why they received opposition from school leaders and educators. Regarding their truth and experiences, participants confirmed that their membership in the organization was also during the time when the United States was undergoing a time of increased racial and social unrest, resulting in school leaders and school district officials closely monitoring situations and organizations they believed may lead to uncomfortable racial or cultural discourse.

Participants reflected on an assembly during their attendance at the performing and visual arts school that school officials arranged to discuss their concerns on the 'inappropriate' usage of Black student voice, and the possible need for censorship. As she reflected on the assembly, Augusta shared her perspective on why the organization was perceived as a threat. "He (an educational leader) said something along the lines of, 'What do you think parents are going to think that are not as open-minded? Or conservative white parents, what are they going to think?'" in relation to their artistic selections at their annual performing and visual arts performance. Participants found it concerning that school leaders were more focused on the impact their Black truth would have on the perception of the school among white parents versus focusing on

addressing the challenges Black students were facing. School leaders' lack of concern for the Black student experience strengthened the Black Arts organization's ability to become more resilient as they face adversities.

Resilience is a fluid process that participants had to utilize as a protective method to navigate various oppositions and adversities they faced as Black students at the predominately white-instructed performing and visual arts school. Sheryl stated, "our survival techniques and tactics were to build up that callous towards the racist world." Participants shared that they had to develop their resilient mindset each year in preparation for challenges plaguing the Black Arts organization. Langston stated, "I think most people, especially those who were there multiple years, understood what this is going to look like throughout the year. It's going to be rough because it happens every year." Despite facing challenges each school year, participants recognized the importance of resiliency, this organization, and their annual performing and visual arts performance.

The Black Arts organization's annual performance was described by Zora as, "it's not just a show; for most of us, it's our defining moment. And you have to fight for your defining moment." Participants saw it as their duty to be resilient, to protect and fight for the continuation of this organization and their annual performance. They felt like they had something to prove.

Zora stated:

We wanted to show the audience and everyone that the people of color we have something to offer too. This performance is just as important and just as amazing to watch compared to other school-mandated performances, regardless of whether the school administration wants to show it.

Resilience in the face of opposition was a survival tactic used by participants to overcome the actions taken by school leaders and school district officials to limit or dismantle the Black Arts organization. Their efforts to limit or dismantle the organization could be credited to their fear of publicly displaying Black experiences, thus negatively impacting the perception of the performing and visual arts school. Despite the opposition participants faced, they were able to execute resilience by holding true to the organization's purpose and memorializing their annual performing and visual arts showcase as their defining moment.

The Perilous Effects of Being Black in White Spaces

Conformity, code-switching, stereotypes, microaggressions, and fear are the experiences Black Arts organizational members faced as their organization was nested in a predominately white performing and visual arts school. Participants had the daily task of learning to navigate spaces where they believed they could not be their authentic selves. The suppression of their Blackness and their constant pursuit to prove the deficit perspectives of their teachers and peers wrong are strategies that some participants believed were necessary for survival within the context of the school environment. Through the usage of emotion words and phrases extracted from the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) protocol artifact (Appendix A), as well as other anecdotal data, this section will examine participants' explanations of the perilous effects of being Black in white spaces and its impact on their personal, academic, and artistic lives.

The CLE protocol artifact captured and communicated emotion words and phrases that the participants experienced in their academic and artistic classes at the performing and visual arts school in comparison to the emotion words and phrases that the participants experienced within the Black Arts organization. Participants identified that their emotion words and phrases used to describe their experiences within the performing and visual arts school embodied

elements of “racism, oppression and marginalization.” Participants freely spoke of the words they added to Appendix A and provided examples of how they experienced that word or phrase. As India shared her observation of racism, oppression, and marginalization being the throughlines of the Black experience in a white setting, participants shared that it was frustrating and that they experienced racial battle fatigue. “It was very tiring, honestly. By day, I had this wall up, but by night, I was home and completely free. I’m just tired of it,” described Sheryl. Participants felt they had to suppress their Blackness during the school day but were free to be the authentic version of themselves when they were with the Black Arts organization. To the participants, the organization was “home,” as noted by Langston, “my safe place,” which was added by Zora.

To wear a mask in white spaces was a conscious decision made by some participants to codeswitch in white spaces in an effort to be seen as more palatable to non-Black peers and education faculty. Participants described codeswitching as intentional efforts to adjust their traditional language and behavior in order to seek approval of the white gaze. India considered codeswitching as a means to be seen as more palatable to white people, noting:

We have to make sure that we're always on our P's and Q's, or else. If we say one thing or we say one horrible sentence, they look at us differently. They're like, oh, she's not smart, or you know she doesn't have what it takes to be an artist.

The constant codeswitching led participants to develop a deep fear of failure and less confidence in their abilities.

The Black participants shared that they felt an obligation to be better than the teachers' possible preconceived notions about Black students and Black artists. To live up to this internal obligation, there were times when some participants felt as if they fell short. Participants

believed that individual Black people had to carry the burden of all Black people, which led to their fear of not being good enough. “During the day, in class, there are these stereotypical molds you have to fit in,” and if a student of color did not fit in that mold, India believed, “it kind of depreciates their value.” This resulted in an educational setting that participants described as a tense environment, suffocating, feeling like second best, stressful, boxed in, draining, and unable to freely speak their minds. Some participants processed these feelings and emotions and internalized them as fear, while others found it to be a source of motivation.

Several participants found fear as a throughline in their experiences at the performing and visual arts school. “I think a lot of it stems from a fear of failure, but not exactly like the fear of failure being public. I think it stings a lot more when you fail in front of people that don’t look like you.” The internal obligation to be better than preconceived notions about Black students and artists wasn’t just about teachers’ perceptions but also their non-Black peers. Participants felt their duty was to be better than the stereotypes assigned to the Black community, and if they did not live up to those standards, it was seen as a defeat. For participant Langston, living up to those standards added to their overwhelming fear. “I think that that fear of failure, I think I’ve always carried an air of that fear of failing. It led to a point of not trying and not committing to giving the effort because of that overwhelming fear.”

The assigned student leaders of the Black Arts organization held members accountable when they believed the group needed a reminder that Black students must be better than the deficit perspectives often held against them. Dylan described an experience when one of the student leaders called a meeting to reflect on their actions that were out of character:

She (the organization leader) just stopped everything and had everyone sit down. She reminded us of what it means to be Black people in America and to have this opportunity

in this organization, it's just rare. So, we have to move differently. And so, she wanted everyone to recognize and see the value in that.

That level of mentorship and accountability was important not only for the Black members of the organization but also for the non-Black members. Dylan, a non-Black participant in this study, stated, "And that was important for me to listen to. I can't understand unless those experiences are shared with me." This helped Dylan to better understand that this organization was more than just about uplifting Black artists but also about accountability for one another by noting that the acts of one Black person may impact how educators or society view the next Black person.

While some participants shared that the school environment heightened their level of fear, it was also used as a motivation factor. As a band student, India knew her responsibility was to execute without error every time the band played jazz music. She felt this was her responsibility as a Black musician because jazz music is rooted in the Black community:

I don't care if I'm the only Black person in this jazz band. I know I'm playing good, because this is my thing. And every time, I'm creating that motor from the back of the band. Being confident in my ability and knowing that my ability also comes to the fact that it runs through my veins, that type of confidence. I was able to kind of be like an energy charger for everyone else to latch onto. So, it became a motivator.

India described this experience as being a time when she knew she was representing all Black people at this moment, yet that empowered her to ensure her execution exceeded expectations and was successful. Similarly, Augusta credits her experiences with a lack of resources during her membership in the Black Arts organization to being beneficial for her now in college:

I go to an institution where there are a lot of resources everywhere, and there's a lot of faculty willing to help. But one of the weaknesses of this institution is at the slightest

inconvenience, everyone goes crazy because it's like, man, we don't have the stuff that we're expected to have. It's all that privileged mindset of always having everything at your beck and call at your disposal. But Black Art didn't operate that way and made me more resourceful.

Racism, oppression, and marginalization described the experiences of the Black participants occupying predominately white spaces at their performing and visual arts school. Majority of the participants recognized that their actions directly impacted other Black students, yet this level of responsibility was internalized by the participants differently. Some participants internalized this obligation as fear, while others used it as motivation. However, the understanding of the effects of being Black in predominately white space encouraged the participants to rely on the support of each other to navigate this racialized climate.

Summary

Student Perception of School: Inside and Outside of Black Art highlighted the experiences of members of the Black Arts organization at a predominately white, performing and visual arts school and their descriptions of the intentional and unconscious efforts to limit or dismantle the organization, through creating a space that lacked belonging and supplying insufficient resources and support. While there were examples of positive developments, such as participants internalizing these actions as motivation or learning how to become more resourceful post-high school graduation, more stories supported these experiences that negatively impacted participants. These participants shared that these acts led to a lack of confidence in their academic and artistic abilities and fear of failure, not just for them but a failure that makes the entire race of Black people appear unsatisfactory.

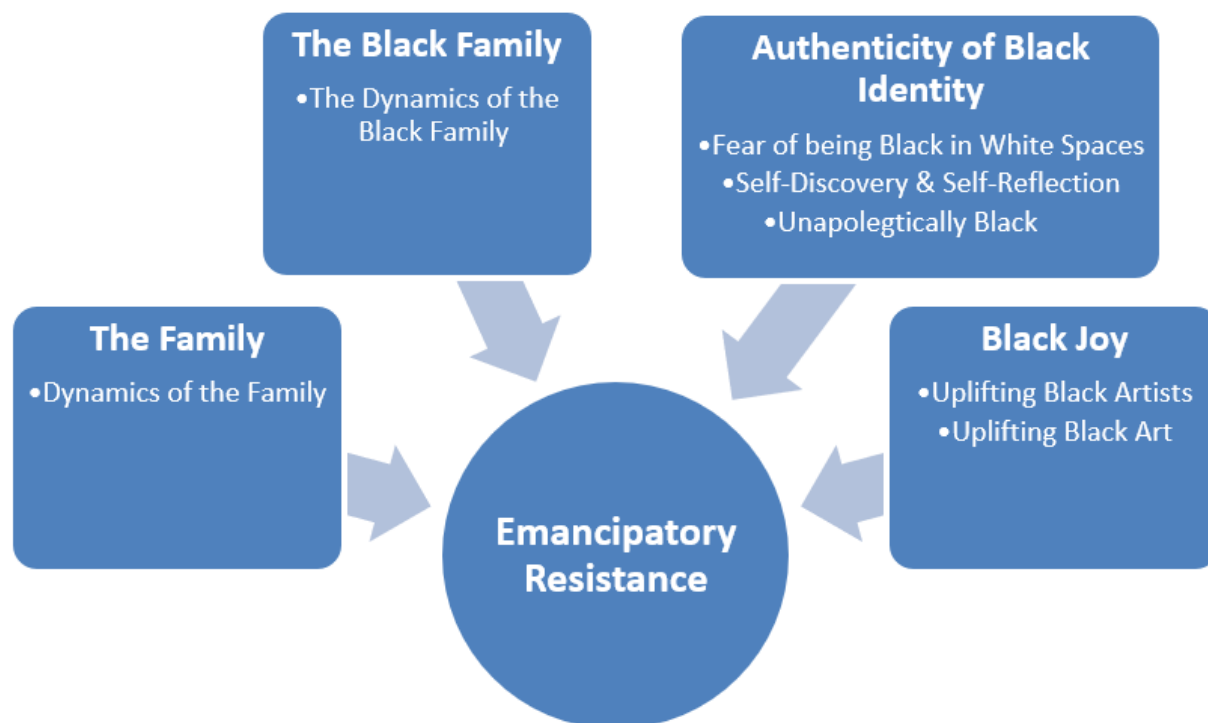
Emancipatory Resistance

“Why didn't white people allow black slaves to read books? It's because they would uncover the truth. It's that power that they are afraid of. It's the power of letting little Black boys and little Black girls know they belong in those spaces.” Sheryl, study participant.

Participants in this study viewed their involvement in Black Arts as an act of emancipatory resistance. For them, emancipatory resistance was required to counter what they perceived as perpetual external threats to the organization's existence and to many of the conditions they experienced in their school outside of Black Arts. For the participants, dynamics of racism often seemed to underlie the threats to Black Arts as well as many of their other experiences in the school, whether those took place in their art area classes and training, or in their core classes. Some of the participants, like Sheryl in the quote above, attributed the reason for these dynamics, in part, on the fear of empowered Black students and Black artists.

Participants in this study came to view Black Arts as a space in which they could resist the dynamics and impacts of the racism they experienced elsewhere in the school, and they viewed their resistance as emancipatory or as producing feelings of freedom both from the standpoints of themselves as cultural beings and artists. Further, within this theme of emancipatory resistance were three interrelated subthemes, each contributing an aspect of meaning. These subthemes for the theme of emancipatory resistance include:

- the role of family,
- the role of the Black family,
- the authenticity of Black identity, and
- Black joy.

Figure 5*Emancipatory Resistance Subthemes***The Family**

When participants reflected on their experiences in Black Arts, the term “family” was used frequently. Further, participants often described their experiences by citing a wide range of characteristics for Black Arts that connoted those often associated with those of a family. Notably, participants not only describe experiences that, to many of them, “felt” like family experiences, but they also described how the ways in which they related to each other in Black Arts, and the ways that they chose to lead and function within the organization, seemed to actively produce conditions and characteristics that resembled, represented, and reproduced some important aspects of a family community. Participants shared that through their experiences in Black Arts, they found that family extends beyond their household and that they could build

connections with others where everyone could feel cared for, seen, heard, validated, and supported. This highlighted participants' experiences that demonstrated how the notion of a family can empower students of color and their allies to build equitable spaces together – even within organizations and structures that seem to be struggling with being inclusive and responsive to them. Two further subthemes supported the overall theme of family, each reflecting qualities and actions, and interactions within family dynamics. The first subtheme reflected the dynamics of families in universal, human context. I refer to this subtheme and its related components the “dynamics of family.” This first subtheme was supported by analytic categories including shared vision, family as a protector, and sense of belonging. The second subtheme reflected the dynamics of families from the more specific cultural framework of many Black families in the United States. I refer to this subtheme as “dynamics of the Black family.” This subtheme was supported by data categories that included Black love, Black solidarity, and the “extended family.”

Dynamics of Family: Shared Vision

Upholding a shared vision is a significant factor in the sustainability of a family where there are generational differences and each member views things through a diverse lens. To support, encourage, and exchange ideas while working towards a shared goal required the Black Arts organization to understand their purpose, provide equity of voice, and defend its vision. Participants allowed the organization’s mission and purpose to guide everyday decisions and lifestyles, which they believed aided in the sustainment of the organization.

The vision and purpose of the Black Arts organization was described by Augusta as being an opportunity “To celebrate and educate participants and audience members on Black culture and history; advocate for Black issues and inspire students by creating community amongst

Black students and allies through the arts.” Participants believed that this organization was the only time they were able to freely celebrate the various aspects of Black culture and history compared to the traditional curriculum taught in schools during Black history month. They also found this as an opportunity to pay homage to their ancestors by celebrating Black culture and history at their annual performing and visual arts performances.

As previously stated, Augusta acknowledged that part of the organization’s purpose was to “advocate for Black issues and inspire students by creating community amongst Black students and allies through the arts.” For some of the participants, Black Arts was necessary to advocate and fight for the issues confronting the Black community inside and outside the school through verbal and artistic advocacy. Sheryl added, “We would all come together and fight towards something that we all thought we had to fight towards. Because we want a space for Black students. We want a space where kids can feel comfortable.” Participants understood that the fight for equity for Black students and the Black Arts organization was not a fight that could be done in isolation but required a family and community.

Creating a family and community environment amplified the voices of participants gave them the confidence to use their voices to contribute towards the organization's purpose and the production of the organization’s annual performing and visual arts performance. Even though the Black Arts organization was established to uplift Black art and artists, non-Black members also embodied the shared vision. They felt empowered being a part of this organization. Dylan, a non-Black participant, shared that the organization was “a space to feel comfortable to express your thoughts and feelings and contribute as well.” Participants recognized that building a diverse family with a shared vision and purpose strengthens the community. “We have the family backbone now because it's not just up to the Black students to stick up for our rights, but also our

allies, our counterparts to also help us stand up because with their voice as well it validates our mission and our statements” as described by Augusta. This organization created a space where all members, regardless of their racial or ethnic demographic, felt that there was value in their input and voice. “Voices were amplified in this community. Compared to our traditional arts discipline courses, it wasn’t the same because those weren’t spaces for us, meant for us and built for us,” as described by Sheryl. Participants felt confident utilizing their voices because they felt empowered to share their thoughts, ideas, or suggestions for the organization. Langston stated:

I feel like a lot comes from not being afraid of being shamed and not being shamed for things you're doing. There was no fear that someone would tell you no or push back against you for the things that you did or the things you wanted to do or the ideas you share. Even if things didn't go through or work out, the empowerment came from sharing those ideas without fearing total rejection, and you could just be you.

Participants believed that the family-community they built was based on their foundation of having a shared vision and purpose that amplified the voices of all members. Nested in a predominately white school, this organization built a family environment by allowing each participant, regardless of their racial background, to provide input and insight to fulfill the organization’s purpose. This empowered participants to have confidence in their voice and commitment to pursue and defend the vision of the Black Arts organization.

Dynamics of Family: Family as a Protector

Racism, oppression, and marginalization were words used by participants to define their experiences within the performing and visual arts school, yet the participants took solace in the Black Arts organization as it acted as a protector in this racialized climate. Participants credited the organization for protecting them mentally, emotionally, and artistically. Participants also

described how Black Arts established a family-community environment which helped to rejuvenate and recharge them after encountering microaggressions and other oppressive experiences. Additionally, participants described how they would protect and defend each other when school faculty, peers, or non-supportive families unfairly critiqued the organization and their artistic abilities.

Establishing the Black Arts organization allowed the participants to engage in a community to reflect, problem-solve, and share their hardships. This was seen as a space for positive emotional release to avoid harboring these experiences to themselves. Their ability to reflect, share and problem-solve protected participants from personal and artistic burnout. After enduring a school day filled with racial implications, it was their opportunity to return to this collective group of their peers and be rejuvenated and validated. As indicated by India:

I would remember doing long school days, and then having to do school-mandated rehearsals, versus a long school day and then coming to this family and kind of releasing all the baggage of that day. There was definitely a difference in how I ended my days when this family wasn't involved in them. I think that just goes to show that the idea of gaining energy, getting confidence, and getting power isn't only physical but also mental and emotional.

Participants found that the organization's ability to make them feel as if they had enough strength to navigate racialized spaces, to have confidence in their Black identity, and to produce artwork that uplifted the Black community stemmed from an environment where they felt they could be their authentic selves while also knowing that other organization members have experienced similar encounters. Louis shared:

Being able to talk to someone about your day, like I had that stupid test a couple of hours before, made me happy just having an outlet to talk, communicate, and crack jokes. It became rejuvenating, not only in an artistic way but also just in a social way.

Participants described rejuvenation as giving them the strength to continue to navigate and overcome the opposition and hardships they faced. One participant described rejuvenation in the organization in a similar vein to her mother's description of experiencing God's presence:

I'm focusing on the word rejuvenating. Whenever my mom was like, I was so refueled from going to church, but I never experienced that. But I kind of got like a grasp of that concept that she was trying to convey to me whenever I came from Black Art. I feel like my rejuvenation experience at Black Art was like her going to church. I guess it gave me a new sense of confidence walking through the halls.

Rejuvenation was a concept that participants believed protected them internally from harboring "the baggage of that day," as described by India. It provided a refreshing space to release and reconnect. Participants shared that it aided in feeling belonging and connection to a community and family.

Dynamics of Family: Sense of Belonging

The Black Arts organization epitomized a family that was accepting, respectful, inclusive, and supportive, which instilled a sense of belonging for all of its members. Despite feeling isolated and looked upon from a deficit perspective at the performing and visual arts school, participants found comfort with the organization's members as their presence radiated belonging. The organization prioritized creating an environment where members formed social relationships and found cultural appreciation.

Social relationships were formed through the organization, centering opportunities for fellowship amongst its members. From playful, artistic moments, to the simple enjoyment of food and jokes, participants found opportunities to build connections with organization members to strengthen their family community. Louis recalls:

We all took a break and whatnot, and everyone ordered food from Door Dash. I remember I got a 4-for-4 from Wendy's. Just everybody getting food and then coming back and just eating, laughing, and having a good time. I just remember that in my head and be like Wow! This is great. This is great, because of that black joy being created... just relaxing, and having fun.

As Louis recalled this memory, other participants laughed and shared agreement with that joyful moment and how these moments aided in their sense of belonging with others. The Black Arts organization found creative ways to be professional while balancing it with being kids. When asked a question regarding the key to developing social relationships, Langston answered:

Entertainment for sure. Like we were able to just have fun with each other, you know. Like when we needed to get serious, it was serious, but we were able to have fun. I feel like sometimes, outside of here, there's no room for fun anywhere.

Participants found that an environment that supports relationship building helps decrease a competitive environment and increase community engagement.

“When we have community, there's a sense of belonging,” as emphasized by Zora when asked what keeps her returning to the Black Arts organization each year. The participants collectively described a sense of belonging as a vital element of the organization, being that most students of color did not feel welcomed or valued at the performing and visual arts school.

Langston stated:

A lot of people feel like they don't belong at this school. They don't feel a sense of belonging as people of color because there are no community vibes, safe spaces, understanding, or appreciation of people's blackness. But when we're a family and a community style, that's where that cultural appreciation comes in.

As stated by Augusta, part of the purpose of the Black Arts organization is “to celebrate and educate participants and audience members on Black culture.” Participants shared that they could freely celebrate and appreciate a Black culture without enduring the white gaze. Zora describes this as being able to “do things that are normal to us...things that are a part of our culture without worrying about people calling them inappropriate, ghetto, or improper.”

The participants who currently attend or have experienced a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) environment have described the Black Arts organization as possessing similar characteristics of belonging with a focus on cultural appreciation. Augusta describes the organization and an HBCU as “all of these people showing love for each other, and our appreciation for one another, and kind of feeling the sense of home.”

The participants shared that a sense of home and belonging made them feel more open to being vulnerable with their peers by “tearing my walls down,” as shared by India. With a heightened vulnerability and sense of belonging, Langston shared that there was “more of a willingness and a desire to learn about other kids' experiences.” This allowed the members of the Black Arts organization to “continue to lay the foundation to build a family, a community, a more of a sense of belonging for students of color.”

The Black Family

“Family is what brings Black people together and people of color together, you know. That's that family. Just like how it takes a village to raise children. So that's a part of our culture.”

Sheryl, Study participant

In examining the experiences of members of the Black Arts organization through the CLE protocol artifact and anecdotal data, the dynamics of the Black family included elements of Black love, Black solidarity, and extended family kinship networks. Participants noted the importance of recognizing that Black students originally created the organization for Black students; therefore, certain generalized characteristics of the Black family were exemplified by organizational members. This section will examine the characteristics of the Black Arts organization's members and elements of the Black family that the organization exuded, Black love, Black solidarity, and extended family kinship networks.

Members of the Black Arts organization described this organization as being the epitome of the Black family. During the CLE, we engaged in a protocol where I tasked the participants to identify emotion words and phrases that captured and communicated their experiences in the Black Arts organization and input those words in a pre-designed circle, while in the second pre-designed circle, participants identified emotion words and phrases that captured and communicated their experiences in their academic and artistic courses at the performing and visual arts school.

As seen in the CLE protocol artifact, Appendix A, Langston acknowledged that:

The comparison between the two circles is so refreshing to look at. You know the left circle (Black Arts Organization), and you see there is somewhere for us. You know there are spaces like this and places for us that we can feel included. No, we don't always have to be living within this right circle (Performing and visual arts school). So that doesn't have to be the totality of our experience in general life. But even though we have to go

look for these spaces, you know we have to find them, and we have to kind of keep them running. They do exist.

Participants agreed that by being in an organization that was focused on uplifting Black art and Black artist created a family that wanted to constantly celebrate their Blackness. This was an experience that they believed did not happen in the school community, thus making the Black family value to hold more weight and appreciation. Their appreciation for the organization also strengthened their appreciation, love, and care for its members.

Dynamics of the Black Family: Black Love

Black participants shared that they regularly received macro and micro-level aggressions, disclosing that, as Black people and artists, they were deficient, dysfunctional, or not valuable; conversely, the Black Arts organization practiced love to unearth the pain its members internalized from those acts. In a school environment where participants felt they were always fighting for equity, leading with love in spite of their hardships was resistance. Given the discriminatory and racist acts against them, participants learned how to express and experience love in a way that uplifted their Black peers and their artwork. Participants believed that Black love differed from the idea of traditional love and was integral to the Black family dynamic. They described Black love as creating a safe space for authenticity and vulnerability and freely displaying their love and celebration of their Blackness through culturally- rooted art forms.

Augusta's thoughts on love as an important dynamic of family summarized the sentiments of many of the participants. "The reason I was there (membership in the organization) was because of love. My love for my art. My love for my people." The participants often expressed their love for one another, and their love for the mission and purpose of the Black Arts organization was the foundation of their family. Participants shared that love was shown through

creating a safe space where they “could be vulnerable in our Black spaces,” as said by Sheryl. Participants agreed that their level of comfort was diminished in traditional academic and artistic spaces at the school due to the fear of appearing weak or deficient in the eyes of non-Black peers and educators. Zora believed that they had to constantly work harder than a non-Black person in order to not be deemed as deficient. “For me, a Black, queer individual with dreadlocks, that was a very interesting thing to navigate, and it really did make me feel that I needed to push myself ten times harder than I saw other people doing.”

In a Black space, Black students whose focus was to uplift one another did not create a competitive environment but a community space where they felt appreciated and understood. For them, this was a “Black space for us to go into and be able to be free and to be seen.” The participants spoke to a wide range of how the environment of the Black Arts organization created a safe space to receive what they needed at that moment mentally, emotionally, spiritually, artistically, or academically. Augusta added to the discussion that the organization:

really helped us during that time to come together, and really be heard, to cry, to be happy, and to laugh without being judged or facing the daily tribulations that we go through already with our school and outside of school.

As participants faced similar daily tribulations that were personal or racially motivated, the organization's safe space allowed them to be surrounded by their peers, where they felt their Black truth could be freely shared. In reference to this notion, Augusta stated “I just was so much more immersed in Blackness and other Black experiences. You can control your own narrative. Nobody is telling you what your Black experience has to look like.” As referenced in Appendix A, the Black family environment allowed the vulnerability and authenticity of its members. India added to this concept, “I have always seen the organization as a refuge and a safe

space for Black artists to take a “sigh of relief” after having to assimilate to a school culture that doesn’t respect us, see us, or help us.” Allowing organizational members to be immersed with their Black peers, created a safe space for participants to feel respected, seen, supported and celebrated.

The love and celebration of their Black identity, Black culture, and Black history through artistic forms, was at the forefront of this family. Participants felt that this was their opportunity to show love through the uplifting of Black art and artists without considering the white gaze. Their love for their Blackness was celebrated through everyday interactions and engagement amongst each other and their annual performing and visual arts performance.

Artistic works by members of the Black Arts organization was performed and showcased annually as an opportunity for artists to reflect on Black identity and how Blackness has shaped social, cultural, and political experiences. Participants found the ability to highlight and celebrate their Blackness as an empowering experience. Langston shared about the creation of a poem he had written for the organization’s annual performing and visual arts showcase:

The sense of empowerment within Blackness was heavily pushed with this organization altogether. This poem was very uplifting and very proud. Even gritty in some ways. I used it to really expose and celebrate our culture, and our history. You know, referencing things that we see within our culture now and things that are, you know, the roots of our culture and where we come from.

Participants found the ability to display love of their Blackness through art to be a consistent opportunity to be done only in the Black Arts organization and not in their traditional artistic courses. India acknowledged that in her artistic department at the performing and visual arts school, their celebration of Black culture through art was limited to Black history month. “It

gets harder and a little more awkward during Black history month because that is when he (the instrumental teacher) would select a piece by Omar Thomas, a very prolific Black composer.” Despite the school’s acknowledgment of Black history month, participants found it frustrating that the celebration of Black culture was limited to a specific time period of the year. This aided in the participant's gratitude for the Black Arts organization where the love and celebration of Blackness, Black identity, and Black culture was recognized every day within the organization.

Participants found that building a family community by forming strong bonds with like-minded, understanding, and supportive people has been key to giving and receiving love. Augusta stated, “But care and love, I feel like it's something that bonded us. I grew to love my environment because love and care were big tenants...even whenever something tough happens or dysfunction in my life, this care tied the family together.” Members of the Black Arts organization were able to display Black love by creating a safe space for authenticity and vulnerability and freely displaying their love and celebration of their Blackness through culturally-rooted art forms.

Dynamics of the Black Family: Black Solidarity

To liberate Black students and artists from the burden of racism, oppression, and marginalization, members of the Black Arts organization established a family community where they found Black solidarity necessary for social change. Participants described Black solidarity as members of the organization collectively pursuing and defending the goals and purpose of the organization. They believed that there was strength and a greater opportunity for change when they operated as a collective unit versus operating in isolation. This section will describe how the organization instilled Black solidarity and its benefits.

As an organization created by Black students, led by Black students, with a focus on uplifting Black art and artists, they faced the challenge of navigating the sustainment of the organization due to being subjected to racially motivated encounters. “Family was the only thing strong enough to hold it all together” were words stated by Langston in defending the idea that for the survival of the Black Arts organization and its advocacy efforts, they must engage in Black solidarity. Participants found it easier to be able to stand with their peers in time of need due to the family environment working towards a shared vision. “Having similar goals, having similar mindsets, having compassion for each other...allowed us to take care of each other within the hardships,” as stated by Langston. Participants believed that when you operate on one accord, with the same goal mindset, organizational members were more likely to collaborate and stand together when needed.

Experiences shared by participants indicated that solidarity and unity enable authority and autonomy that is not typically given when they did not work alongside members of the Black Arts organization. India noted, “The power that this organization has is because of Black solidarity and Black collaboration. There are so many ideas here that we express that unless I'm in another space like this one (Community Learning Exchange), I don't have the liberty to articulate.” Participants agreed that the CLE environment was a family environment that included participants with a shared mindset, which empowered Black solidarity in sharing their own narrative and experiences.

Many of the participants believed that their strength and endurance to withstand challenges came from operating as a family. We all truly care about each other within this family group dynamic. It wasn't just that we were all working towards this goal, we were all defending this goal. We were all pushing this goal. And we all took care of each other despite the hardships

of trying to showcase our art to the world. And I think that's what truly made it a family because no matter what, we had to have each other's backs”.

Dynamics of the Black Family: Extended Family Networks

To create a family strong enough to execute its purpose, the study participants indicated that it would need to span across racial and ethnic backgrounds and include people from outside of the school community. The Black Arts organization members shared that the effectiveness of operating in their purpose relied on their ability to create an extended family network. This section will focus on the organization’s invitation to non-Black members to join the Black Arts organization, and the invitation to the community to be a part of the Black family experience.

As recognized by participants, incorporating members of diverse racial and ethnic populations added multicultural representation to support their mission, aiding their solidarity. “The special part of this organization is that it was a community...it wasn’t just because we were Black students...it was us being Black as the throughline that connected us (Black and Non-Black members) together to create that community.” It was shared that there were intentional efforts to recruit diverse students to become members of the organization. Study participant Dylan, a white male, was honored to be invited to participate, stating “I got the invitation, and I was pretty thrilled...Once I was invited, they made me feel comfortable, and I knew this was something that could fulfill the soul and give me a sense of purpose.”

Participants shared they experienced difficulty in being Black in white spaces, therefore, to a certain level they believed they could empathize with non-Black members being in a predominately Black space. As non-Black members entered into this space, Black participants noted that they would remain their authentic Black selves without intentionally suppressing their

identity to make a non-Black member feel comfortable. Langston described his encounters with a white organization member:

I never censored myself around him, and I never allowed him to. Even though we have such largely different views of the world, we could interact without having to feel like we have to hold something back from each other.

To follow up with this thought, Dylan reflected on his first day joining the Black Arts organization and the positive impact Black members non-censorship had on his understanding of Black culture:

Just even being able to relate a little bit with black experiences is so powerful as an experience on its own. You just learn so much in so many aspects of life. Walking into the room for the first time, I joined like a week or two late, so everyone's kind of in the groove of things. I'm the only white person there, so I don't know if I will be accepted immediately, or how that experience will be. I think that's an experience that black people may experience a lot just going into a predominantly white environment, and you don't know how you're going to fit in or if you just can't. And so, when I did, I was lucky to be surrounded by a group of people who were super supportive and instantly accepted me into the group and got me adjusted to what we were doing.

Langston encouraged non-Black members to see that this organization was a safe space and that they were welcome to join this extended family:

And you can come into these spaces. You can feel comfortable here (in the Black Arts organization). With my friends that are of color just like me, we can all be here. You can be comfortable with this. You can be here whenever you want, and nobody will trip.

From Dylan's perspective and other participants' thoughts, Black and non-Black members of the organization felt comfortable in standing in solidarity to understand and work together toward fulfilling the organization's purpose. Sheryl supported this notion by saying:

We have that community, and we have that backing. We have the backbone now, because it's not just up to the Black students to stick up for our rights, but was also our allies, our counterparts to also help us stick up.

In addition to inviting non-Black peers to become members of the Black Arts organization, participants shared that they also extended an invitation to community members to be a part of their extended family network. Community members included biological relatives of the organization's members, community activists, school district board members, local artists, and community members who attended the Black Arts organization's annual performing and visual arts performance. These extended family networks had the opportunity to provide insight from their Black experiences and to engage in the celebration of Black culture and history at the annual performing and visual arts performance.

When preparing artistic selections for their annual performance, participants wanted the community and audience to feel a part of the family. Participants shared that having them feel as if they were family was important to the organization because they wanted the audience not to see this performance as a traditional school production but to see their performance and feel at home. Participant Lauryn attested to this notion in her statement that, "resonating with your audience [is crucial] and so this entire production is about, feeling at home within the black community by appreciating your own art." To ensure they were resonating with the audience, participants shared that they engaged in discourse with family members to allow their voices and

experiences influence their artistic selections for the annual performing and visual arts performances. Lauryn explained part of their planning process as:

We went to our parents; we went to our family members. We said that when you're at a cookout, a family reunion, or a predominantly Black event, what songs make you feel at home within your community? What songs make you want to get up, sing, and feel nostalgic?

Participants believed that the comfort levels of their audience members were shown through the audience's engagement during and after the performance. One participant shared his memory of what he called the most profound memory of the Black Arts organization's family environment:

There was also this magic moment that I talk a lot about. During the intermission that year, Rodney Hurst was a Black historian and activist and a Motown enthusiast and historian. And so, there was 'My Girl' (Grammy award winning song by The Temptations) was played during the intermission, and to hear these freshman students behind us, belting it out, while watching him (Rodney Hurst) sing it, to recognize, like the intergenerational power and beauty of Black art. It was just a profound thing.

Participants indicated that the praise and responses they received from the audience was more supportive and motivating than they have ever received in their traditional arts discipline productions at their school. "It was just so much more about how we connected to the audience and getting that response from the audience. We had people, you know, we had people strolling in our theater." Lauryn shared her memory of "Atomic Dog" (song by George Clinton) also the national stroll song of the Black Greek Letter Organization, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated, was playing during the performance, and there were older and younger aged fraternity members strolling to the music, while the crowd was cheering them on.

Through the creation of an extended family network, participants shared that it allowed community members and audience members to join in on the celebration of Black culture, and the uplifting of Black art and artists. Regarding the need for an extended family, Sheryl added, “That’s that family. Just like how a village it takes a to raise children. So that’s a part of our community. We need villages to be a part of the family.”

When participants responded to questions regarding the key strategy that those who would want to limit or dismantle the Black Arts organization would use to depreciate its value, their response was to dismantle the family:

Family is the pinnacle of what it means to be human. Family isn't necessarily big or small; it is these extremely close relationships. Can be tried, can be worried, can go through a lot of things but isn't necessarily broken.

Participants found that even though they faced racially motivated and personal hardships during their membership in the Black Arts organization, they could hold on to the notion of family, Black family, and extended family to sustain the organization. “Family was the only thing strong enough to hold it together,” said Langston.

The Authenticity of Black Identity

The authenticity of their Black identity was a concept that the participants often strove for however, the demands and processes of their performing and visual arts school posed a challenge for them to know and be their authentic selves. Participants found that their attendance at a predominately white performing and visual arts school did not provide opportunities for identity exploration, nor was it fully accepting of Black cultural engagements. This section will discuss how the participants credit the Black Arts organization for laying the foundation of self-discovery of their Black identity and what it means to participants to be unapologetically Black.

Self-Discovery of Black Identity

As participants matriculated through the predominately white performing and visual arts school, they shared that there was a disconnect between themselves and their understanding of their Black identity. Experiences that participants shared highlighted oppressive educational and artistic structures that forced members of the Black Arts organization to work together for their individual and collective growth and development. Most participants agreed that the Black Arts organization created an atmosphere for them to process and make meaning of their experiences as it related to their identity.

I didn't have much of a grasp on my culture or anything like that like. I didn't really understand completely what Black Joy was, or what Black culture was. And so, coming into this (Black Arts organization) I found my place. It really made me understand myself, my family, and my environment a lot better.

Without the Black Arts organization, participants shared their difficulties in uncovering their authentic version of themselves.

Going a whole day from 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM, you know, forgetting who I was as a Black artist took a toll on me and I didn't realize how much of myself it took until I got with my people (Black Arts organization) and had just this breath of fresh air.

Participants shared that most days were filled with the need to code-switch to become a more palatable version for teachers and non-Black peers. Augusta shared, "I experienced a lot of tokenism and just because I was seen as more palatable." Augusta added to the notion of the need to code-switch to be accepted, "That was just a part of myself that I wanted to throw away, and sometimes I still look at it in shame. I don't want to say, quote, unquote palatable, but it was a lot easier to be accepted." Participants shared that the need to constantly become a

different version of themselves to conform to the mainstream context made them feel as if they were losing or detaching from their Black identity. Zora shared an instance of a teacher requiring students not to use their culturally rooted language in her class. “She insisted that we didn't use AAVE (African American Vernacular English) she would tell them not to use AAVE or speak more properly.” Participants shared that some of the rules the teachers and the school implemented seemed to be suppressing their Blackness. To discover or reattach to their Black identity, participants found that immersion into the Black culture, and learning to express those experiences through their art form are two approaches they credited to that self-discovery of their Black identity.

Participants found that by participating in the Black Arts organization it allowed them to be “immersed in Blackness and other Black experiences,” as said by Augusta. With traditional artistic and academic courses at the performing and visual arts school being rooted in European-based practices, the organization was the only time where participants believed they could freely share and process their experiences with others without feeling as if the listener wouldn't be able to understand or empathize. The immersion of Blackness allowed participants to be able “...to control your own narrative. Nobody is telling you what your Black experience has to look like, or what it has looked like,” Augusta added. In return, this helped participants to share their experiences, ask questions, and make meaning of their identity alongside members of the organization.

Having a level of collaboration and family to support participants in making meaning of experiences related to their Black identity also helped in the development of their Black artistic identity. Similar to their academic courses, participants shared that their artistic courses also followed European-based standards, thus requiring them not to see themselves represented in

artistic forms. Participants found that the lack of representation in their arts area courses led to them struggling to find their authentic, artistic voice.

“I can only remember having my work shown in 2 galleries, and those were 2 separate pieces. So, I don't necessarily attribute one piece for each gallery to my Blackness, but more so as a lack of identity,” as stated by Langston. Participants who felt that they struggled to discover their Black identity found their artistic exploration to be an opportunity for self-discovery. The Black Arts organization helped to encourage participants to explore various art forms to allow them to freely express themselves and uncover their identity. Langston, an enrolled visual arts student at the performing and visual art school, found poetry writing and spoken word to be a method of reflection and expression through his engagement with the Black Arts organization. A self-written poem he shared, titled *Negus*, helped Langston to learn more about his history and who he is as a Black man, which Langston also credited for laying the foundation for discovering his Black identity. Langston shared that this was an emotional experience for him to be able to tap into his feelings and culture, which is not a process that he has engaged in within his traditional artistic courses at the performing and visual arts school:

I have my poem titled *Negus*. I take pride in this one a lot. It was kind of me for the first time really seeing myself as more than just Black but as someone as a lineage of royalty, and really holding myself up to the esteemed that I believe people as an individual should hold themselves up to and really kind of taking that pride in my blackness and putting that on display.

Participants shared similar sentiments of their inability to fully find their Black voice and identity within their academic and artistic courses, possibly due to the lack of Black teachers within the school community. Black and non-Black participants found that with the absence of teachers

supporting the self-discovery process, Black Arts organization members provided support in that area. Augusta stated, “Members of this organization are there for you as a friend and teacher.”

For the participants, discovery of their black identity was enhanced through their participation in the Black Arts organization. This created an opportunity for students to be immersed in Black culture and Black experiences, which participants shared to be an opportunity to reflect and gain understanding of their identity. Through their self-reflection and self-discovery of their Black identity, participants believed it also enhanced their Black artistic voice. This level of growth and exploration encouraged their annual participation in the Black Arts organization. Augusta concluded with:

You walk away knowing that we understand our experience and that it's like a very nuanced one, which is why people want to keep coming back to keep learning more because there's more to discover, I feel. With each show with each new batch of kids like there's always something new.

Unapologetically Black

To exist in their Black skin, and to be louder and prouder in it, was described by participants in regard to being unapologetically Black. Membership in the Black Arts organization nested in a predominately white performing and visual arts school pushed members of the organization to step outside of their comfort zone to engage in self-reflection and self-discovery, which in turn helped them to appreciate and love their Blackness. As participants became more aware of the Black identity, in conjunction with being surrounded by their peers giving them permission to embrace their Blackness, participants shared that it empowered them to be unapologetically Black, especially in white spaces. The Black Arts organization

participants believed that it was about loving their Blackness and creating a space for Black students and artists to realize their power leads to their ability to be unapologetically Black.

In the creation of the Black Arts organization, participants believed it to be a safe space that allowed them to grow in their Blackness and feel empowered in their identity. “So, with this organization, we had a space that was made for us, and that made us amplify our voices, and it was just so comfortable. It's just so comfortable to be in a space that we can be unapologetically black,” as said by Sheryl. In spaces built for a specific population, participants found that environment to relate to historical Black movements:

This organization kind of reminds me of the Harlem Renaissance. During that time, it was a safe space for black creatives. I believe that this organization helps cultivate young minds and helps grow our Black creatives. It’s a place where we can feel safe, it’s a place where we know that we belong. It’s a place where we don’t try to fit the mold because we are the mold.

Participants acknowledged that this organization empowered them to be confident in their authenticity within the organization and as they navigated the hallways of the performing and visual arts school. Augusta added, “It helped me become more confident in my Blackness and be more loud and proud about it.” Additionally, as participants became more confident in their Blackness, some attested to unlearning mainstream, culturally appropriate habits to step more fully into their unapologetic Blackness:

Unlearning those toxic skills that I had to grasp onto in order to reach the same level as my white counterparts. And try and learn how to gain confidence in the way that I express myself the way that I communicate to others, and also realizing that my

education level and my comprehension level does not change. Codeswitching doesn't amplify what I already know.

As participants gained confidence in their Blackness and were empowered by their peers, they found it easier to be unapologetically Black. That was their opportunity to uplift their Blackness, to exude Black joy without concern of the white gaze or the need to conform to what society deemed as appropriate behavior, vernacular, or art forms. Participants shared that their confidence to accept their Black identity was partially developed due to believing they now have the power and freedom to be, say, and do things as they feel led to. Langston asserted that Black Arts provided freedom, power, and control that was not found for them within the performing and visual arts school:

I think as Black people, we really know how important freedom is to us. I think that's why people look at us as being rebellious and disruptive and because we value freedom so much. Historically, it was taken away from us. So, when we get it, yeah, we want it, and we keep it. We can't let that be taken away from us. So, I think Black Art gave us our freedom within school that we never really had. That is valuable. That is valuable to actual people. Freedom to Express with each other and in the way we want. Freedom to, you know, do the things that we want to, act the way we want to, and engage with each other the way we want to.

As participants accepted the freedom, power, and control of their voice and identity, it inspired them to be no longer ashamed of their Blackness. Being their authentic selves, feeling confident in their Blackness, and controlling their own narrative, empowered the participants to be proud of their Black culture. Sheryl concluded with, “So that's a part of our community. Villages, storytelling, and being unapologetically black.”

Black Joy

From their perception, joy for the Black Arts organization members enrolled at the predominately white school has never been a given. Black participants shared that they intentionally searched for and created culturally affirming spaces of joy at their performing and visual arts school. They used these spaces to vent, validate each other's experiences and struggles dealing with racism, oppression, and microaggressions, and support each other. They described these culturally affirming spaces of Black joy as efforts to uplift Black artists and Black art.

Uplifting Black Artists

To inspire and uplift Black artists in the Black Arts organization was something that participants described as bringing them joy. As Black participants nested in a predominately white school, they shared that they regularly encountered racism, oppression, and microaggressions. With the creation of the Black Arts organization, participants found this joyous counterspace as an opportunity to inspire Black artists, cheer for Black artists, and freely express themselves as Black artists.

Participants believed that there often stereotypical assumptions and deficit perspectives that they often would strive to combat. To not be seen as less than or inadequate, participants aimed to reshape the narrative of Black art and artists. Sheryl stated, "It's (Black Arts) a place where we can feel safe. It's a place where we know that we belong. It's a place that we don't try to fit the mold because we are the mold." Participants found themselves able to make strides toward not trying to conform to what society deemed as appropriate but forging their own path. This was done by being open to being inspired and inspiring other Black artists:

I've learned so many things by spending time with these people that eventually, they just plant these seeds with inspiration. You're just spending so much time with each other. You trade ideas and trade experiences, and that kind of what led to the inspiration for me.

As the inspirer, participants found that position to bring them joy as they see their peers evolve, grow in their Blackness, and become more confident. Sheryl speaks to

Black Boy Joy, seeing those powerful Black men in the arts. It kind of sparked something in the younger generation as well as in me. So, seeing all those Black boys transitioning into Black men, and really realizing who they are...it's kind of amazing.

As someone who was inspired, Langston spoke to the joy and confidence that he gained by having a leader of the organization to uplift and push him.

She really pushed me in creating and thinking about how I want to describe certain things or how I want to deliver it. And it really was the inception of the writer I would become today, and the confidence that I now have in my writing ability.

To inspire, and be inspired, participants shared that it enhanced the environment to be a culturally affirming space that brought joy and freedom. Participants agreed that their ability to have the freedom to be artistically creative on their own terms and to explore art through their Black lens not only helped their confidence but also taught them how to find joy in their shortcomings. Sentiments from Langston acknowledged that his uplifting and inspiration from his Black peers empowered him to be unapologetic in his voice. "Black Art definitely gave me more confidence to say what I thought. I've always been introspective. But I don't ever think I could take those things inside and bring them out to the same effectiveness." Similarly,

participant India noted how her freedom of exploration within the Black Arts organization, allowed her to develop skills that was then admired by her white peers:

That growth as an artist like it just gave me the confidence to develop my own style, which eventually became a whole thing in the jazz band. When I played bass, it was just like, oh, wow, that's that characteristic. You know, plucking, that I developed in this Black organization because I had the empowerment and enough time to explore.

Participants found that even if they fell short during their exploration, it did not affect their confidence but rather it pushed them to rediscover how to turn their shortfall into something productive. India shared, "I could mess up in front of these people, and that'd be turned into something productive. I had the creative space to mess around with things and to see what worked and what didn't. And I had encouragement from my peers."

Encouragement from Black Arts organization members was key in the participants' enjoyment in and out of the organization. Participants shared that the atmosphere always felt like someone was cheering for their success and excellence. Dylan provided an example from the organization's rehearsal for their annual performing and visual arts performance:

Everyone in the group's first instinct was just to root them on. It means more for your peers to root you on with no surrounding pressure. In regular artistic courses, the pressure is your peers in that scenario. But when you know all your peers want the best for you, and they want you to perform as best as you can, then that pressure is out the window.

Participants found the relationships that members of the organization built amongst each other to be "invaluable," as stated by Langston. With the consistent uplifting and empowerment, most participants agreed with India as it being "the best part." India added, "This organization was

really always a space where they were always reaffirmations like, man, you're doing great.

You're sounding good. You're killer, you know, and especially amongst peers.”

Participants found that the Black Arts organization was an organization with a focus on empowerment and uplifting Black artists. Through Black artists inspiring Black artists, engaging in exploration through a Black lens, and cheering for Black artists, participants found these acts to bring them joy in a school where they often faced traumatic experiences.

Uplifting Black Art

Black art was described as not simply artwork created by Black artists, but rather the creation of sacred space for Black artists to share their art with their own elements in consideration. The Black Arts organization was that sacred space where participants shared that they felt empowered to create art based on their preferences, experiences, and truth versus the European-based artistic lens taught in their artistic courses. Participants engaged in processes to help create their own narrative and tell a story through their art form. This process included members of the organization working collaboratively to uplift Black art in a way that doesn't only reflect on their releasing of historical trauma but more so reflecting on the joy and celebration of Blackness.

The focus of artwork based on joy and not trauma was an intentional effort made by members of the Black Arts organization. Participants acknowledged that this was particularly difficult for those who were attending the performing and visual arts school when the United States was undergoing a period of racial and social unrest. Zora reflects on her collaboration on a film in the midst of nationwide protest:

And we worked tirelessly in Panera's, every weekend, making these collages and these montages of people of Black artists during 2020. Then kind of collaborating to make a

film that expressed Black joy and Black love and stuff like that, just to show that being Black isn't always sad. There are beautiful things that come with being black, but it's hard to show in the middle of chaos.

Participants shared that trying to create art in a moment of chaos could be due to overwhelming feelings of pain and sadness. Sheryl shared her emotions when trying to create art in 2021, "As young Black women and young Black men in this world, we were desensitized. We were numb." As some participants shared their experiences navigating through the feelings of numbness, other participants shared how they led the Black Arts organization to shift its mental and emotional focus from trauma to joy.

Intentional efforts by the Black Arts organization to uplift Black art through exemplifying joy helped participants to navigate the processing of their negative emotions purposefully and to see things from a more joyful light. India, a leader of the organization, shared her perspective on the transfer of thought:

Like as black people, it's almost expected to talk about negativity and hustle, hustle culture, you know? And it was sobering in itself that we wanted to do the complete opposite, and actually do something that was uncharacteristic of us as Black artists and speak about positivity and talk about how, yeah, we're struggling, but look at how we're thriving too, you know, and look at how much positive energy we can create.

Participants shared the importance of combating the stereotypical narrative of Black people and Black art. Therefore, they created art that exemplified empowerment, success, and resiliency.

India added, "It was all African celebratory music or poems that spoke of childhood or, music that was positive and uplifting. Just reminding you that we still are a people that are able to rise above our challenges, you know. And we don't have to be in that rut all the time." As the various

art forms of the Black Arts organization navigated the art making process, they shared that it was uplifting to be able to tell their personal story through their art. Langston noted,

Through art, we make commentary. We're not just passionate about these pieces, but we're passionate about the subjects that we're talking about. You know, these are the things that we actually find important. These are the things that we actually want to be heard about. These are the things that we want to be portrayed as.

The ability to tell their own story through their art, participants stated that it enabled them to practice an art that spoke loudly and unapologetically of the message they were portraying.

Black joy was exerted by the members of the Black Arts organization in a way where participants described it through uplifting Black artists and uplifting Black art. Uplifting Black artists were tools of empowerment where participants seized the opportunity to inspire Black artists, cheer for Black artists, and freely express themselves as Black artists. While uplifting Black art participants intentionally effort to engage in the art-making process through the lens of the creator to create art that focuses on joy and celebrating Black culture. Sheryl summarized this notion, in her statement, “In this organization, we were able to share Black joy, to share our Black spaces, and to be vulnerable in our Black spaces to create art.”

Collective Action

Empowering to see blackness through different perspectives, because there were just so many kids in so many ways that they expressed their own blackness and thought about their own blackness. Being with that many Other black children just really empowers you. Like there's power in numbers. So yeah, village. There's such a sense of community when it comes to Black Art and like the community takes care of each other.

- India, Research Participant

The Black Arts organization nested in a predominately white performing and visual arts school, was described by participants as being an organization where members had to collectively act to enhance their condition as Black people, Black artists, and the sustainment of

the organization. As an organization with a shared vision, participants found that the shared vision helped lay the foundation for collective action to take place. In working collectively to achieve a common objective, the organization uncovered ways to uplift Black artists, uplift Black art, and enhance the Black Arts organization. This section will explore the elements described by participants that related to collective action, including shared learning culture, community building, and local action and knowledge.

Figure 6

Collective Action Subthemes



Shared Learning Culture

Participants and members of the Black Arts organization believed that all of its members had something to contribute to their peers' learning and the organization's growth. Shared learning was foundational for participants to grow as Black artists, learn Black culture, and discover their Black identity. A shared learning culture was built upon the participants' strong peer relationships. Key elements of the shared learning culture include, establishing a relational environment through fostering collaboration, fostering trust, and fostering peer relationships.

Establish a Relational Environment

Relationships were the fundamental building blocks of the Black Arts organization that encouraged learning and contributed to innovation and productivity of the organization. The participant's perception of the performing and visual arts school's social environment impacted their well-being negatively, thus pushing them to create a relational environment within the Black Arts organization where members felt connectedness and belonging. The construct of the relational environment captured the atmosphere of what participants described as fostering collaboration and fostering peer relationships.

Fostering Collaboration

The Black Arts organization was described by participants as an organization comprised of students from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, gender identifications, age ranges, and artistic disciplines, yet despite their differences, creating a collaborative environment felt natural for them. Collaboration efforts were made amongst their peers as well as collaboration with outside community stakeholders. Participants shared that this helped their peers grow as artists and understand Black identity and culture.

The strength of the organization was developed through having a community that prioritized working together and uplifting one another. Identified by India, “The power that this organization has is because of Black solidarity and Black collaboration.” The collaboration took on various forms. Augusta found collaboration to be meaningful through sharing knowledge with other organization members. “You trade ideas and trade experiences, and that is kind of what led to inspiration for me.” This level of discourse and storytelling helped unify the organization members with each other as well as aided in the meaning-making of the experiences of others.

Partnerships with members of the Black Arts organization was also described as an empowering collaboration that uplifted their art. India shared:

I had encouragement from upper-class members with whom I formed close relationships.

They were there to say, hey, I've been there too, or we're all going to make it together.

We're going to create art together. And it was this idea of collaboration that this

organization had versus the school where everyone is kind of in their own bubble.

Since this organization was nested at a dedicated performing and visual arts high school, participants found collaboration in their artistry essential to their growth. This collaborative process was beneficial because the organizational members had a shared vision of art and were able to process their Black experiences together, which would then in turn influence their art. According to the participants, this process was not common in their school-based artistic courses due to those classes not having a relational environment but more of a competitive environment. Langston, shared:

Thinking of schooling, or even individual classrooms, as less of a competitive space of trying to get the highest grade, or trying to be the best performer in the class, but more so

as a collaborative community, to help all of us get better together and working together, to which we have this similar goal that we all have.

As stated by participant Jack, the Black Arts organization did not harbor a competitive environment, thus enabling collaboration to flow more freely:

This sense of pressure isn't present in this organization, and because of this, students are able to embrace who they are as musicians and artists instead of being molded into what the arts area directors want their students to become as artists.

The relational environment was cultivated by the Black Arts organization within the school, yet it was extended beyond the organization and reached community stakeholders. Participants shared the importance of wanting to collaborate and engage community stakeholders in an effort to share their learning with community members. Langston noted, "I want my art to make people think about their impact on their community I think that's exactly what this organization does, it makes people think about their place in their community." To reach a broader audience, this student-led organization collaborated with local galleries to share and speak about their artwork. India recalls her partnership with a local gallery, "We did a collaboration with Yellow House for our gallery specifically, and we also had creative writers have a performance there, too. And one of my paintings is used as the cover for the exhibition." Participants believed this collaboration between the Black Arts organization and community stakeholders to be impactful through allowing them to be in control of sharing their own narrative.

Fostering a collaborative environment was built on what the participants described as less competition and more on relationships. Through collaborating with their peers and local community stakeholders, participants believed it was fundamental in creating learning from and

with each other. This collaboration process was said to help uplift Black artists and enhance the Black Arts organization.

Fostering Peer Relationships

Fostering positive relationships amongst members of the Black Arts organization was a factor that participants shared that came naturally to the organization. To have an organization with a shared vision and one which understands its purpose was what they believed to be the glue to each relationship formed. Relationships were built due to having strong peer support. Peer support was cultivated through peer-to-peer accountability and being supportive during times of need.

Participants shared that the Black Arts organization displayed an outgrowth of trust and respect among each other, which led to peer-to-peer accountability. When asked what some of the qualities or characteristics of the Black, student-created, student-led organization's environment were, a commonality amongst participants was accountability. Langston stated, "I think the last one has to be accountability. I can count on those people, you know. This is a group of people I can count on. I think those things work together in a way that made it such a good space to be in." For some, peer-to-peer accountability encourages members of the organization to provide feedback on others artistic performances and their own personal artistic goals. Several participants shared accounts of needing the support of their peers to aid their artistic growth. Sherly shared:

I think this was my tenth-grade or eleventh-grade year, and she was one of the executive leaders of the organization, and she we really worked on my piece. It was a poem, but I changed it into my culture. So it was like an African poem, and then I was able to really

infuse my Jamaican culture, and that's something that I've never done in my normal arts classes.

Langston shared similar sentiments to peer support in his statement:

And I think a lot of that came from you know, being surrounded by other writers who wanted to convey their ideas through word and from the help of the leaders. She really pushed me in creating and thinking about how you want to describe certain things, or how I want to deliver it.

Larry added to this topic in his statement, “It was in a space that was welcoming and open to help me develop the skills that I want to build and to be surrounded by people that were willing to work with someone who was starting from basically square one.” All participants found by being an accountability partner for others, or having accountability for themselves, created strong peer-to-peer ties amongst members of the organization.

Strong peer relationships made the participants feel that there was always someone there to support them in their time of need. Whatever level of support participants felt they needed; they believed the organization could provide. Sheryl stated, “This organization really helped us during that time to come together, and really be heard, and to cry, and to be happy, and to laugh without being judged or facing the daily tribulations.” Participants described a plethora of topics that would be discussed amongst peers, which included racial battles, personal goals, artistry, post-secondary planning, and life as a Black person. “And when we all came together, I feel like the unity of all of us is really reflected,” added by Zora.

The relational environment and peer support was also evident for non-Black students who were members of the Black Arts organization. Non-Black participant, Dylan shared how he felt a level of connectedness to the organization and how peers supported his journey being one of the

few white persons in the organization. “I can express myself fully around this group of people and not feel any pressure.” Even though the organization was created by Black students and built for Black students, participants recognized how they welcomed diverse participants, and that they deserved just as much support as Black members. Langston shared, “And you (non-Black members) can come into these spaces. You can feel comfortable here (in the Black Arts organization).” Zora added appreciation for the peer-support from non-Black members. “I appreciated the support from those who were non-black that wanted to, you know, help with this fighting.” The wrap-around peer support from all members of the organization continued to strengthen the relational environment even when obstacles arose.

Despite difficulties and disagreements, the relational environment amongst peers was strong enough for the organization to sustain. Langston attests to this notion in his statement:

We don't have to agree on everything, but we're always going to be here. Every day you come home; I'm going to be here. Whether you like me or not. That's just how it is, right? There's an accountability, and there's a consistency. I just know that these people are going to be here for whatever. When I have no one else here outside of this for me, I come home, and these are the people. These people are always here.

Sheryl recognized that during her membership in the organization and still at this present moment, her connections with former members of the organization remain:

And that's the type of relationship that we built with each other. I know that even though I don't talk to the members consistently, I just know if I want to reach out and network with one of them and create something with them, I know they would always have my back. I know that they will be there, or they would support me at the end of the day.

A relational environment was established within the Black Arts organization through means of fostering collaboration and fostering peer relationships. Participants noted that this environment was able to build upon the foundation already being set with a shared vision amongst the organization. As relationships were built, and collaboration blossomed amongst peers and community stakeholders, it allowed for peer-to-peer and peer-to-community learning. This shared learning culture allowed all members to engage in the process of learning with and from each other.

Community Building

Cultivating community in a predominately white setting was used by members of the Black Arts organization to affirm Black student's identity, presence, and artistry, and they did so through methods of intentional invitation. Participants shared their understanding of the Black Arts' purpose, yet they emphasized that they did not have to work in silos to accomplish this. Participants intentionally made efforts to invite their non-Black peers to join as members or support the Black Arts organization by attending the annual performing and visual arts performance. Additionally, participants shared that Black Arts members intentionally invited school community members, local community members and community stakeholders to engage with the Black Arts organization in shared learning through attending their annual performing and visual arts performance or as a recruitment tool for future Black Arts members. Intentional invitations were made to build community between the Black Arts organization, non-Black peers, school community, local community members, and stakeholders to aid in the uplifting of Black art and artists.

Invitation for Inclusion

Building a shared community in a space created by Black students to uplift and celebrate Black culture was recognized by participants as requiring the inclusion of non-Black members. Since most non-Black students enrolled at the performing and visual arts school assumed that Black Arts was only for Black students, participants shared that they intentionally connected with non-Black members to invite their membership. Through invitation for them to be a part of the organization or for attendance at the annual performing and visual arts performance helped to give non-Black people a space of inclusion within the organization and build allyship between Black and non-Black members.

Mobilizing the power of communities to uplift Black art and artists was an intentional process among the Black Arts members to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for non-Black students to be a part of the organization. Participants found that they must engage in intentional invitations because most non-Black students assumed that Black Arts was inclusive to only Black students. Zora agrees with this in the statement:

I remember I would encourage people to join Black Art. To join Black Arts' choir or when I was trying to recruit for this singer-songwriter-performer, I would tell people to join because it's going to be fun. It's an experience to showcase who you are. They (non-Black students) would be hesitant about it, because they would be like, well, I'm not Black, so I don't want to join Black Art. They thought it was just reserved for Black people and not open for others.

The assumption by non-Black students of Black Arts being a reserved space was interpreted differently by participants. Langston believed that most non-Black peers believed that selecting to be part of Black Arts or to support it indicated choosing a racial side:

I think that individually we talk, at least talking race in America, historically in a binary way, even though the issue is very nonbinary. It makes other people who aren't Black think you have to take a side, whichever you more closely identify with. If you more so identified with the general audience, white people might stay over there, and then, if you more so identify with Black people, then you come to Black Art.

Augusta believed that non-Black students were fearful of the outward appearance or the perception of others if they were a part of or supported Black Arts stating, "Some (non-Black students) would support in very reserved ways. They didn't want to engage with Black Arts too much just out of fear of looking out of place or just feeling too out of place." With race-based assumptions made by non-Black students, participants knew it would be a difficult task to recruit them, yet they still understood the value in intentionally inviting non-Black students to join the Black Arts community.

It was the perception of the participants that historically, it was the Black responsibility to make other races and ethnicities feel comfortable, specifically in predominately Black spaces. India stated, "So I just think that once again, as Black people, we have to carry not just ourselves and our weight, but the weight of everybody else. Once again, we got to make people feel comfortable in Black spaces." Intentionally or unintentionally, this act of making other people feel comfortable was a task that participants shared that came natural to most Black people; therefore, the invitation to non-Black people and to make them feel welcomed and belonging to that space was effortless. When Zora was recruiting diverse members, it was emphasized to non-Black students that this community is a welcoming space to foster belonging for non-Black students as well. "I would always tell them that, you still have a place in this club like it's not,

specifically reserved for us. There's a place for you too. That's really the whole point of this club.”

The Black Arts organization’s purpose was to uplift Black art and artists, yet the element of community was something that the participants found was necessary for non-Black students to feel connected to, not only for them to learn about Black experiences but to also learn about themselves. Dylan reflected on the moment he was approached by a Black Arts member and the invitation that he received, and how it was an exciting experience that helped him to find purpose and compassion towards his Black peers:

I got the invitation, and I was pretty thrilled because I always look forward to doing it. I just didn't know if it was like my like place in a way to step into that. So, I didn't want to overstep. Really, this is a thing primarily for students of color, just to like bond with each other more than anything. And I just didn't want to break that for them. Once I was invited, they made me feel comfortable, and I knew this was something that could fulfill the soul and give me a sense of purpose.

Inviting non-Black students to join or support the Black Arts organization was recognized by participants as not being just an invitation because of the need for additional artistic talent but to provide community for anyone who may need support in their racial or ethnic identity. Langston provided insight on this thought as all demographics of people face a racial battle internally or externally. Black Arts members have already cultivated a space of belonging and inclusivity; therefore, the invitation to include others should be given:

It's out about realizing that this (race) isn't a binary issue. This is very much a spectrum, and it has to include everybody. Because every race deals with racial issues and has different racial issues to deal with them differently. Historically here in America, Black

people probably got the worst of it for the longest period of time. I think that kind of scares some non-black non-POC away from the conversation, even though I think many Black students and Black people are more than welcoming to other people. In reality, if we can all have each other's back and take care of each other and expand, it would only be better for us.

To invite non-Black students in a Black Arts organization was a task that participants shared as being beneficial to the growth of the organization, the growth of non-Black students, and the growth of Black Arts members. Sheryl stated that the invitation of inclusion built a bridge of connection to now "have allies." Dylan stated that the invitation to include him in the organization created a shared learning culture where he was able to learn more about Black culture and the experiences of his Black peers. "That's something I can't understand unless those experiences are shared with me. Learning about that makes me value people's experiences in society from like other races, or other cultures." Langston stated that the invitation for inclusion helped Black Arts members to see their efforts as being tokenized but an opportunity to create community across racial lines. "Pulling yourself out of that idea of tokenism and kind of forcing slowly like winging them into a new space and allowing them to slowly become more comfortable in this space."

Invitation to the Family Reunion

The invitation to a family reunion in the Black community is seen as a rite of passage that is an empowering celebration of kinship and resilience that Black families have endured and overcome. Students in the Black Arts organization shared about and reflected on how their annual performing and visual arts performance depicted a sense of community, love, and connection and how those elements resembled a family reunion. Annually, for two nights, the

Black Arts organization hosted a performing and visual arts performance at their predominately white performing and visual arts school. The performance is a student-created and student-directed production where Black Arts members orchestrate artistic pieces to celebrate Black history and Black culture. Participants shared that the event is a well-attended performance at the performing and visual arts school, with predominately Black attendees and audience members of all ages. India identified audience members to include, “It was family, friends, or people that are allies and people that we just knew.” As they reflected on their annual performance, most of the participants discussed that the aspect that made their performance special was their ability to capture a space and celebrate Black culture with those who shared those sentiments. The Black Arts organization cultivated a family reunion-like space through the invitation of diverse attendees to engage in not only uplifting Black art and artists but to transform a traditional predominately white performing and visual arts school into the epicenter of the Black family for two nights each year. Participants described the important elements of their annual performance, included their ability to create a community environment through fellowship with cultural foods and art forms rooted in Black culture that resonated with the audience.

Food at the family reunion. Food is recognized as a love language to the Black community, and participants noted its importance as a way of building and protecting Black culture. Prior to the start of their annual performance, participants reflected on a memory that they all enjoyed, and that was having a meal before the start of their performance. Augusta shared that, “Having this moment of togetherness before we did something very brave and like expose ourselves,” was a powerful moment. Sheryl reflected on that memory in her statement, “I really enjoyed having that sense of community...to enjoy potpie right before the opening of the

show. It was a black-owned (catering) company as well, and until this day, I still go there, and I still support them.” Fellowshiping with food in the Black community was described by Larry as creating “an environment where we can relax and have fun and generally express ourselves,” similar to a family reunion. In an effort to create a community space for everyone at the annual performance, the Black Arts organization provided outside seating and catering for audience members as well. Participants recognized that by their organization providing culturally relevant food at their performing and visual arts performance, it allowed collective conversations amongst attendees but also for cultural exposure to non-Black attendees.

Songs at the family reunion. The creation of Black Art’s annual performing and visual arts performance was created with the audience in mind. Lauryn acknowledged that to celebrate Black history and culture, they must facilitate their own research by connecting with Black community members to get their understanding of what artistic selections make them feel uplifted as a Black person, or what artistic selections pay homage to the Black culture. It was important for Black Arts members to engage in these conversations with Black community members to help them feel belonging and a part of a family while they are attending the annual performance. Lauryn stated:

It was about resonating with your audience and so this entire production is about, you know, feeling at home within the black community by appreciating your own art. And so, we did our own research. We went to our parents; we went to our family members. We said when you're at a cookout, when you're at a family reunion, when you're at a predominantly Black event what songs make you feel at home within your community? What songs make you want to get up, sing, make you feel nostalgic?

Participants recognized that their effort to invite community members to be a part of the planning process of their annual performance was something they never experienced within their traditional school-based artistic performances. Participants believed that community engagement in the planning process led to the sold-out performances and high praises of enjoyment from attendees.

Zora added, “There's so much joy in that building, like the energy was electrifying. Black Art is one of the only times I truly feel a part of a community in this building (the performing and visual arts school).” Augusta agreed in her statement, “Energy is kind of contagious for general audience members.” Sheryl continued with her comments on the high level of energy in the audience as she reflected on her attendance as an audience member during her freshman year at the school.:

But to see them (Black Arts members) highlighted in this safe space in this community, and I truly felt like I was at church. I felt like I was at a family gathering. Because we were all excited at the same time together, and we were able to freely express it without being labeled as oh, that's Ghetto, or that's loud, or that's ratchet. No, we're literally there celebrating.

Participants felt humbled and honored for the level of audience engagement and praise they received at their annual performance, as it confirmed that audience members felt a part of a community space that the Black Arts members intentionally built. Sheryl shared:

I remember there's this lady, she came up to me in Publix, total stranger. She saw me perform at Black Arts. She's like oh, my gosh! Ever since that day of your performance it really stuck with me. It was so amazing. I've never seen something like that being done in a school.

Participants recognized that their annual performing and visual arts performance resonated with a significant amount of audience member because it felt like a Black family reunion. A space where participants intentionally invited community members to be included in the planning process of the annual performance and to be included in a safe space to freely uplift Black art and artists. This collective, shared space that Black Arts members created was initiated through invitation into the space and was sustained through the continuous effort to use community voice to inform their annual performing and visual arts performance.

Local Knowledge and Action

As the Black Arts organization centered around uplifting Black art and artists, participants described the organization's ability to create a collective space as the members would share their individual and community experiences, as it helped to foster creative agency that aided organization members to find their voice. This collective action allowed the Black Arts organization, as they experienced the racialized climate within the performing and visual arts school, to be in a position to obtain the power to identify possible solutions to the racially motivated challenges they were experiencing. "So, the power just kind of goes back in our hands," stated Augusta when she responded to how the Black Arts organization can begin trying to regain control of the Black experience. To operate as a collective unit, to take action toward a more positive experience at the performing and visual arts school, participants described the need to empower Black Arts members with the skills and knowledge to find power in their voice and agency and to engage in mentor-mentee relationships to cultivate a collective environment to counter negative perceptions of Blackness.

Empower with Skills and Knowledge

The Black Arts members felt empowered to confront the realities of the performing and visual arts school's racialized climate by affirming how Black Arts members could disrupt those actions through their voice and agency. Participants described finding their voice as gaining confidence to speak up against the challenges they were facing such as racism, oppression, and microaggressions. Langston attested to his improved confidence:

So now we have this newfound confidence in ourselves that we feel that we can say what we need to say because it's impacting us in this way. We can say what we need to say because we are getting confident enough to approach a teacher, a faculty member to execute and exercise our voice.

Participants described utilizing methods of empowerment to help gain confidence that amplified their voice. Sheryl stated:

I feel as though our voices were amplified in Black Art, in in our other arts areas (classes) there weren't spaces for us and meant for us and built for us. So, with Black Arts we had a space that was made for us, and that made us amplify our voices, and it was just so comfortable.

Participants felt comfortable and confident to use their voices to bring awareness to the unfair treatment there shared they were experiencing. Langston added, "Had to put [their personal Black experiences] on display, and really think about, speak about, and put that out into the world."

Finding their voice and the confidence to have the agency to act on their experiences was described by participants as a process. A process for them to learn the importance of seizing

every opportunity they have to speak about their Black experience or to uplift Black art and artists:

But you have this ability to command a presence in command. The attention of everyone in the room and keeping that and holding that tension and speak. Leaving it so carefully to communicate the things that you want to do, or that you want to say and really feeling heard in that moment.

Participants saw every opportunity to use their personal and artistic voice to bring awareness to the unfair treatment there shared they were experiencing as “their defining moment” as described by Zora. As participants empowered Black Arts members with the skills and knowledge needed to uplift Black art and artist, members gained valuable skills to aid in their wholistic growth and the collective action of the Black Arts organization.

Mentor-Mentee Relationship

The environment that the Black Arts organization created was a collective action to empower students personally and artistically, and this was done through the utilization of mentor-mentee relationships. The mentor-mentee relationships between Black Arts members happened organically. Without guidance or prompting, participants shared that it was common for 11th and 12th grade Black Arts members to take a 9th or 10th grade Black Arts member under their wing throughout the school year. Participants described mentor-mentee relationships as the thread that connected Black Arts members together and the thread to pull each other up with knowledge and action. The mentor-mentee relationships helped strengthen this collective space as it was a source of guidance and empowerment to help cultivate and foster wholistic growth of the Black Arts members.

Most participants credited part of their willingness to join this Black collective space was due to being inspired by a Black artist at the annual performing and visual arts performance. However, most participants credited part of their willingness to return to the Black Arts organization each year due to being inspired by Black Arts members who poured into them about their artwork, their Blackness, strategies to navigate racialized school environments, or other personal matters. For some participants, the Black Arts member by whom they were inspired by to join the organization became a positive personal role model and mentor. Augusta stated:

There's something important about looking up to somebody not too far out from you but like the same sort of age as you. Because you're still in high school, they're not like an adult telling you what to do. There's no power dynamic on the level of like a child to a parent because they're still there for you as a friend and teacher.

Through mentorship, participants credited their increased passion for advocacy and uplifting Black people due to the mentoring and teachings of their peers. Sheryl described her positive outcome from mentorship as her willingness to advocate for Black people and artists across her local community outside the school. "I have the power, passion, and fire for black artists, for allowing people's voices to be heard into helping other black people, and other black creatives, voices to be heard in the city as well."

Participants who were mentors or were mentored by Black Arts members, shared that the mentor-mentee relationships helped to cultivate important leadership skills and other qualities needed to grow and advocate for the organization and its members. India correlated the mentor-mentee relationship of Black Arts to the elder-congregation relationship within the church. "That was just such a space for care, too. When you think about it, there's like the elders and whatnot. And there's like the newcomers and you're sort of trading wisdom, and you're acting like a

village, like a community.” Augusta continued with the thought that the mentor-mentee dynamic creates an exchange of knowledge, “With these people that eventually they just like, plant these seeds with inspiration and when you're just spending so much time with each other, you trade ideas and trade experiences.”

As mentorship was built and shared learning took place within a racialized school climate, participants shared that they had opportunities to put their new knowledge into action. Actions were developing leadership skills within the Black Arts organization and using their voice in their art to reveal the Black experience to a broader audience. Langston attested to the process of learning knowledge amongst each other and putting new skills and learning into action:

And I think this, as you learn about how the screwdriver works. You don't understand it intuitively until you really use this and experience it, I think that was the piece of real world that we got the difficulties that they showed us what the real-life experiences like and how that was for other people.

As a student-led organization, Black Arts cultivated strong leaders who would mentor younger members to help build leadership skills within them. Sheryl's testimony was:

So, just looking at all those powerful young women. It's just admirable. So, when I got up to be a leader in this organization, I knew how I wanted to run it because those great women inspired me...and now I want to continue to inspire others.

Dylan also agreed that the Black Arts organization focused on the continuous development of leaders within the organization from his observation at his post-graduation attendance at the Black Art's annual performance:

They (the new Black Arts executive leaders) really took up the leadership role, and they're doing an even better job. And it's really encouraging to see that they're taking it another step, and then the people after that are going to take it another step. So just that continuous development, I think, is really special.

According to participants, the leaders and mentors of Black Arts did not engage in a power dynamic but established a relational environment to have a mentor-mentee relationship that worked in tandem with the family dynamic. Zora felt that leaders of the Black, student-created, student-led organization “acted like a big brother to me.” Having that big brother, big sister relationship was particularly important to the participants because they felt that, as young people, they are more likely to provide advice and a rationale when advice is being given.

Langston noted:

They have the best in mind for you. To have someone that is right where you are, showing you the best way to move forward, helps to solidify in your mind, oh, this is the right thing to do, and this is why. You're not just telling me to do something, not just telling me that this is the right direction. You're guiding me and showing me that this is the right direction. This is what makes those relationships so invaluable.

An important factor of the mentor-mentee relationship was the constant focus on leading others to build community. Dylan stated, “just seeing them (Black Arts leaders) lead this group and just guide them (Black Arts members) on like how to grow. It was more about community. It wasn't it wasn't about the music. It was about the experience.” Building a community where they focused on the process versus the product differed from the participant's traditional experiences at the performing and visual arts school. Dylan added that this “is a student-led organization and the biggest part is to prioritize the students and their experiences in this club. They did that by

kind of making sure the process was really valuable to everyone.” Participants believed that the focus on the process improved their annual performance's end product.

The mentor-mentee relationship in this family dynamic helped members of Black Arts to “See that they have potential and that there's something in their art” and had the power to transform the lives of the mentees. Sheryl provided an example of the growth of one of her mentees by sharing, “He was like underneath my wings, and you know I was trying to mentor. So, seeing all those Black boys transitioning into Black men and realizing who they are and that they have a place in this world. It's kind of amazing.” Participants found the mentor-mentee relationship to have a ripple effect of inspiration. “Someone inspired me and mentored me; now I have the opportunity to inspire someone else and mentor them,” said Augusta, adding, “you feel like you’re doing something right.” Black Arts’ members ability to utilize this collective space to foster mentor-mentee relationships helped to sustain the effectiveness and growth of the organization.

Summary

As Black Arts members engaged in working collectively to take action against racism, oppression, and microaggressions they faced, participants described the need for shared learning, community building and local knowledge to empower action. As a minority group, participants found that they were strength in their solidarity, but they must cultivate a community through inviting non-Black peers and community members to join and support the organization, create a relational environment that fostered collaboration and peer relationships, and empower Black Arts members to be leaders who use their voice and agency to uplift Black art and artists.

Art as Transformation

People want to do better, and that's what I strive to convey as an artist as well. I want my art to make people think about their impact on their community. I think that's exactly what Black Art does, it makes people think about their place in their community. And hopefully, have thoughts to bring something better to their community and themselves.

- Sheryl, Research Participant

The debate of what is high-quality art, and its purpose is an understanding that participants shared did not come from their technical training at the performing and visual arts school but was developed through their membership in the Black Arts organization. The Black Arts organization, focused on uplifting Black art and artists, created a collective space that empowered participants to immerse themselves in artistic exploration and freedom. This process allowed participants to work collaboratively or in silos to experiment and take risks within the art development stage to aid in discovering their purpose of creating art. This section will discuss how participants transformed the Euro-centric foundation of art that was taught in their arts courses to discovering their purpose of art. This section will continue with how participants learned to use their art as activism through the usage of storytelling. Figure 7 provides a visual representation of this section's subthemes.

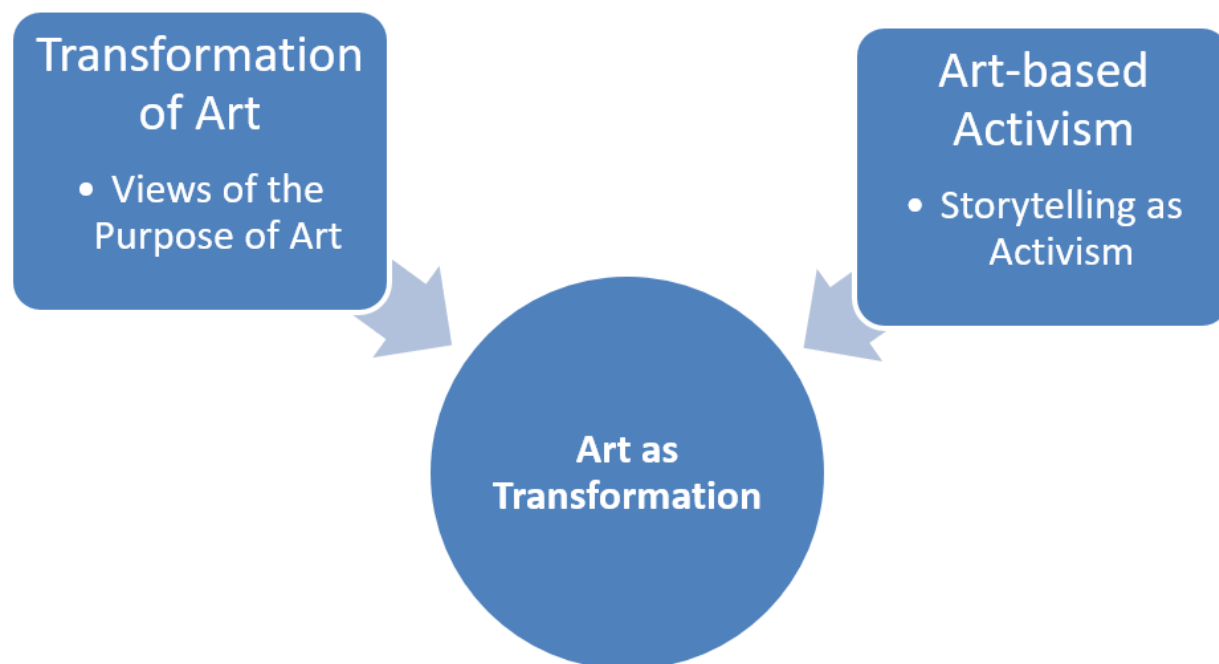
Transformation of Art

At its center, art is a form of self-expression that empowers the artists to utilize various mediums to outwardly express what they feel internally. Participants believed this definition to only be partially true as they believed that art is self-expression yet was limited to the Euro-centric standards of high-quality art which is taught within their performing and visual arts school. This restriction of expression led Black Arts members to take a different approach in their art and to engage in artistic exploration and freedom to take time to discover other artistic forms and techniques as well as their artistic identity. By taking control of their creativity,

participants were able to discover their meaning behind their art creation and the purpose of their art.

Figure 7

Art as Transformation Subthemes



Views on the Purpose of Art

Art has the power to use invisible inward feelings and emotions and transform them into visible outward expressions through a painting, body movements from a dance, music notes on a paper, a singer on a stage, or a theatrical performance. Participants were accepted into this performing and visual arts due to a successful critique of an artistic audition, where their acceptance afforded them an opportunity to receive technical training in their arts discipline that was designed to prepare them to become professional performing or visual artists. Through their matriculation at the performing and visual arts school participants described that former

understanding of the purpose of art was one-dimensional as it embodied the sole standards of a Euro-centric perspective. This often-left participants engaging in artistic exploration to explore their purpose of art. The level of artistic exploration and freedom the Black Arts organization gave students allowed them to engage in reflection and discover that most participants' purpose of art was to create and impact and influence a community that not only would begin appreciating Black art and artists but also influencing a community to create change within their own neighborhood.

Enrolled at the performing and visual arts school, where the teachers predominately identified as white, it was not surprising to the participants that the curriculum utilized within the artistic classroom followed a Euro-centric approach to art development and training. Langston described the impact of having art being taught based on the perception of the mainstream race, restricted him from being able to view the purpose of art through a diverse lens:

What we see, and who we study as the masters of the craft are generally European. We're studying art through the lens of predominantly Caucasian and European. What is it called basically, the things that they valued at the time? Those standards you could say, it definitely influenced a lot of how I approached art and how I viewed what visual art meant to me.

Similar to Langston, India's approach to art was largely based on Euro-centric techniques. However, when the teacher introduced an Afro-rooted artistic skill or technique, India believed that the teacher provided limited context that would have allowed a greater appreciation and understanding of the skill by all students. "In jazz history, the teacher would always take time at the beginning of every chart and kind of talk about the background. But it was never enough to describe the racial significance, at least in the band, because it was just all go, go, go, rehearse,

rehearse.” Following the skills and techniques that were taught by teachers as the correct way to perform within their arts discipline left some participants feeling that what they believed art to be did not mirror what they produced. Larry shared, “I would restrict myself to be in this uniformed group (choir).” The lack of incorporation of diverse curriculum, skills, and techniques, participants believed, constrained them from finding their true understanding of the purpose of art.

The Black Arts organization prided itself in giving its members the opportunity to engage in artistic exploration and freedom to prevent them from feeling constrained or restricted to one version of art. Participants described artistic exploration and freedom allowed them to engage in self-reflection and discovery to find the true meaning of their purpose of art. Dylan described the Black Arts organization as “the most natural art making experience.” In alignment with Dylan, participants agreed that the culture and environment within Black Arts created an experience where they were able to experiment with artistic forms and techniques to gain a deeper understanding of how their feelings and emotions align with and connect with the artistic disciplines in which they were engaging. Langston added:

Before that, art was fairly restricting. You know, it’s to a point very by-the-book basic types of things. But now, being able to truly experiment and express really deep feelings that you want to express. I don't think I ever did anything like this within my arts area that was to this extent of Black Art.

India added, “I could mess up in Black Art, and that would be turned into something productive. I had the creative space to mess around with things and to see what worked and what didn't.” Having the creative space to experiment with their art looked similar for participants, as most participants preferred collaborating with their peers during the artistic exploration process. Larry

shared, “And just being in the creative writing department alone, and just going back and forth, and bouncing ideas off of one another that really helped a lot... creating art allowing me to grow and give me a healthy space to convey my thoughts and feelings.” Augusta believed that engaging in artistic freedom gave participants control over their art creation, which led to their uncovering of the purpose of their art.

Artistic exploration and freedom allowed participants to have what Augusta called “agency over my creativity,” which helped them discover their distinct art purpose. Their discoveries of how they now view art are credited to the artistic exploration and freedom the Black Arts organization provided. Each participant responded based on their own personal beliefs and experiences.

Sheryl’s purpose of art was to create artwork that impacted the community in a positive way where they would want to take action to better themselves and or their community. Sheryl stated:

People want to do better, and that's like what I strive to convey as an artist as well. I want my art to make people think about their impact on their community...people think about their place in their community, and hopefully have thoughts to bring something better towards their community and for themselves.

Langston’s purpose of art was to not conform to the traditional Euro-centric standards of art but to be willing to push those standards far enough to create new boundaries. He stated, “Art in a way, has to be scary. You have to let us actually practice art in the way that it's meant to be practice as a way to push boundaries into asking questions.”

Zora’s purpose of art was to use the process of creating art to engage in self-discovery. This process helped Zora to slowly identify elements of who they are as a person, a Black

student, and a Black artist. Zora stated, “I have been able to take pieces of that (art exploration process) and put it into my life today into my art today. I just found new pieces of myself and my art kind of represents that.

India’s purpose of art was to learn how to engage in advocacy work through the usage of musical instruments in order to tell the stories of Black artists in hopes for social change. India stated, “Journey of trying to figure out how can I amplify my voice through just strings. Through that journey, I realized that playing bass, playing jazz, using jazz as a black art form to shed light on this issue of the disparity of black artists.”

Larry’s purpose of art was to spend time in the art-making process to learn how to freely express his thoughts and emotions as a Black man. This was relatively important to Larry as he shared that Black male expression is a luxury and not often deemed appropriate by society. Larry stated, “The space to grow not just as an artist, but I feel like as a young black man...creating art allowing me to grow and give me a healthy space to convey my thoughts and feelings..

Augusta’s purpose of art was allowing herself to have agency over her creativity. Her purpose of art is to demonstrate that art can be embedded in different racial, ethnic, or cultural roots, yet she will still own the artwork. Augusta stated:

Having creative liberties is art. The art is wide-ranging like I was able to play classical pieces by very, very white men and it's still accepted as Black art because it's coming from me, a Black individual. And then, students were able to create works of their own through their own Black experiences. Wide-ranging, but they're all very black.

Dylan’s purpose of art embodied self-fulfillment through the creation of artwork that made him feel a sense of accomplishment. Dylan stated, “Art, I knew this was something that could fulfill the soul and give me a sense of purpose.”

Participants came into the performing and visual arts school with the assumption that the curriculum and techniques that were being taught within their artistic courses were the standards of what high quality art looks like and the purpose of art should meet those standards. However, through membership in the Black Arts organization, participants engaged in artistic exploration and freedom that allowed them to experiment with different art forms and techniques, reflect on their identity to discover what the purpose of art meant to them individually.

Art-based Activism

To educate, advocate, and build community to have a broader awareness of the artistic talents of Black artists were strides the Black Arts organization had to make in a space that often attempted to silence their voice. Participants saw the value in validating the diversity of Black experiences and showing what joy, solidarity, and love looked like in non-white spaces. This was done through the usage of storytelling methods. Participants described the importance of changing the narrative of who their teachers and peers assumed Black art and artists to be and used their artistic forms to control and share their stories. This was seen as an act of activism, as they were able to challenge the power relations within the school to bring about social change that would uplift Black art and artists.

Storytelling as Activism

Stories are powerful and are embedded within the Black culture. “Villages, storytelling, and being unapologetically Black. That's a part of our culture,” as confirmed by Sheryl. Participants understood that they are a walking story, and it's how they navigate society through making meaning of their stories and telling their stories. Once a story leaves their lips, paintbrush, music instrument, body movement, or film, participants described the joy but

sometimes fear that comes with releasing their story while being unsure how the receiver would interpret their Black experience. Therefore, it often left participants and Black Arts members silenced from engaging in storytelling to speak their truth. It wasn't until the participants became members of Black Arts where they found a community that invited and encouraged them to share difficult negatives even if the receiver may not be receptive.

To members of the Black Arts organization, activism takes many forms, but the approach that resonated the most with the participants was activism through the usage of storytelling. Storytelling was described as an opportunity to reflect on personal and community experiences, freely speak on their experiences without limitations. Langston described storytelling as “just that willingness to say what I have to say specifically, not what I think people want to hear. Not what I think is correct. But what I truly want to say.” Storytelling to the participants could be done through any artistic medium, including through song, dance, acting, film, or spoken word. As students who often faced racism, oppression, and microaggressions, participants felt that they did not always feel safe or confident in using their art forms to share their experiences. This section will describe the participants' restricted opportunities for storytelling within the context of the school setting and how they were able to gain the confidence to do so through membership in the Black Arts organization.

Nested in a predominately white performing and visual arts school, the participants described feelings of restriction, rigidity, and limitations regarding their ability to share their experiences with peers and teachers freely. “Different spaces allow different forms of expression,” was shared by Sheryl as she responded to the topic of not feeling comfortable to be her authentic self within her improvisation theatre classes. Sheryl continued with an example of a

class-assigned theatre performance where she performed a skit that told the story of police brutality and its impact on her and the Black community:

We did a piece it was such a beautiful piece about Trayvon Martin, and how Black men were being killed, and that could be our Black uncles and our aunts, or anyone that's related to us. The teacher was like, I don't understand how the skittles and Arizona correlate to the rest of the piece. This topic is one sided with no depth. Everybody else in our class are like. Are you serious? It's just ignorance, honestly.”

Sheryl made an attempt to share a narrative on a Black experience in an improvisation course, while other participants shared that they did not feel comfortable or confident to share their personal narrative due to the lack of opportunity presented to them in the school environment. Augusta assumed the teacher's lack of initiative to create a space for storytelling meant it was not the appropriate setting to do so. “Part of it might have been that I might not have felt certain things would be okay to portray within that given space (arts classes).” Langston added:

A lot of it was definitely comfortability being comfortable to say what I want to say and to craft a story the way that I want to. And then I think the last bit of it I within a classroom, you still have to check off the boxes. I still have to meet the requirements of the given assignment. So, sometimes you don't have the room to fit in a narrative that you're trying to tell.

Students attributed the lack of opportunities for students of color to engage in authentic storytelling within the school setting to the lack of diversity and cultural appreciation within the curriculum. “We need to be looking at that overview of our curriculum in the schools,” said Sheryl in regards to what schools can do to allow students of color to share their cultural experiences within the classroom setting.

The lack of substance or innovation are factors that participants believed why teachers at the performing and visual arts schools did not show an interest in the stories Black Arts members would tell through their artwork. Langston added:

Teachers probably think this is the same thing that we've seen throughout history. This artwork is a commentary on the same thing that Black people have been talking about. Like there might not be any innovation to it. There might not be any change in narrative. It's just the same thing that Black people have always talked about. So, it's either that or the artwork is ghetto. Those are the two things if I had to guess, that's what most people would see. People listen to rap music or R&B, and they think about how vulgar and how aggressive it is, and they attribute that to the idea of what Black people are without understanding why this work is the way that it is. It has to be that way to tell the narrative that it's trying to tell. And I think most teachers or people outside of that, don't feel like there is a narrative to tell or they don't understand the intricacies of the artwork to be able to appreciate it or understand what is trying to be conveyed. So, they don't see any value in it.

Some participants believed that teachers and staff did not see the value in their experiences due to the fear of how their stories might negatively impact the school. Participants shared intentional efforts by school faculty to prohibit or restrict certain storytelling through art experiences that may put the school in an unwanted position or a negative light. "The push back came down to how they wanted their school to be represented versus what the reality of our experience was while we were there," said Langston. India added, "So it's like your voice was shut and silenced as a student."

This lack of concern or fear of the truth of the experiences of Black students initially left the participants feeling fearful to use their voice in the manner of storytelling:

I think that in my tenure there (performing and visual arts school), I don't know if I was ever bold enough to do anything that was blatantly a statement like that (their Black experience). I don't think that I felt the comfortability, or maybe not the push or the want to go that far.

As participants reflected on their storytelling experiences between the school context and Black Arts, they found a higher level of confidence in Black Arts due to the amount of push and support from its members. "I think a lot of that came from being surrounded by other writers who wanted to convey their ideas through word and from the help of the leaders, she really pushed me..." Black Arts members provided support to their peers to remind them that there is power in their authentic voice and there should not be any limitations to restrict them from telling their stories. Augusta added, "You can control your own narrative. Nobody is telling you what your Black experience has to look like or what it has looked like. You are able to define it for yourself."

As a leader of the Black Arts organization, India encouraged members to see their Black identity as a source of inspiration to tell their story through their artwork, saying "Have real raw conversations about what it means to be Black, and how to navigate through this world.... use your blackness to use your creativity." India understood that storytelling was not only verbal, but she could advocate for Black artists through her music usage:

How can I amplify my voice through just strings? Through that journey I realized that playing bass, playing jazz, using jazz as a Black art form to shed light on this issue of the disparity of Black artists. That was my calling, and that was my passion and senior year.

Providing Black students a collective space to process their unique experiences empowered Black Arts members to be confident in their stories and authentic narratives. Even his brief one-year membership in Black Arts, Langston understood its impact on his esteem and personal growth:

Black Art definitely gave me more confidence to say what I thought. I've always been introspective. But I don't ever think I could take those things inside and bring them out to the same effectiveness. I think that it definitely made me more comfortable voicing what I felt needed to be voiced from me.

Sheryl, an audience member listening to Langston's spoken word poetry to narrate his Black experience, shared how his story impacted the listener:

Black boy joy...seeing how they're (Black males) able to express themselves through the arts, and that's something that men are not even allowed to do in our society. Being able to express themselves, especially Black men, if they're even able to live that long, anyway.

Participants found that their bravery to tell their stories was contagious and empowering. As one person from Black Arts exercised storytelling through their artistic form, it inspired others to do the same while also not wanting to filter their stories to be seen as more palatable:

Black Art definitely gave me more confidence to say the things that I thought. As a writer, a performer now I know that I'm better off because of the amount of things and the amount of vulnerability that I was able to portray. And within Black Art in that moment, I now feel like I have the bravery to talk about anything that I want to talk about. I'm not scared of appeasing anyone or catering to an audience, or making sure that

certain things are digestible. I'm now at a point to where if you get it, you get it.

That's great. And if you don't, you don't.

Participants hoped by giving their raw truth of telling stories through their art, the listener or audience member would listen with an open-mind and a willingness to learn. Despite their experiences of racism, oppression, and microaggressions, participants aimed to keep a positive mindset that people are innately good and that their artwork may positively impact their view of Black people:

People want to do better, and that's what I strive to convey as an artist as well. I want my art to make people think about their impact on their community. I think that's exactly what Black Art does, it makes people think about their place in their community. And hopefully, have thoughts to bring something better to their community and themselves. Storytelling through their artistic form was not an experience that participants felt was afforded to them within the school context, but as they navigated their membership in Black Arts, participants understood the importance and value in utilizing storytelling to share their experience. It was their view that in order for changes to occur within the school context regarding Black art and artists, those in position to make changes must be made aware of these experiences. Despite the restrictive environment within the performing and visual arts school, Black Arts members relied on each other to empower, motivate, and push each other to tell their personal story through their art form.

To make meaning of the purpose of their art, participants found being a part of an unrestricted environment that allowed them to have agency over finding their artistic voice enabled their purpose. Having freedom to explore their artistic mediums empowered participants to look within to determine their outward response of showcasing their artwork. Each

participant's personal experience influenced their response to the purpose of their art. Their responses included community impact, self-development and fulfillment, creative liberty, and creating new boundaries outside of the Euro-centric realm. As participants discovered their artistic purpose it also pushed them to use their art to advocate for Black art and artists. Participants engaged in storytelling as a method to share their Black experience and the experiences of others that encompassed stories of joy and trauma. Through these transformative artistic measures, participants could engage in individual and collective social change.

Chapter Summary

Through the participant's individual and collective storytelling and meaning making, this chapter offered space for Black Arts, a student-created, student-led organization, to share their experiences during their membership in the organization which was nested in a predominately white, performing and visual arts school. What was learned, is that an organization of youth who have a passion for the performing and visual arts, created a safe space and community to protect each other from the racism, oppression, and microaggressions they were facing within the school context but to also empower each other's artistic exploration to amplify their voice. What also became evident was the Black Arts members willingness to create community and relationships with those outside of the school environment. This was done through inviting family members to be a part of the artistic process by providing their insight on culturally related traditions, as well as creating community with local non-profit organizations to highlight their artwork. From the data it was discovered that the four themes dominated the study: (a) student perceptions of school: inside and outside of Black Art, (b) emancipatory resistance, (c) collective action, and (d) art as transformation.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

“Black is never ending” – Sheryl, Research participant

This critical phenomenological study aimed to understand the perspectives and experiences of members of Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists. Through a critical phenomenological research design, I provided opportunities for nine participants to share and reflect on their artistic, academic, social, and emotional experiences during their membership in the Black Arts organization. The research question that guided this inquiry was *“What are the experiences of students involved in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists?”* In addition, I explored three sub-questions:

- How do students experience their involvement in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting African American art and artists in ways that uplift and magnify their voices and agency?
- How do student experiences in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists, inform deficit perspectives often held toward Black students and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted?
- How do student experiences in Black Arts, a Black, student-created, student-led organization focused on uplifting Black art and artists, inform deficit perspectives often held toward Black art and how those deficit perspectives can be disrupted?

Through my systematic, iterative analyses of the data collected throughout this study which included semi-structured interviews and Community Learning Exchanges, I identified findings reflecting four main themes:

- Student Perceptions of School: Inside and Outside of Black Arts,

- Emancipatory Resistance,
- Collective Action, and
- Art as Transformation.

Findings and Literature Review

Meaning is never made in a vacuum. This is particularly true for research. Just as I shaped and designed this study within the context of academic literature in various domains, the findings from this study will now become part of related academic discourses. For instance, it is important to consider all findings from this study as interconnected themes rather than as separate entities. This emphasis on interconnectivity and interrelationships is grounded in the meaning-making processes of Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs), which were used as a data collection method. The collaborative processes of CLEs are themselves grounded in the understanding that relationships are key to the learning and meaning making during CLEs (Guajardo, et al., 2015). In many ways, this research and the findings it yielded are reflective of the beautiful complexities of relationships, whether those relationship create connections among the approaches, strategies, and solutions that arose in the findings or the connections that were made or strengthened among participants throughout this study. In that spirit, this section will examine relationships among and concerning the findings. Specifically, I will explore and connect how the study findings of Student Perception of School: Inside and Outside of Black Arts, Emancipatory Resistance, Collective Action, and Art as Transformation are in relationship with each other, in many ways working in concert with one another. Secondly, I will explore how my findings connect with the literature presented in Chapter Two.

The first finding I identified for this study, Student Perception of School: Inside and Outside of Black Arts, represented an exploration of study participants' perception of their

considerably different, even divergent, experiences within two very different environments within their performing and visual arts school. During their participation in the Black Arts organization and any space they occupied during their participation in it, student participants consistently described feelings of belonging, community, empowerment, and love. In contrast, their experiences in the school otherwise outside of Black Arts, including their academic classes, art-area classes, and the less structured time and experiences within the school often produced feelings of isolation, emotions associated with many of their observations that there was a lack of cultural representation, and deep and persisting sentiments of being disconnected. Although participants each conjectured around specific and idiosyncratic incidents or reasons for their disparate affective experiences between Black Arts and the school otherwise, all hypothesized either individually or collectively during CLEs that racism, whether explicit or more covert contributed to it. Throughout this study, every participant shared experiences where they or others were hurt by situations that appeared to be racist or oppressive. These experiences and observations included the predominance of ethnocentric teaching and curriculum that seemed to render invisible those contributions and narratives that were not centered on Whiteness, as well as the exhaustingly consistent exposure to racial micro- and macro-aggressions from teachers, staff, and sometimes even their non-Black peers. It is a well-known fact of human existence that we share a need for social connection, or a sense of belonging. In fact, seeking belonging is a basic human motivation (Walton & Cohen, 2007). At this very basic human level, the oral history of the establishment of the Black Arts organization shared among students, as well as their perennial fight to continue its existence, is a testament to this need for belonging. It is fitting then that Black artists at this performing and visual arts high school each year re-create and re-envision Black Arts each year as a space where they can belong in ways that are *radically*

inclusive, in contrast to their experiences in the school otherwise and as evidenced by the invitation that is extended each year to non-Black students.

The Black Arts organization was and is (at the time of this writing) a student-created, student-led organization that focused on uplifting Black art and artists. Black students built this space as a safe haven for Black students and allies to support one another in the face of adversity, to problem-solve together, and to act as a source of empowerment for not only each other, but for other Black students in the school and Black members of the community in which the school is located. The act of racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism (Carter, 2007). Researchers have found that culturally sustaining spaces, such as affinity groups, like Black Arts, that are created with students of color, help those involved to develop their cultural identity and increase their sense of belonging (Nguyen, 2020; Weaver, 2021). My findings demonstrated how involvement in Black Arts facilitated study participants' growing sense of belonging and perceptions that this growth seemed to occur for all members of Black Arts. Their sense of belonging was profoundly relational. As they developed greater and closer rapport with other members of the organization, they felt more connected to each other, to the organization, to their respective arts area, and to Blackness – either their own or expressions of appreciation for it. This happened during Black Arts through mentor-mentee relationships, which functioned to build student confidence, as they collectively tapped into asset-based methods and approaches to developing artistic skills, competencies, and passions that for many of them were absent in their art-area classes with their trained arts teachers. This all happened, and from the participants' narration happens repeatedly year after year, through deep relationships that yielded a different form of accountability – deeper and more motivating than

grades – an accountability rooted in holding high expectations for each other, and believing in their peers’ abilities.

Participants in this study attributed the ability to have a strong sense of belonging amongst Black Arts members to their capacity to cultivate a family environment. The concept of family is the epicenter of Black culture. To many of the participants, the Black Arts organization “felt” like family as aspects of it resembled, represented, and reproduced key characteristics of the family community. Importantly, participants in this study expressed an understanding that they weren’t a family simply because most members were Black, but that they were a family because they embodied and lived out collective values that produced a shared vision, love, and solidarity. To participants, the Black Arts organization demonstrated how the key elements of family, shared vision, love, and solidarity, were needed to disrupt negative perceptions about Black art and artists. Within the Black Arts organization, participants and their peers embraced a vision that was created by them, affirmed by them, and strengthened through their love and care for their art and each other. This collective vision rooted in radical love then had the ripple effect of emboldening Black Arts members to stand in solidarity to protect each other and protect their art in the midst of a particularly racialized climate in the school and in the years immediately following the tumultuous national reckoning with anti-Black racism following the murder of George Floyd. As a group of young, Black students and non-Black allies, they expressed their understanding that to overcome race-based adversities, such as the lack of resources and support they experienced yearly for their organization, the only thing strong enough to keep them sustained was to remain a family. This was done through the level of trust that the organization established amongst the participants. Trust that no matter what obstacles they may face, the

members of the Black Arts organization will always show up for them and that through it they could have a unified front.

Through the race-based adversities and threats to shut down the Black Arts organization, due to school and district leaders' beliefs that their artistic selections were not deemed as “high quality art,” the family dynamic taught and encouraged participants the importance of amplifying their voice and agency during these times. Students of color are often not offered an opportunity to have a voice on matters impacting their education (Flutter, 2007), thus leading to students of color internalizing those thoughts and emotions. My analysis of the data provided by participants during their individual interviews and our Community Learning Exchanges produced findings indicating that alongside each other throughout their experiences with and in Black Arts, they learned how to advocate for themselves using their artistic voices. This element of my findings is reflective of Freire’s conjecture that members of oppressed populations must be the drivers of their own liberation (Freire, 1996), an act that holds the potential to even transform the consciousness, and therefore redeem and liberate those enacting forces of oppression.

Another key element of my findings for this study was that participants learned how to use their artistic voices and marshal their storytelling both for and through activism. Throughout the duration of this study, when I invited participants to reflect on and describe their personal experiences, whether they were experiences of the racial climate at the performing and visual arts school and in the United States or their Black experiences as a whole, they nearly always opted to tell a story using their desired artistic medium. I came to understand the Black Arts organization as a powerful analog to the Black artistic movements in the United States I explored in Chapter 2. Just as the Harlem Renaissance is understood as an artistic liberatory movement of Black Americans who fought for Black voice and agency through artistic forms (Boyd, 2021),

participants in my study understood that they too were fighting for Black voice and agency in their school, in their communities, and in their lives.

Both the Black Arts organization in this study and the Harlem Renaissance were community-built spaces in which Black artists honored their Black history, while also elevating and celebrating their present moments together, as well as their hope for the future. Participants in both demanded the creative agency to remove the dusty notion that Euro-centric aesthetics (Neal, 1968) were the only elements that should or could be deemed as “highbrow art” or high-quality art (Patterson, 2020). As with other dynamic Black artistic movements in the United States, participants in this study and were aware of the capacity and, for some, the obligation of their own Black Arts organization to be viewed as a movement purposed to intentionally disrupt and remove the white fingerprints from their art in order to establish a clear space to cultivate a truly Black aesthetic (Lewis, 2019). The collective actions participants reflected on engaging in during their involvement in Black Arts helped them to foster racial solidarity, prompted community activism, and built members’ racial awareness, and, for Black members, their Black identities.

Black participants in this study shared stories about how Black Arts was essential in cultivating and developing their Black identities, a process they believed could not occur otherwise as Black students enrolled in their predominately white institution. Prior to joining the Black Arts organization, several participants shared they had little to no connection to their Black identities, a state they believed was either produced or exasperated through their attendance at predominately white schools, which also lacked Black faculty representation, and no defined spaces or structured actions to support the development of Black students. Participants shared feelings about their identities that resonated with W.E.B. DuBois’ double

consciousness theory, or the notion that every American Negro (using his vernacular of the day) lived separately as a Negro and as an American (Du Bois, 1903). This theory came to my mind each participants shared stories about their constant need to codeswitch and conform to euro-centric narratives or behavioral expectations in order to feel valued by non-Black peers, teachers and other staff members, and even themselves.

My findings indicate that in order for some of my participants to disrupt their own negative perceptions of themselves, they needed a space with their Black peers, normed around Black culture, in order to engage in the self-reflection and self-discovery needed to begin to more closely identify and develop Black identities. Notably, Black Arts members, both white and Black, empowered each other to learn about themselves and this self-learning was enhanced by their ability to learn about and from other Black Arts members. As participants gained confidence and awareness of their own racial identities, they seemed to also develop deeper levels of connectedness with their Black Arts peers. This reciprocal relationship between learning about self and others was all nurtured by the astounding cultivation of shared learning culture that was they collectively constructed within Black Arts.

The undeniable ability of students in the Black Arts organization to co-construct a powerful shared learning culture amongst different diverse learners is yet another striking element of my findings. My study participants described how their participation in Black Arts fueled and expanded their development personally, artistically, academically, and spiritually. They each described how through Black Arts they produced a collective environment in which they focused unrelentingly on uplifting one another. This asset-based approach aided in the development of participants holistically. Through mentor-mentee relationships that blossomed within the collective spaces they built for fellowship, participants described a willingness to be

vulnerable, a willingness to share their artistic gifts more courageously with each other, and a willingness to help process and make meaning of their development as a group. The powerful shared learning culture students created in Black Arts resonated with Lewis's (2019) own findings that Black communities are strengthened when they propose independence from hegemonic European and Western cultural aesthetics to allow Black people the freedom of expression.

I also found through my study that the shared learning culture that was built and embodied by the Black Arts organization reached far beyond the boundaries of the school walls. For them, this powerful shared learning culture not only nurtured member-to-member relationships and development, but irrepressibly extended out into the community. For them, the enactment of the Black Arts shared learning culture was built from the foundation of storytelling and invitation and neither of those elements were constrained just within the school. Participants reported how they shared their own personal stories and experiences with Black Arts with their peers in the school and extended invitations to them and to others in the broader community to hear their stories and experiences with Black Arts and the development it provoked in them. These invitations ultimately meant that they would not only bring others in contact with powerful artistic expressions of Black culture during the culminating two days of public performances, but that they would also engage audiences in difficult and confronting conversations regarding oppressive experiences and realities of Black life (Peabody, 2013). Participants shared considerable awareness that they used their invitations through performances of their art to engage in shared learning with a broader audience in ways that encouraged, if not demanded, that audience take action to address persisting inequities and injustices. Participants unpacked how, for two days each spring semester, the Black Arts performances would bring in community

members to engage in deep learning within the undeniably Black cultural framework that had nurtured their learning and development in so many ways. Participants described how this final collective action from the Black Arts organization each year would transform the white cultural space of the school to something reflecting their own Black Arts experiences that were so central to their own growth. Given the school's historical significance to many in the surrounding Black communities, it is easily imagined how in some ways, those two nights of public Black Arts performances temporarily restored the school to its roots as a hub of Black thought and development. While the threshold for what many call culturally-sustaining work and practices is very high, Black Arts seem to exemplify such efforts in ways that maybe only result from student-driven efforts. Regardless, it was clear that participants in this study shared a belief in Black Arts as an essential practice that must be sustained in order to redeem the larger school as a whole by demonstrating how holistic growth can be empowered for all involved. Profundities aside, when participants shared about the environment Black Arts created for the Black community at large, by using their art and their voices in ways that invited audiences to engage in shared learning to obtain a greater awareness of Black experiences and gain greater insight into cultural perspectives of Black art, they did so in ways that can only be described as reflecting Black joy (Vereen et al., 2013).

Despite participants reflecting on and recalling traumatizing experiences of racism, oppression, and microaggressions, they more frequently recalled joyous moments and relationships they built in spite of, and sometimes as a result of, the racialized climate within the school. This seemed to reflect Love's (2019) postulating that Black joy is essential to educational justice. To her, Black people must seek and find joy in the midst of racial tribulations as it is a part of the cultural fight to be Black. During this study, Black participants shared feelings of

battle fatigue with the constant oppressive experiences they dealt with on the school campus and in society. Notably, sharing these trials and traumas often seemed to lead participants to explore more positive experiences that would bring them joy to overshadow feelings of trauma. For participants, the Black Arts organization helped them to make meaning of racist experiences they endured, and then transform them in order to then be able to center Black Joy in their everyday lives. It is also worth noting that my use of Community Learning Exchange processes and practices seemed to create space for study participants to move through difficult stories relating those troubling experiences to collective expressions of joy with each other. Perhaps these students were able to do so even more robustly because they are artists, as Love noted that entering Black joy allows Black students to see that their creativity, imagination, and healing are vital to liberation (Love, 2019). Further, for some of my study participants, expressing Black Joy also meant being unapologetically Black. For some of the participants in my study, Black Joy came to represent an understanding of their Black identities as well as learning to become comfortable operating in that identity without the need to codeswitch or to conform to euro-centric standards. Lastly, for my participants, their conceptions of Black Joy, sharpened during their experiences with Black Arts, seemed to be durable as some added that, to them, it now has grown to represent engaging in revolutionary acts of justice and maintaining a commitment to taking steps towards liberation.

Connections to Conceptual Framework

The tenets of the arts-based, culturally responsive and sustaining framework I used to frame this study were a sense of belonging, student voice and agency, and Black Joy. Ladson-Billings (1995) and Paris and Alim (2017) stated that culturally responsive and sustaining practices make learning more relevant by building on the cultures of marginalized populations

and using them as strengths while sustaining their communities' cultural and linguistic traditions. Participants of this study fostered elements of culturally responsive and sustaining practices within the Black Arts organization through the creation of a community amongst its members which led to their sense of belonging, empowered student voice and agency by giving members creative agency through storytelling through their art, and honoring and celebrating Black culture which sparked Black joy within its members.

Culturally responsive and sustaining practices are validating, comprehensive, and emancipatory. The findings of this study showed that participants' actions in the Black Arts organization aligned with the purpose of culturally responsive and sustaining practices. Through Black Arts' members' ability to use their mentor-mentee relationships and student leadership opportunities, they connected teaching and learning to their peers' cultural heritage and to their peers' current experiences. This asset-based approach made Black Arts participants feel a sense of belonging, maximized their voice and agency, and exemplified Black joy.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of one specific school context and the impact of one particular student-created, student-led organization, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. One of the primary limitations of this research lies in the fact that lived experiences are not universal. The findings and conclusions derived from this study may not be applicable or representative of other schools or student arts organizations, particularly those with differing demographics, cultural backgrounds, or organizational structures.

Having expressed that overarching concern, I did identify two main structural limitations in this study. The first limitation of this study related to the collection of data through facilitation of Community Learning Exchanges through a virtual platform, Zoom. The virtual platform

limited opportunities for participants to engage in various protocols to increase engagement and further build rapport among participants. This may have affected how comfortable participants were to disclose their experiences more fully.

The second limitation of this study relates to data collection and the consideration that not every participant engaged in each form of data collection method. After the first Community Learning Exchange, participants were selected for the remaining data collection opportunities based on their responses and the data presented. By incorporating each participant in all data collection methods could have increased data saturation.

It is important to recognize that schools and student arts organizations vary significantly in terms of their social, cultural, and educational contexts. Factors such as geographical location, socioeconomic status, ethnic diversity, and educational policies can all influence the experiences of students and the dynamics within student organizations. Consequently, the findings of this study may only be applicable within the specific Black Arts context under investigation.

Moreover, the experiences and perspectives of individuals within the same Black Arts organizational context can also vary considerably. Factors such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and personal background can all shape an individual's experiences and influence their interactions within the student organization. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that the findings of this study may not capture the full range of experiences and perspectives within the Black Arts organization, as they are inherently limited to the participants involved.

To mitigate these limitations, future research should aim to incorporate multiple school contexts and diverse student organizations. This will help provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play and allow for a broader generalizability of findings. Additionally, employing qualitative research methods, such as interviews or focus groups with

different constituents of the organization, such as teachers, community members, and family members of participants, can further enrich our understanding by capturing the nuanced experiences and perspectives of individuals within different school contexts.

In conclusion, while this study offers valuable insights into one school context and its impact on a specific student organization, it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations. Lived experiences are not universal, and the findings may not be applicable to other schools or student organizations. Recognizing these limitations and encouraging further research in diverse contexts will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics within student organizations and their wider implications.

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

In the spirit of the paradigmatic shift my participants described from the constraining, sometimes even oppressive, ways they experienced the conditions and structures of the traditional educational experiences they encountered in their schools, to the joyful and robust learning communities they built together through Black Arts, I approached this traditional section in my description of my study with a joyful suspicion. This critical phenomenology study was designed to explore the participants' lived experiences as they related to the arts-based conceptual framework that included culturally responsive and sustaining practices, student voice and agency, sense of belonging, and Black joy. Some may think that my researcher positionality may pose a limitation for this study. After all, I am a Black female educator who worked for a time as a school counselor in the school that contained the Black Arts organization. I knew the participants in this study when they were students. However, I viewed my positionality as an asset. I have deep knowledge and connection to the performing and visual arts school as an employee and more importantly I had personal relationships with the participants when they

were members of the Black Arts organization. My employment at the school allowed me to see first-hand the behaviors and interactions of students and faculty within the school context and within the Black Arts organization. Additionally, the connection I made with them as students at the performing and visual arts school was evident in their transparency and collaboration with me as research participants. Nonetheless, in order to maintain an awareness of my own subjectivity in order for it to not intrude on my analytic efforts, in other words to avoid bias, I engaged in four important researcher practices. First, I was diligent in my use of reflective and analytic memos. Doing so helped me bracket my subjective judgments so to limit their intrusions into my analyses. Second, I relied on a critical friend group to engage in dialogic engagement around my research processes and analyses. Third, my use of the data collection method of Community Learning Exchanges (CLEs), the guiding axiom of this process, both empowered participants to collectively make meaning of their experiences and limited my interjections as the researcher. Finally, to guard against personal bias from intruding on my data analysis processes, I engaged in consistent member checks that allowed participants to review and check for accuracy of my interpretation with their experiences and perspectives.

Implications for Future Research

Culturally responsive and sustaining practices are essential to maximizing the success of students of color. Future research should be conducted to include the experiences and perspectives of teachers at K-12 schools that have organizations similar to Black Arts, as uncommon as they might be, where the mission of the organization is focused on uplifting Black students. Additionally, given the perspectives of participants in this study that their own art area teachers often held deficit-laden views of Black art and Black artists, future researchers might design studies that examine the perspectives of teachers at performing and visual arts schools.

Such research might even expand its aims in order to gain more insight into how teachers of Black students view student-led efforts to disrupt deficit perspectives others have toward them by uplifting themselves and Black students. Research with this or similar aims would build upon the findings from this study that community building is essential in creating a sense of belonging and amplifying student voice and agency. Student-driven community building should be supported by teachers, rather than representing a threat to them. Research studies exploring arts educator perceptions, whether they are non-Black or Black, might help us better understand the deeply rooted cultural biases privileging white artistic contributions and artists over non-white artists and their contributions.

Further, future studies might do well by incorporating methodological designs which include participants who are both teachers and students engaging in meaning-making together. I would suggest considering the use of a Community Learning Exchanges to help all participants to make meaning of their experiences in gracious and collective ways. Finally, implementation of a youth participatory action research project with current members of a student-led organization focused on uplifting Black students or Black artists along with current teachers is recommended for a future study. Student focus groups and Community Learning Exchanges could allow students and teachers to reflect on their roles and make meaning of their experiences in supporting Black students and how that support aligns with culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy. Youth participatory action research projects could hold great potential to amplify student voices and empower them to share with teachers their perceptions of school practices and how collectively they can work together to create solutions.

Implications for K-12 Schools

The National Education Policy Center (2014) asserted that K-12 schools have become significantly more diverse in the last decade. However, the culture and curriculum of schools have not adapted their processes, policies, and practices to meet the changing student demographics. The culture and curriculum of K-12 schools were established based on the norms and values of white, middle-class families, and these processes, policies, and practices have been integrated into the fabric of the educational system and are still ever-present today (Paris & Alim, 2017). Given the literature that suggests that school culture and curriculum are embedded in Eurocentric processes, policies, and practices, greater consideration for the voices of Black students should be considered. Future practice recommendations include providing Black students with intentional spaces to engage in dialogue with school leaders and teachers to help inform school processes, policies, and practices and creating the conditions for a Black-centered, student-led organization to be established and sustained on the school's campus.

Valuing Black Student Voices and Agency

Incorporating student voices to foster culturally responsive and sustaining school environments increase the opportunity to “enhance education access, opportunity, and success for historically marginalized students” (Institute of Education Sciences, 2020). Amplifying Black students' voices and agency in schools is an approach that allows students to partner with school leaders and educators as evaluators and creators of educational policies and practices (Cook-Sather, 2020). The Institute of Education Sciences (2020) suggests that it is essential for schools to foster a welcoming and safe space where students can understand the purpose of sharing their voice, authentically share their voice, feel that their voice is being heard and will lead to action, and have multiple and different opportunities to share their voice.

The findings uncovered that participants did not feel that the school fostered a space where their voice and agency were welcomed or implemented into action. Due to the deficit perspectives they believed educators held toward Black students, their attempts to disrupt those perspectives through dialogue or artistic storytelling were often seen as combative or intentional attempts to make the school and its educators seen in a negative manner. Educators and school leaders providing Black students with consistent opportunities to evaluate current educational school processes will allow them to identify processes that may impede their learning and the learning environment (Fielding & Bragg, 2003). Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) suggest that students of color are positioned to have the greatest insight into policies and practices that reproduce racism in the classrooms and curriculum. Partnerships between Black students and educators could include school advisory councils, school leadership teams, teacher-professional learning communities, or school district-implemented projects (Mitra, 2009).

Schools' ability to amplify Black students' voices has shown an increase in student agency, sense of belonging, and competence (Cook-Sather, 2020; Kirshner et al., 2003). Through partnerships between Black students and educators, student agency positions Black students to voice their observations and evaluations of school policies, practices, processes, and culture and are also partners in informing decisions. Creating conditions to amplify student voice and agency can improve self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and produce Black joy (Love, 2019).

Establishing and Supporting Affinity-like Spaces

Dating back to the 1920s during the Harlem Renaissance and the 1960s during the Black Arts Movement, Black communities established affinity-like spaces where Black people and allies created a space free from the hegemonic Western cultural aesthetic that allowed them to affirm pride in their Black identity and culture (Lewis, 2019). This liberatory movement was

considered a safe space for Black people to grow as artists, connect with their Black identity, and develop a renewed sense of racial pride (The Library of Congress, 2009). While fighting for racial justice, both movements partnered with Black youth by creating organizations for youth to learn how to engage in advocacy efforts. This demonstrates the importance of Black-centered youth organizations and removes the aesthetic of Western-cultural or Eurocentric practices.

Findings showed that Black-centered, affinity-like spaces had the power to increase a sense of belonging, empower students' voice and agency, and aid in discovering and developing their Black identity. An additional consideration is the notion that the Black-centered, affinity-like space should be student-led. From the participants of the study, the ability for the Black Arts organization to be student-led allowed the participants to have autonomy over their Blackness and this Black space. It taught Black Arts members skills that they still use today, such as resourcefulness, advocacy, storytelling, empowering others, and resiliency.

K-12 schools that establish a Black-centered, affinity-like space must support the organization. Findings from the study highlighted the participant's disappointment in teachers and school leaders' lack of support of the mission of the organization. Support can take on different forms such as public shows of support and encouragement of the organization, attendance at events and programs held by the organization, and a willingness to learn from the organization. With educator's intentional support and appreciation to learn about their students, may lead to disrupting the deficit perspectives that are often held towards Black students (Love, 2019).

Implications for Performing and Visual Arts Schools

Performing and visual arts schools are growing at a fast rate in the United States. Most of these specialized schools are being established in metropolitan areas, thus leading to a significant

increase in students of color (Rod, 2000). James (2020) outlined the need for performing and visual arts schools and arts organizations to focus on “diverse representation and inclusivity in hiring, casting, retention, and content of arts educators” (p. 131). However, based on the findings from this study, participants found that within their arts education courses and training there was a lack of representation of Black faculty, Black artists, and artistic techniques rooted in Black culture, which impacted how arts educators and teachers viewed as highbrow or high-quality art. In addition to the implications for practice within K-12 schools, an implication for performing and visual arts schools is inclusivity in arts-based curriculum and training.

Highbrow or high-quality art has been referred to as specific styles and genres of art that require a high-level of understanding and is rooted in a Euro-centric aesthetic (Chan, 2010; Levine, 1990). Any artistic forms or genres outside of highbrow art is often not appreciated by those of the elite social class (Montalban-Anderssen, 2015). Findings from this study uncovered that participants felt a disconnect in their artistic training courses. Several participants noted they were rarely exposed to influential Black performing or visual artists and when they were it was typically during the nationally recognized period of Black History Month. From my findings, I posit that even when arts educators attempt to include culturally diverse content in the curriculum, the delivery and presentation of that culture or racial group depicts conscious and unconscious stereotypical and colonial ways of thinking.

Performing and visual arts schools should give greater autonomy to students by facilitating through a student-centered approach. Findings showed that the Black Arts organization gave its members artistic freedom and encouraged artistic exploration to expand their artistic pallet. Some participants credited that their artistic development grew more within the organization than their traditional artistic courses within the school. This resulted from the

students directing their own learning while also collaborating with their peers in the Black Arts organization. The artistic form is a part of one's culture. Therefore, performing and visual arts schools must consider their students' cultural dynamics and ensure it is reflected consistently within the classroom curriculum, content, and training techniques. For example, storytelling is rooted within the Black culture, this could catapult learning through the arts for Black students.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the experiences of members of Black Arts, a student-created, student-led organization that focused on uplifting Black art and artists. The utilization of Community Learning Exchanges (CLE) allowed participants to make collectively make-meaning of their experiences, followed by semi-structured interviews to gather rich data on the themes that surfaced in the CLE. The data collection consisted of the utilization Colaizzi's data analysis process that included:

1. multiple passes of reviewing the transcript,
2. create codes for critical statements, organize the codes into categories, transfer codes into themes,
3. member checks of the findings, and
4. incorporate any changes to the findings as suggested by the participants.

This data analysis process uncovered four main themes: Student perception of school: Inside and outside of Black Arts, Emancipatory resistance, Collective Action, and Art as Transformation. These findings were supported by subthemes that uncovered ideals that align with culturally responsive and sustaining practices.

This chapter continued to recommend implications for future research, K-12 schools, and school leaders, as well as performing and visual arts schools. Implications for future research

should explore the experiences and perspectives of teachers and school leaders at K-12 schools or performing and visual arts schools that have an organization similar to Black Arts to have students, teachers, and school leaders collectively make meaning of their experiences. Implications for K-12 and school leaders include their ability to value Black students' voice and agency through partnerships to allow them to evaluate and inform school decisions and processes. Additionally, K-12 schools and school leaders should take steps to establish a Black-centered affinity-like space that is student-led. Lastly, implications for performing and visual arts schools include the recommendation for K-12 schools but also inclusivity in arts-based curriculum and training.

Black Arts, a student-created, student-led organization, engaged in collective action and leadership as an act of liberation and resistance from the racism, oppression, microaggressions, and deficit perspectives that were held towards them as students and artists. Through celebrating their Black culture, engaging in storytelling through their art, and embodying a share learning culture, their actions mirrored culturally responsive practices. Through their facilitation of mentor-mentee relationships, art-based activism, and building community across generations, their actions embodied culturally sustaining practices. School leaders to reproduce the actions taken by Black Arts member will aid in their ability to implement more culturally responsive and sustaining practices at their K-12 and performing and visual arts schools.

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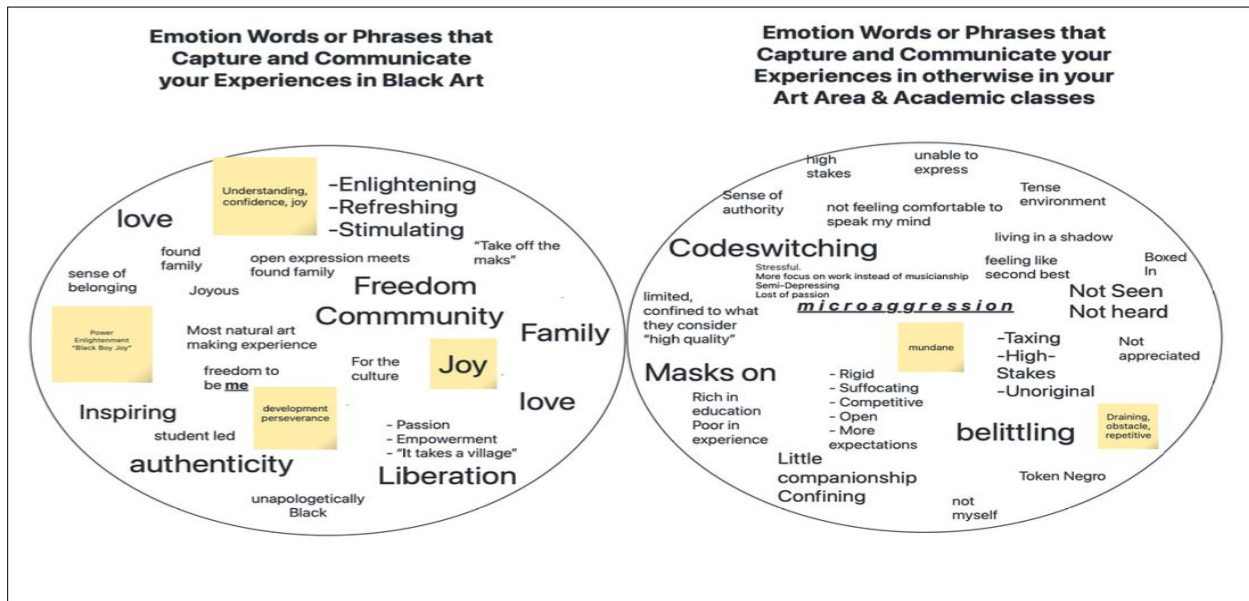
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APPENDIX A: COMMUNITY LEARNING EXCHANGE ARTIFACT



APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW ARTIFACT

Poem by Langston, Research Participant

Negus:
 N-E-G-U-S
 Negus
 Not the word that use to control us
 But of completely different origin
 Yet sounds so close to the n word not so foreign to us
 We'll wait let's take a look at our origins
 Cause it sure wasn't shackles and chains on a boarding ship
 See that was just the start of the American negro
 But the system make you believe that's just what a negro is
 But we were just brought here to pluck, plant, and watch seeds grow
 See the American negro was a negro that was dethroned
 And we'd never know cause we were never told that we were King's and Queens of our own home
 N-E-G-U-S
 Of Ethiopian origin meaning Royalty
 The word that holds all that's important to me
 See we come from a place with blue skies and golden lands
 Not just gold grass, but GOLD LANDS
 So much gold that one could barely stand on his own two feet lookin at how much gold he had
 We carry this richness in our spirit
 And through our culture it is mirrored
 So you can see why others would wanna steal it
 Now I'm not sayin that we just stash it up and keep it
 I just want the world to know what's ours
 Love us for our progress and our flaws

N-E-G-U-S
 Royalty, I am
 So much so I bleed purple
 It just hurts me so much every time I see the hurdles that our people are put through leaving us traveling
 in circles
 But with each generation the cycle is slowly broken
 And with each word spoken
 I'm hoping
 That my kids kids won't have to go through the same oppression
 My great grand daddy did
 Sadly it takes time to do this
 But I can proudly say that we still part of the movement
 Our persistence ruthless
 Our will a nuisance
 To those who tried to break us cause to them we were clueless
 We were stupid
 But I'm here to tell you now
 That you spawn from greatness from your toes to your crown
 So take your crown and raise your temple
 Cause best believe we just gettin started now

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW ARTIFACT

Painting by Augusta, Research Participant

