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**Youth Alchemy:  
Non-Formal Learning around Identity & Agency**

**by**

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Date: 3 May 2024

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education at  
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2024

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Jaya Sarkar, 2 May 2024

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**ABSTRACT****YOUTH ALCHEMY: NON-FORMAL LEARNING AROUND IDENTITY & AGENCY****Jaya Sarkar**

The social and educational disruption during confluence of COVID isolation and Black Lives Matter protests was critical to learning and agency amongst Youth of Color. This phenomenological qualitative study centers around Youth of Color in Providence, Rhode Island as they contested formal education and sought to make meaning of these events. Drawing on Amartya Sen's capability approach, a series of in-depth phenomenological interviews with participants to explore the meaning they gleaned from their engagement in Youth-led emancipatory educational initiatives, particularly in terms of their sense of identity and agency. Although existing literature documents Youth resistance, this study explores Youth reflections on their experiences of agency for social justice. Through the lens of the capability approach, the findings illustrate the participant learning and agency journeys Youth undertook to seek a life they have reason to value. Findings indicate Youth of Color seek to learn what they find missing in formal education, both individually and collectively. It reveals the importance of collective Youth-led spaces that cultivate agency to pursue social justice for themselves and future generations. Exploring the alchemy of how Youth of Color transmute their experiences and learning to collectively develop agency for social justice has implications for adult allyship and formal education.

Key words: Youth Identity, Youth-led collective spaces, non-formal learning, emancipatory educational initiatives, phenomenology, Youth agency

**DEDICATION**

*To Youth everywhere.*

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For my advisors and professors who guided me on this long, and sometimes treacherous, journey with great thoughtfulness and determination. For my cohort of peers with whom I weathered the doctoral journey through fair and stormy skies. For all the friends and colleagues who supported me throughout this endeavour in so many ways. For Tuani, who stood sentinel to my efforts.

For the participants in this study. Thank you for sharing your learning and agency journeys, and for your fierce dedication to make the world a better place for future generations. I only hope that I have done justice to your power and vision.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: But What Do Youth Think?

*I would say, realizing everyone gets different treatment depending on how you look and where you live, where you were born, and what middle school you went to, was something that was really hard for me to unpack. Because how do you even negate that?*

(Stella, Youth participant)

The purpose of state-sanctioned schooling has been to forward the largely assimilationist and often violent White imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools. In the United States and beyond, this saga of cultural and linguistic assault has had and continues to have devastating effects on the access, achievement, and well-being of students of color in public schools. (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1)

Not only do students in Providence, Rhode Island, where over 90% of the student population are Youth of Color and more than half speak a language other than English in their homes, learn from curricula that do not validate their cultural identities, but the school system has also fallen short of meeting its own academic standards for students. This issue is outlined in a report commissioned by the Governor of Rhode Island:

Creating strong academic outcomes for urban students, many of whom are economically challenged and speak English as a second language, is a challenge across the United States – not only in Providence; however, we found unusually deep, systemic

dysfunctions in Providence Public School Department's education system that clearly, and very negatively, impact the opportunities of children in Providence. (Johns Hopkins University, 2019, p. 2).

The Johns Hopkins report detailed how Providence teachers, principals, and the school system had failed against their own standards and highlighted that the great majority of students were not on or near grade level performance. Additionally, students studied in school buildings that were deteriorating and even dangerous. This report was used to justify the Rhode Island State takeover of the Providence Public School system in 2019 shifting the administration of the school department to the Commissioner of the Department of Education and away from the local School Boards, the City of Providence, and the Providence Public Schools District.

The Providence Public School District (PPSD) website states it serves approximately 22,000 students who attend 37 schools which include 21 elementary schools, seven middle schools, nine high schools, and two public district charter schools. Statistics reveal a diverse student body, "approximately 68% of our students are Latinx, 15% Black, 6.5% White, 4% Asian, 5.5% Multi-racial and 1% Native American" (PPSD website, 2023). Over 30 percent of students are multilingual learners. In other words, 93.5 percent of youth in Providence schools are Youth of Color, whereas Youth of Color represent 36 percent of the total Rhode Island youth population (Policylink, 2021). The geographic distribution of population was identified as an issue as early as 2010, when Providence was ranked as the ninth most segregated metropolitan area in the United States (Kidscount, 2016, p. 18).

Educational inequity is compounded by the fact that Black and Hispanic students attend schools that are disproportionately minority and high-poverty. The achievement gap between White and Latinx students in RI is amongst the largest in the US (Kidscount, 2016, p. 18). These

statistics illustrate the marginalization of Youth of Color in Rhode Island is mirrored in the poor performance of schools where “during the 2014-2015 school year, RI’s Hispanic and Black children were almost 12 times as likely as White children to attend schools identified for intervention” (KidsCount, 2016, p. 20). Before COVID, in 2019 the Rhode Island Comprehensive Assessment System given to students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade showed that only seven percent of Providence students were proficient in math, and only 15 percent were proficient in English Language Arts (KidsCount, 2021, pp. 148-149). The demographics of the Providence student body provide important context to the issues of opportunity and freedom core to this study.

Marginalization is a deeply personal factor in the lives of Youth of Color, including immigrants, who must define their own identity and understand how the constructs of the world they live in impact them, while possibly seeking social justice to establish the necessary societal conditions to pursue a life they value. Demographically, marginalization is particularly acute in Providence, RI. Students of color in Providence are ‘asked to lose or deny’ their very identity to succeed in schools (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1) and schools have not yet embraced the multiple identities of youth to ensure their success. The failure of the Providence Public school system to attend to the educational and development needs of students, particularly Youth of Color and immigrants, compromises their individual freedoms and their ability to develop the capabilities needed to convert future opportunities (Sen, 2000).

Within the context of education in Providence, students have demonstrated their own agency around education. Youth-led organizations have engaged with the formal school system through campaigns to change the content of their education, by demanding Civics and Ethnic Studies. They have collaborated to address challenges faced in education including advocating

for a shift away from the dominance of state and classroom testing to more student-centered pedagogy, such as project-based learning, during the COVID pandemic and endorsing a more empowering approach to active shooter protocols. Students have also advocated for their vision of safety in schools through the *Counselor's Not Cops* campaign, making the case that additional counselors in schools would increase safety by providing students support they need before situations escalate to confrontations. Students have successfully bridged the distance from classrooms to the state capital building to testify for issues around their identity including the CROWN (Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) Act and Ethnic Studies, resulting in legislation.

Although the Johns Hopkins report highlights the challenge of urban education in Providence and nationally, there is limited research that explores how Youth of Color respond to their formal education and engage in non-formal education to learn about issues they prioritize to better understand and act in the world they live in. This study contributes to filling this gap with a phenomenological research approach that engages five Youth of Color in a series of in-depth interviews focused on Youth-led emancipatory educational initiatives.

### **Research Purpose**

This research study explored the processes Youth of Color, including immigrants, undertook to make meaning of their identities and position in society to better understand how these processes informed their sense of agency and their emancipatory education initiatives. I positioned identity as essential to Youth's experience of justice and the study explored the elements of identity, agency, and emancipatory education from a Youth perspective. The main research question was: *How do the lived experiences of emancipatory education initiatives inform and reflect the processes through which Youth of Color make meaning of their identity*



*and form a sense of agency?* This overarching question was further explored through the questions below:

1. How do Youth articulate the simultaneous experience of defining their own identity while seeking to understand and contest societal systems that define and affect them?
2. How do the experiences of defining identity, particularly when done in collaboration with their peers, contribute to Youth's sense of agency?

These areas of exploration served to deepen understanding of the motivations and worldview that inform Youth visions of *a life they have reason to value* and how they sought to create societal opportunities and conditions to support their freedom to live this life (Sen, 2000) through emancipatory education initiatives.

### **Approach to the Study**

#### **Theoretical Approach**

Theories addressing freedom, power, and identity provided a useful conceptual framework to explore the research questions posed in this study, and particularly the elements of identity, agency, and emancipatory education. Amartya Sen's conceptualization of freedom presented in his book, *Development as Freedom* (2000) was transposed to education, both formal and non-formal. Sen (2000) defined freedom as the capacity to "live the kinds of lives that people have reason to value" (p. 295). This articulation of freedom was appropriate to this study as it places the responsibility of defining what one values with the individual and then asserts that the process of education is the "expansion of human capability to lead more worthwhile and free lives" (Sen, 2000, p. 295). Education as Freedom provided the theoretical scaffolding for this study as it allowed for the incorporation of the dynamics of power and identity which were critical to the exploration of the research questions.

The theoretical framing of this study draws on Foucault's (1990) conceptualization of "capillary power." This understanding of power as present throughout society and not only held by the dominant hegemony was central to understanding how Youth contested education as they sought to learn what would support them in pursuing the lives they had reason to value in an environment that embraces their identity and safety. Recognizing and witnessing power wielded by Youth peers strengthened the development of agency. This study also explored the spaces available to Youth to reflect and construct their concepts of identity and develop agency. Youth-led spaces offered learning around identity and the opportunity for collective dreaming (Gutiérrez, 2008) where emancipatory educational initiatives were conceived. The discussion of societal spaces was informed by scholars of decolonization (see Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1952; Jeffress, 2008; Said, 1978; Shahjahan, 2014) who define three societal spaces: the first at the individual level focused on cultural and other personal identities; the second represents the dominant hegemony informed by colonial thinking; and the third space refers to collective spaces where domination is critiqued, and collective learning and action for emancipation are imagined (Anderson, 2023; Anzaldúa, 1987; Bhabha, 1994; Gutiérrez, 2008). The third component of the theoretical approach is an interpretation of Critical Race Theory that traces its roots to early decolonization efforts and resistance (Kumasi, 2011). Sen (2000) argues that the "freedom of agency we individually have is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities available to us" (p. xii). Critical Race Theory enables an analysis of the systemic racism in education and other areas, such as housing and economic opportunities, that Youth of Color must navigate. The analysis of systemic injustice that CRT offers is important context to understand the dynamics Youth of Color must navigate and aligns with Sen's framing of the pursuit of individual freedom. The Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies

approach (Paris & Alim, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2001) elucidates how cultures might be validated within a context of systemic racism which is important to the construction of identity and the priorities of Youth of Color in their emancipatory educational initiatives.

### **Methodological Approach**

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to give primacy to the voice of the participants. The study was situated within the transformative paradigm of research (Mertens, 2020) which respects cultural norms, promotes human rights, and acknowledges that social position affects one's perspective. The transformative paradigm provides guidance in managing the power relationships between researcher and participants. I chose a phenomenological research approach (Seidman, 2019) to explore the meaning Youth of Color make of their lived experiences in emancipatory education. The research approach consisted of a series of three interviews with five Youth of Color who engaged in at least one emancipatory education initiative in Providence.

### **Research Rationale and Significance**

There is important scholarship that assesses the challenge to create strong academic outcomes for urban students across the United States, many of whom are economically challenged and speak English as a second language (PPSD website, 2023). However, gaps remain in scholarship that seeks to understand Youth perspectives of education as reflected through Youth priorities. Methodologically, though there is an increasing body of work that engages Youth in participatory action research, the utilization of phenomenological research that is designed for Youth reflection of the meaning they make is less common. Finally, scholars do address the concept of emancipatory education, and this study would contribute to that work through engaging Youth of Color directly in reflecting on their engagement in emancipatory

educational initiatives. Providence is instructive due to the large number of Youth-led organizations that have mobilized to successfully influence key legislation at the state level. Understanding this phenomenon from a Youth perspective will contribute to both understanding Youth priorities and to how educational systems can become more responsive to Youth priorities. Current literature around Youth collective action is predominantly around adult-led and initiated programs, often through organizations providing documentation of their work. This research is not affiliated with a specific organization and addresses an important gap in documenting Youth-led initiatives for social justice, particularly Youth of Color.

The study makes a scholarly contribution to documenting Youth-initiated critical analysis of their own position within societal systems, how they understand causal pathways to their present condition, and their prioritization and design of activities to address the issues that impact their experience of justice and freedom. The phenomenological approach grounded the inquiry in Youth experience. The dynamic of Youth-initiated education explored through this study lends a critical perspective to addressing the multiple issues within the present volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) times (Stein, 2021). The study's findings may be useful for Youth and other groups beyond Providence in terms of the educational themes addressed, the impact of Youth actions, and in terms of the logic and rationale Youth applied to their actions. The experiences of Providence Youth of Color shared in this study will contribute to the global dialog and actions amongst Youth around issues of social justice and identity.

Youth of Color organized non-formal education to learn things that were important to them which were not offered in school. For example, Youth organizations introduced the Student Bill of Rights to make students aware of policies that protect them in the formal school setting, and advocated for Counselors Not Cops campaigning for an alternative to policing within

schools. Youth also organized workshops and actions to offer students a chance to explore a variety of content not covered in school including focus on aspects of identity, be it the history of parts of the world reflected in immigrant populations or gender and sexuality workshops. Youth-led spaces also offered skill building workshops around self-care, restorative justice, and art activism. In this study non-formal education is understood as those efforts to learn that take place outside of a formal school or educational setting. A key distinction in non-formal education is that it is participatory and changes as people and circumstances change (Rogers, 2005). The exploration of identity, meaning making, and agency within non-formal emancipatory educational initiatives deepens our understanding of elements critical to social justice education and reveal what Youth imagine for the future despite the barriers they experience. This has significant practical implications for public policy as Youth are on the cusp of 'adult' civic engagement, and their formative experiences and visions may influence their civic trajectory. For example, Youth expectations in terms of access to information might translate into heightened demands for accountability and urgency (speed of accomplishments) from societal institutions. Institutions have begun to take notice of the campaigns that Youth organize to improve school content and conditions, particularly in the context of Providence where the public school district has not, by its own standards, effectively served students. Understanding Youth processes and frameworks for identifying and pursuing change around key issues lends additional credibility to Youth efforts and supports their impact in influencing priority setting and approaches to policy design and implementation.

This study has practical significance to the challenge of how formal education can better respond to the changing demographics of Rhode Island where in 2020, 47% of children under 18 were People of Color, compared with 28% of adults (Kids Count, 2022). The heightened national

attention to societal inequities may suggest an increased demand on the part of students and parents for education to be more responsive to social justice and systemic racism. Analyzing the types of non-formal and freedom-seeking education that marginalized Youth of Color have undertaken indicates content gaps in the current curriculum and approaches through which education might embrace the identity of Youth of Color and support broader concerns for social justice.

### **Researcher Assumptions**

I come to this research motivated by both my personal and professional experience. I have spent over 20 years working with marginalized Youth in India and the Americas promoting Youth voice and agency within the framework of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Working in international non-governmental organizations that focused on children's rights, I introduced formal processes of consultation directly with Youth to ensure their experience was reflected in our program design and implementation processes. The participation and agency of Youth changed the focus and contextual understanding of organizational programs and deepened my own understanding of issues. For example, incorporating Youth perspectives into educational programs required program elements to reduce the fear children said they felt, either on their way to school or at school itself. Through my work with Children and Youth I have come to appreciate how Youth negotiate their position of power and create spaces to express their ideas and agency. I find an interesting resonance with this in Youth-led movements here in the US, particularly in Rhode Island where I am based. I have managed the challenge of bringing Youth perspective to public policy and institutions, including educational institutions. The conceptual framing of 'development as freedom' was useful in my work with marginalized

Youth populations internationally, and I believe its application is relevant to education in the context of this study.

Personally, I relate to Youth of Color having grown up in a predominantly white school system with very few students or teachers who looked like me. I also relate to the immigrant experience in that both my father and husband are immigrants to the US. We raised our three sons overseas negotiating their identity and positionality in various contexts before we settled in New York where their transnational identity shaped their experience. As young Black men, they had to understand how they were seen and decide how they would act in the context of power, privilege, and oppression here in the US during the beginnings of the Black Lives Matter movement. As a mother, observing and engaging in this process deepened my appreciation for the profound process that Youth undergo to make meaning of their identities and then explore and contest the degree to which the realization of their identity is possible in the world around them. My assumption is two-fold in the notion that Youth do undertake these processes of reflection and that this journey is typically not fully appreciated and supported by the adults and institutions around them.

Youth of Color must navigate many issues of critical importance to their own survival and to that of the world itself. I believe Youth have a critical perspective of their identity and society defined by the time in which they experience their youth that may lead to innovative and accelerated approaches to change.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Youth is a transitory positionality, that each of us has passed through and remain adjacent to as parents, grandparents, educators, and community members. I have been a co-conspirator with Youth throughout my career taking significant risks to open spaces and power for them. In

this research, I position myself as an ally to the participants and Youth organizations. The Anti-Oppression Network defines allyship as, “an active consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person in a position of privilege and power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group” (The Anti-Oppression Network website, 2021). Providence Youth groups use the terminology of allyship and the ‘arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating’ is consistent with the critical reflexivity demanded of researchers. The conceptualization of ‘co-conspirators’ is also used in the anti-racism space and is differentiated by a heightened risk co-conspirators are willing to take to eliminate racism (Love, 2019; National Education Association, nd). The position of allyship is appropriate to this research to ensure I listen, support, and document Youth actions and the articulation of their experiences. Initial informal conversations indicate Youth are sophisticated and dynamic in their analysis of and response to injustices they experience and see in their communities. However, I will practice critical reflexivity to avoid the “halo effect” in which, “more negative aspects of their behavior or personality are neglected or overlooked” (Cohen, 2018, p. 321).

Youth report they perceive me to be present and aware in listening to them, neutral in my questions, and bring my experience in as needed with a degree of humility. They express that I create an environment where they feel safe to share experiences and raise questions without fear of judgement. Feedback from Youth in multicultural settings throughout my career indicates I am able to build trust with Youth participants. I will monitor my relationships with participants throughout the study and adjust as needed. Both my personal and professional background drive my interest in Youth leadership in the US and globally and underscore my sense of urgency around the issues of social justice they face.

## **Roadmap**



This chapter introduced the purpose of the research to explore the meaning Youth themselves made of the social and educational disruption of the confluence of Black Lives Matter protests and COVID isolation. I then articulated the conceptual framework of the capability approach and articulated the research methodology and phenomenological approach to explore participant meaning making. I discussed my assumptions and shared my positionality as a researcher.

In Chapter Two, I establish the context in Providence, Rhode Island through a discussion of three events that impacted the everyday lives of Youth of Color in Providence and span the period from the fall of 2018 through the summer of 2022 against the backdrop of COVID pandemic restrictions which began in March 2020. This leads to my review of literature that theorizes Youth engagement in social justice. To conclude, I synthesize the literature in the field regarding Youth engagement, identify gaps, and posit the significance of this research study.

In Chapter Three, I present the Capability Approach of Amartya Sen as the conceptual framework for this study and situated within the context of decolonization and nation building which is important to this study and the pursuit of freedom and a ‘life one has reason to value.’ I introduce this study’s key themes of identity, agency, and emancipatory education and share the conceptual approach to these themes that I have adapted to this study. I also reference other concepts relevant to the study including meaning-making and liberatory education and power.

In Chapter Four, I present the methodology of the study beginning with the qualitative methodology and the phenomenological approach that center Youth experience. I further describe the process of participant selection, data collection and analysis, and discuss issues of trustworthiness, ethics, and limitations to the research.

In Chapters Five and Six I present the findings of the study organizing the reflections from the participants against the research questions of the study. Chapter Five presents the findings that focus on the individual process Youth undertook to explore how Youth articulate the simultaneous experience of defining their own identity while also seeking to understand and contest societal systems that define and affect them. Chapter 6 presents findings on how participant experiences in collective Youth spaces informed their sense of identity and offered opportunities to explore and exercise their agency. The Youth Spaces described by participants are inextricably bound to emancipatory educational initiatives central to this study.

In Chapter Seven, I discuss the findings within the context of the literature review offering insights around Youth learning and agency journeys. To conclude, in Chapter Eight I summarize the study and offer theoretical, methodological contributions to the field, and identify areas for further research. I finalize with closing remarks on the alchemy of Youth learning and agency.

## Chapter 2

### **Literature Review: Contextualizing Providence & Situating Youth**

This chapter begins by establishing the context in Providence, Rhode Island through a discussion of three events that impacted the everyday lives of Youth of Color in Providence and span the period from the fall of 2018 through the summer of 2022 against the backdrop of COVID pandemic restrictions which began in March 2020. These events were particularly relevant to the research questions of this study given the demographic composition of Providence schools where 94% of the student population is Latinx, African American, Asian, and immigrants, and had a profound effect on the learning and well-being of Youth. Next, I situate Youth by defining the term, discussing how Youth are perceived as citizens, and sharing examples of Youth organizations in Providence that supported Youth to manage the challenges of seeking to learn while contesting elements of formal education. This leads to my review of literature that theorizes Youth engagement in social justice. To conclude, I synthesize the literature in the field regarding Youth engagement, identify gaps, and posit the significance of this research study.

#### **The Context of Providence, Rhode Island: 2018-2022**

The summer of 2020 was a flashpoint for racial justice in the reaction to the murders of George Floyd and other men and women killed by the police during the COVID pandemic restrictions. In Providence, two other issues were being addressed concurrently with the summer of 2020 protests, a state takeover of Providence schools and a legal demand for Civics education. The governor mandated a takeover of Providence schools in the fall of 2019 and processes were underway to address school improvement. In the Fall of 2018, students filed a class action suit

against the governor claiming their rights were violated by the state’s failure to teach civics education in public schools and the case was decided in 2020. These three events illustrated the historical legacies that frame institutions and political decisions that impacted Providence Youth of Color, and one of their attempts to seek redress through the legal system. The complexity and interrelation of these three dynamics is indicative of the issues that Youth of Color must navigate and reconcile themselves with as they strive to understand and potentially transform the society in which they live. The social and educational disruption particular to this period opened a space for Youth to reflect, learn, and exercise agency. Table 1 highlights key events during the period of this study.

**Table 1**

*Timeline of Confluent Events*

<b>Year</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
<b>Black Lives Matter</b>			Summer: Protests Mayor Elorza forms Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission	A Matter of Truth report issued.	Reconciliation & Reparations committee work
<b>Providence Schools Takeover</b>		Johns Hopkins Report Fall: Providence School Takeover	Takeover ongoing	Takeover ongoing	Takeover ongoing
<b>Legal Demand for Civics Education</b>	Fall: Cook v. Raimondo Civics Class Action suit filed	Students continue to lobby for Civics Literacy Act	Cook v. McKee passed on to higher court	RI General Assembly passed the Civic Literacy Act establishing civics education proficiency as	Plaintiffs settled with the State of RI. The Department of Education incorporated the Civic readiness as a requirement for

				a graduation requirement.	graduating seniors, and appointed a Civic readiness taskforce
<b>COVID</b>			March: COVID Restrictions	School hybrid (virtual and in-presence)	Jan: Providence School reopen in-person.

**Summer of 2020 Providence: “A Matter of Truth”**

The summer of 2020 was a time of reckoning in which people took to the streets across the U.S. in what experts consider to be the largest social protests in US history (RI Black Heritage Society & 1696 Heritage Group, 2021). In June 2020, 10,000 people marched to the Rhode Island State House demanding an “end to systematic racism and police brutality and advancing criminal justice reform and economic empowerment” (RI Black Heritage Society & 1696 Heritage Group, 2021, p. 126). This led Mayor Jorge Elorza of Providence to sign an Executive Order that “identified and created a process of Truth, Reconciliation, and Municipal Reparations to address institutional and systemic bias and racism affecting Black, Indigenous people, and People of Color within the City of Providence.” The initial report, “A Matter of Truth: The Struggle for African Heritage & Indigenous People Equal Rights in Providence, Rhode Island (1620-2020),” was produced by the RI Black Heritage Society & the 1696 Heritage Group and issued in 2021. Detailing Providence’s history in the White Transatlantic slave trade and the impact of reforms, this report highlighted the issues of immigration, the persistent segregation of schools (including funding and housing dynamics), and the need for an inclusive curriculum to represent the history of various peoples in the state (RI Black Heritage Society & 1696 Heritage Group, 2021).

Youth were present in the Black Lives Matters protests during the summer of 2020 in Providence and prioritized Civics Education and Ethnic Studies in their educational campaigns before 2020 and continue to do so now. The Truth Commission echoed issues Youth were fighting for. Youth of Color embody the history of Rhode Island and their presence is bound with the legacy of the White Transatlantic slave trade, European colonialization, and US geopolitical positions in Southeast Asia, the Americas, and Africa.

### **Fall 2019 – Fall 2024: The Governor’s School Takeover**

Providence demographics have changed over the last fifteen years. Between 2000 and 2015 Providence public schools with at least 90 percent People of Color increased from 36% to 74%. This demographic shift was identified as one of the biggest in the country (Herchinger Report, as cited by US News & World Report, 2018). Harris (2019) observed 98 percent of the teachers in the district were White, whereas 91 percent of the students were People of Color. These demographic shifts and representation translated into the everyday school experience of Youth of Color in Providence and added a critical dimension to how they understood their identity and its interaction with the systems around them.

The Johns Hopkins report (2019), commissioned by the Governor of Rhode Island, detailed how Providence teachers, principals, and the school system itself failed the great majority of children who were not on or near grade level performance and studied in deteriorating and even dangerous buildings. Chronic absenteeism on the part of teachers and students indicated poor school climates. The Johns Hopkins report was utilized to justify the Rhode Island State takeover of the Providence Public School system in 2019, shifting the administration of the school department to the Commissioner of the Department of Education

and away from the City of Providence and the Providence Public Schools Department and local school boards.

In *Takeover: Race, Education, and Democracy* (2018), Domingo Morel takes a socio-political analysis to interrogate the utilization of the powerful policy tool of school takeovers and its implications for democracy, equity, and accountability to local citizens (Trujillo et al., 2019). Morel analyzes the political history of school takeovers in 33 states over the last twenty years and concludes that whereas many schools had poor academic performance, the predominance of communities of color within school districts was a better predictor of the likelihood of a state takeover. School takeovers often channel additional resources to failing schools, however the financial and academic reforms are decided by the state, wresting power for decision making away from local school boards. Morel (2018) argues that the shift away from local governance of schools curtails opportunities for political participation as the “path to political empowerment – and.. *disempowerment* – starts at the school level” (p. 5). School takeovers distance decision-making from locally elected school boards and municipal officials and from students themselves.

### **Fall 2018 through Summer 2022: *Cook v. McKee***

While Morel (2018) made the argument that school takeovers cause political disempowerment, students in Rhode Island made the argument that the content of their education precluded their effective civic participation. In November 2018, a class-action lawsuit was filed on behalf of fourteen Rhode Island public school students, ranging from high school to pre-school, against then Governor Raimondo to establish public education as a right under the U. S. Constitution. Plaintiffs in the case, now *Cook v. McKee* (who replaced Raimondo when she left office to become U.S. Secretary of Commerce) claimed state officials, including the Governor, violated their 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment Equal Protection Clause:

By denying [students] a meaningful opportunity to obtain a basic education necessary to prepare them to be capable voters and jurors, to exercise effectively their right of free speech and other constitutional rights, to participate effectively and intelligently in our open political system and function productively as civic participants. (Cook v. McKee, as cited by the Center for Educational Equity, 2022)

In October 2020, Rhode Island District Court Judge Smith issued his decision to dismiss the case citing his lack of constitutional authority to rule on it. However, Judge Smith expressed his reluctance to dismiss and noted the case represented:

A cry for help from a generation of young people who are destined to inherit a country which we – the generation currently in charge – are not stewarding well. What these young people seem to recognize is that American democracy is in peril... We would do well to pay attention to their plea. (Center for Educational Equity, 2022)

In June 2022, plaintiffs in Cook v. McKee settled with the State. The terms of the settlement included incorporating civic readiness for graduating seniors across the state, and the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) appointed a Civic Readiness Task Force that included students, parents, educators, community members, and advocacy groups. This demonstrates that Youth contestation does not go unnoticed. In December 2023 the Secretary of State of RI conferred the John Lewis Youth Leadership Award to the plaintiffs of the Cook v. McKee case. Secretary Amore noted civics literacy was the third major piece of legislation that was initiated by students in Rhode Island, advising: “If the young people are upset about it, then we should probably pay attention because they have been right on just about every single occasion.” He also acknowledged the impact of Youth agency on government officials noting: “I think it's really cool that the state general officer and the National Association of Secretaries of



State, are recognizing the group that sued the State” (Secretary G. Amore, public speech, December 5, 2023). Providence Youth agency around the issue of civics education demonstrated Youth can change the content of education and also deepen their credibility in advocacy spaces.

## **Situating Youth**

### **The Elusive Category of Youth**

The social category of Youth is defined differently by international organizations, agencies, and governments. The UN defines the age range for Youth as 15 to 24 years old (Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2015), recognizing there are significant differences between subsets within this range. The Providence School system defines Youth as children up to age 18. Tuck & Yang (2014a) emphasize the descriptor of ‘Youth’ confers a social location as a class of people that are not fully developed. They further argue the category Youth connotes:

A structural (and historical, generational, political) location. Youth is legally, materially, and always a raced/gendered/classed /sexualized category around which social institutions are built, disciplinary sciences created, and legal apparatus mounted. ‘Youth’ has implications for identity and social life, of course, but its salience as a category is deeply connected to compulsory schooling (in the US and Canada) or other legal apparatuses. (Tuck & Yang, 2014a, p. 2)

This discussion of the definition of Youth is relevant to this study as it combines the identity, social position, and social constructions of Youth and links these to both education and the treatment of Youth under legal and policy parameters.

### **Citizens in Waiting or Citizens Today**

Beliefs and normative assumptions around whether Youth are considered citizens of the future or citizens of today have a strong influence on how Youth are engaged and the civic

opportunities that exist for them. The socially constructed nature of this category makes the nearly unanimous (with the notable exceptions of the US and Somalia) ratification of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child extraordinary. Assumptions about the capability and role of Youth in public decision-making are inherent in the structures that impact their daily lives. Cahill & Hart (2007) describe the policy implications of the 1991 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC required ratifying state parties to implement a 10-Year Plan for children based in principles of survival, development, and participation, espoused in the Convention. Article 12 outlines the standard for child participation:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1991, as cited in Cahill & Hart, 2007, p. 215)

Cahill & Hart (2007) invoking scholars in Children's Rights (Bartlett, 2005; Boyden, 1997; Chawla, 2002; Hart, 1992; Hart & Lansdown, 2002; Ranjani, 2000) argue the U. S. decision not to ratify the CRC thwarted the opportunity to build awareness and practice of a rights-based approach to Youth work that prioritizes Youth participation and its ensuing opportunities. The CRC changed national discourses around children's participation which led to "experimentation and innovations in opportunities to participate that many other countries have had, particularly in political participation and governmental forms of representation and consultation with young people" (Cahill & Hart, 2007, p. 215).

Many scholars root their analysis of interaction with Youth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and on whether Youth are considered future citizens (citizens-in-waiting), or if they are considered citizens in the present (Cahill & Hart, 2007; Kirshner, 2015; Sutton, 2007;

Varney, 2007). The approach of civic Youth work distinguishes the conceptualization of *Youth engagement*, which frames Youth as future citizens assumed to be presently apathetic and disinterested; as opposed to *engaging Youth*, which frames Youth as current citizens and actors in their communities who are structurally disengaged from civic decision-making (Roholt, 2018). Youth voice is curiously absent from this literature, but Youth activists such as Mealakthey Sok, a plaintiff in the *Cook v. McKee* case, underscored the importance of understanding youth as citizens:

Youth are not only the leaders of the future, but also the leaders of today. Investing in youth and equitable access to education, is to also invest and optimize the possibilities of tomorrow. And this starts with students being at the decision-making table. (RIDE, 2022)

Cahill & Hart (2007) suggest a continuum of youth participation from encouraging responsible citizen behaviors on one end to encouraging “active, critical engagement... where young people are brought together to act as citizens in inclusive settings in ways that recognize their agency and competency” (p. 216). These two ends of the continuum are characterized by the view of Youth as future citizens who must be trained for participation at one end, and present citizens who have important perspective to contribute to current issues on the other.

Underscoring the impact of the normative value of the citizenship assumption, Zeldin et al. (2003) and the UN (1990) describe how this links Youth to policy: “they are citizens now who experience, interpret, and sometimes resist the policies that organize their everyday lives” (as cited in Kirshner, 2015, p. 5).

Inviting Youth perspectives and considering the everyday experience of Youth may curtail the negative framing of Youth. A positive, asset-based frame orients interaction with Youth, particularly Youth of Color, towards a “cultivation of strengths and purpose rather than

the avoidance of risk or delinquency” (Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2005, as cited in Kirshner, 2015, p. 13) while offering experiences in which Youth are mentored in civic engagement (Roholt et al., 2018). The decision to interact with Youth as citizens of today or citizens in waiting is an important lens to utilize in understanding the missions of Youth organizations in the Providence area.

### **Youth Organizations in Providence**

Males (1999) analyzes how society views Youth and posits that there is a “common conception that young people are apathetic, self-absorbed, and apolitical” (as cited in Roholt, et al., 2018, p. 1) that supports their structural exclusion from public decision making. This study focused on Youth who participate in organizations that recognize and support their agency and capacity as citizens of today. Providence is home to many such Youth groups that engage in a variety of social justice issues and contradict the conceptions of Youth Males (1999) articulates. This section introduces four of these groups including their organizational missions and some of the educational initiatives they lead and participate in to establish the context of Youth activism in Providence. This is not an exhaustive list of the Youth Organizations in Providence, nor does it include the coalitions that Youth are active in addressing specific issues, such as Ethnic Studies or school safety. These groups are highlighted here to illustrate their engagement with Youth as citizens of today and the emphasis on social justice and liberation within the Providence context.

#### ***ARISE: Alliance of Rhode Island Southeast Asians for Education***

Founded in 2017 by Chanda Womack, ARISE mobilizes Southeast Asian and other Rhode Island Youth of Color and recognizes Youth’s intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), or multiple identities Youth have that may each attract different forms of marginalization. The organization seeks education justice through combining leadership training and organizing and

engages Youth in issues that address their cultural identity and safety in school. ARISE's vision statement calls for an active role of Youth in addressing today's challenges noting "We must rise to these challenges by reimagining our schools, social services, and systems overall. As we support young people to learn, we must also cultivate a world in which they will grow to lead" (ARISE, 2022).

ARISE has contributed to Providence School Takeover Plan and is also engaged in the Counselors, Not Cops, and Civics Education movements. Amongst Youth organizations in RI, ARISE leads the Ethnic Studies initiatives including education outside the formal education system around the "Importance of Teaching Truth." ARISE was awarded the Common Cause Excellence in Public Service award (2022) for advocacy and organizing work in the Cook v. McKee case.

***PSU: Providence Student Union***

PSU was founded in 2010 and emphasizes that "young people are today's leaders!" (PSU, 2022). PSU addresses issues such as police and disciplinary violence in and out of school, lack of student participation in designing formal education, and notes these issues must be viewed in the larger context of a society in which, "national institutions have silenced and ignored young people's voices for decades" (PSU, 2022). PSU calls for young people to join the movement to build a better future:

Providence Student Union builds student power to improve our education and well-being. We envision a true "union for students" that increases young people's collective power and ensures our frustrations, demands, and dreams are heard. At PSU, young people grow as leaders, organizers, and advocates for justice in all forms, today and throughout their lives. (PSU, 2022)

PSU was also awarded the Common Cause Excellence in Public Service award (2022) for advocacy and organizing work in the Cook v. McKee case.

***Youth in Action: Share. Lead. Change.***

Youth In Action (YIA) was founded in 1997 and is firmly grounded in the experiences and capacity of Youth and moves from these fundamental values to design actions to create more equitable systems. Their website describes some of their work including facilitating workshops on identity, power structures, undoing racism, and student activism. Youth in Action works with Youth of Color to recognize and address the internalization of oppressive mentalities and are driven by the mission that by “building power, leadership, and action amongst youth in our communities, we believe a more equitable and safe world is possible” (Youth in Action, 2022)

Youth in Action also makes explicit reference to the process of identity building within systems that may not recognize or welcome the culture and values of Youth of Color. The organization deliberately creates “brave spaces for youth to bring their cultures, values, identities and truths and then build the skills and tools to name and address equity issues in their communities” (Youth in Action, 2022).

***Young Voices***

Young Voices was established in 2006 to address the need for “authentic youth voice in policymaking throughout Rhode Island” (Young Voices, 2022). Activities include training for Youth in leadership, critical thinking, public speaking, and giving testimony in the RI Assembly on relevant bills to advance policy changes. Young Voices fosters the skills and creates space for Youth-led initiatives and has been involved in issues around educational equity. The organization strives to be consistent with the commitment to Youth leadership offering governance and decision-making opportunities to Youth within the organization. Their mission

is to “ensure that Youth are provided with innovative leadership training to fight against systems of oppression, advocate for racial justice, and advance educational equity” (Young Voices, 2022).

### **Contesting Formal Education While Seeking to Learn**

Within the context of the failure of Rhode Island education officials to meet their stated educational goals and with few advances post-takeover, Youth-led organizations within Providence felt renewed urgency to address issues they prioritized. Their efforts addressed both the content and form of education and were often founded in processes through which Youth organized to reconstruct their own identity and deepen their understanding of the systems within which they lived. This resulted in Youth-led initiatives to educate themselves, fill educational gaps through their own non-formal education, and organize campaigns to press the State to improve their formal educational experience. To address the formal educational system, Youth in Rhode Island took a vocal role in advocating for students including presenting position papers and testimonies at public hearings around educational issues including the Providence Schools takeover; suing the State for the lack of Civics Education; and campaigning for the incorporation of Ethnic Studies in school curriculum. They also advocated for safety at school and an alternative, *Counselors not Cops* approach, to arrest the school to prison pipeline dynamic. Informally, Youth-led organizations designed educational initiatives including trainings (such as restorative justice and Youth activism), awareness events (transgender and queer vigils), and broader campaigns organizing walkouts and marches. They addressed local issues and connected to national and international movements such as Black Lives Matter and Climate Justice.

Activities of Youth leaders in Providence exemplified the international call in the State of the World’s Children Report 2015 for innovative Youth-driven strategies to address critical

issues (UNICEF, 2014, as cited in Bastien & Holmarsdottir, 2015). As Youth articulated their demands, they pressured the very systems that shaped the socio-economic conditions to change and create more space for Youth agency amongst their own peers, teachers, and even policy makers. The exercise of agency built Youth capacity and understanding of actors and systems that influenced the issues they cared about. Engaging Youth also created opportunities to demonstrate Youth capacity and perspective to adult stakeholders who could potentially incorporate their experiences into policy design and implementation.

### **Youth in Society: (Mis)Perceptions and Contradictions**

Three main themes of pertinence to this research emerge from scholars around Youth agency for social justice, particularly in the North American context: the demographics and social positioning of Youth; the (mis)perception of Youth as a social category; and structural and developmental contradictions in the expectations and conditions associated with Youth position in society.

#### **Demographics of Youth Populations**

Michael Males (2006) engaged in a critical socio-political analysis of Youth comparing demographic and policy trends of Youth in the US and Canada. Recognizing the intersectionality of ethnicity and race, in 2007, Males noted that “40 percent of the population under age 20 is non-white compared to 24 percent above age 40, and this trend is even more prominent in urban areas (as cited in, Cahill & Hart, 2007, p. 214). In Rhode Island, children are more likely to be identified as People of Color than adults. In 2020 in RI, 47% of children under age 18 were People of Color, compared with 28% of adults, which is up from 36% Children of Color in 2010 (KidsCount, 2021). Although his article was written before the Black Lives Matter movement, Males (2006) argued that “anxieties about social and demographic changes in



the U.S. are projected onto young people, who are more diverse, and look and think differently from older generations” (as cited in, Cahill & Hart, 2007, p. 214). One may argue that the Black Lives Matter movement established common ground between Youth and adults, particularly liberal Whites, that presented the opportunity for critical dialog such as the Providence Mayor’s response in examining truth, reconciliation, and reparations.

Contextually, scholars (see Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Males, 2006; Aspen Institute, 2005; Lipman, 2003; Parenti, 1999) have noted the socio-economic lens is critical to understand the experience of Youth as “the widening gulf between the wealthy and working poor is felt even more deeply by young people, as they are more likely to live in poverty than adults, more likely to be jailed, and have fewer rights” (Cahill & Hart, 2007, p. 214). This socio-economic analysis contributes to a depersonalized view of children and Youth as comprising trends without attention to how these trends translate into their personal experiences. The demographic shift also fuels the problematization of Youth as a social group.

### **The (Mis)Perception of Youth**

Sociological studies conducted in the 1990s contributed to the “common conception that young people are apathetic, self-absorbed, and apolitical” (Males, 1999, as referenced in Roholt, et al., 2018, p. 1). This perception is situated in a review of the evolving perception of the problematization of the lack of Youth civic engagement in the 1990s, demonstrated through low voter turnout and little support or membership in political organizations (Bennett, 2000; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, as cited in Roholt et al., 2018). Scholars noted a larger societal shift away from membership in civil society organizations (Putnam, 2000). These trends led scholars to indicate a potential crisis of “a societal problem and a youth problem” (Cohen, 1997, as cited in Roholt, et al., 2018, p. 5). With this analysis, funding institutions increased their support for

programs that targeted Youth civic engagement (Cahill & Hart, 2007). Youth themselves have articulated these problems as Ahmed Sesay, a plaintiff in the *Cook v. McKee* comments:

I feel that a lot of things I should have learned in public school I didn't learn. For example, I never really had a dedicated civics class. We never went into depth about how local government works or how our decision makers are affected by the citizens that they are supposed to be governing...When you don't teach civics, students simply feel left behind or apathetic. (Ahlquist, 2018, November 18)

In this statement Sesay draws the link between the lack of civics and other educational content with democratic participation and the resultant alienation of Youth.

### ***Structural and Developmental Contradictions***

Two fundamental contradictions impact the position and activism of Youth in the U.S.: structural contradictions that make demands of Youth yet fail to support their efforts; and developmental contradictions where Youth are framed as immature and unfit for civic engagement despite their capability to engage, resulting in their exclusion from participation through which they might build skills in public decision-making.

**Structural Contradictions.** Structural contradictions exist where systems pressure Youth to work hard, get good grades, and stay out of trouble when these systems maintain significant barriers for Youth to experience success in these areas, particularly if they are Youth of Color or immigrants. For example, there are significant constraints for academic success due to failing schools (Anyon, 2005; Carter & Welner, 2013; Gonzales, 2011; Kirshner, 2015; Warren and Mapp, 2010). The school to prison pipeline which leads to disproportionate imprisonment of People of Color is another example. Kirshner (2015) established that “Racial

profiling is also rampant in schools, where ample evidence has documented that Latino and African American students are more likely to be referred to police for nonviolent crimes” (p. 16).

The prevailing exhortation to work hard to succeed deliberately negates the structural dispossession high poverty neighborhoods experience. Kirshner (2015) invokes scholars (Ceballo, Huerta, and Epstein-Ngo, 2010; Weis & Fine, 2012) to assert that “structural dispossession signals the active role played by entities (public or private) to take away resources from certain classes of people” (p. 9). He further argues that “structural dispossession lands disproportionately on people of color: inadequate schools, restrictions on voting rights, mass incarceration and its attendant disenfranchisement from the vote, and immigration deportations” (Kirshner, 2015, p. 9). Youth must reconcile the contradictions between their lived experience and what they learn in school through their critical analysis of the impact of systemic oppression on their lives and in their communities.

**Developmental Contradictions.** Structural contradictions are compounded by a developmental contradiction: “most youth are developmentally ready to participate under conditions of support but lack opportunities to do so. There is a lack of fit between paternalistic societal institutions and young people’s rapidly growing cognitive capacities and desire for personal agency” (Kirshner, 2015, p. 6).

Neuroscientists Hartley & Somerville (2015) have researched the development of the adolescent brain and raise several challenges that complicate clear scientific understanding. Challenges included varied applications of the definition of adolescence which compromises comparison across studies; reliance on quantitative models designed for adult decision-making; and difficulty in contextualizing the validity of decisions as adolescent decision-making “typically occurs within rich environments that often involve complex motivations” (Hartley &

Somerville, 2015, p. 14). Adolescent decision-making is different than that of adults; however, Hartley & Somerville (2015) conclude this is developmentally normative and may have distinct advantages for their life stage:

Adolescents are tasked with attaining independence despite limited amounts of direct experience. Therefore, it might be advantageous for the adolescent brain to be attuned to more proximal outcomes, to be tolerant of uncertainty, and to benefit from robust learning signals that can entrain a richer experience base to scaffold the transition to independence. (Hartley & Somerville, 2015, p. 9)

Adolescents have been framed as impulsive, emotional, and irrational within the field of psychology and mass media, and as dangerous and irresponsible in international development policy spheres (Kirshner, 2015; Mead, 1928; Sommers, 2015). This positioning serves to justify the failure to invite them into key decision making, even when decisions impact their lives. This tendency is contrary to the stipulations for the right to participate in decisions that affect them outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12, 1990). Adolescents continue to be cast as unstable in public discourse:

This narrative resurfaces today in breathless reports about the immaturity of the teen brain. An NPR story referred to teenagers as ‘an alien species,’ TIME described them as a ‘famously reckless species,’ and the NYT titled its article ‘Why Teenagers Act Crazy.’ (Cloud, 2009; Friedman, 2014; Knox, 2010, as referenced in Kirshner, 2015, p.11)

The derisive language used to describe Youth would cause outrage if used to describe any other group, for example, women, disabled people, or ethnic groups. The general societal tolerance for using disparaging descriptors for Youth reveals the discriminatory bias against Youth as a social group.

There is a remarkable absence of Youth and teen perspective or voice in the defamatory messaging about Youth. This further indicates the social reproduction of Youth position in systemic structures, such as schools and youth programs, where opportunities for Youth are based on the perception of Youth as either dangerous or vulnerable (Kwon, 2013). Valencia (2010) notes that “either punitive approaches or benevolent approaches still frame Youth as passive or vulnerable objects of intervention rather than capable contributors” (as cited in Kirshner, 2015, p. 12). Unfortunately, the rhetoric around Youth becomes self-fulfilling through the media and through the resulting exclusion from opportunities where Youth can publicly demonstrate and develop their critical thinking and decision-making skills.

Ginwright & Cammarota (2006) posit that Youth activism is fueled by the lived experience of these contradictions. One way Youth respond to these contradictions is through harnessing their collective power through civil disobedience such as walkouts and marches. Ginwright & Cammarota (2006) draw on scholars in Youth resistance (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1969; Carson, 1981; Martínez, 1998; Newton, 1973; Piven & Cloward, 1979) to argue Youth acts of civil disobedience have the power to “revive the dormant dynamic qualities of state institutions and render them responsive to change” (p. xviii). This was exemplified through the walkouts, protests, and educational initiatives conducted by Youth and their organizations in Providence.

While the contributions of scholars to the definition of Youth, the analysis of changing demographics, and the structural and developmental contradictions Youth must face are significant and helpful in understanding the experience of Youth, there is limited knowledge about how Youth themselves make meaning of their position in society. This research was conducted in Providence within the context of a confluence of reckoning around the legacy of

the White Transatlantic slave trade and the failure of the Providence School Department, and Youth-led educational initiatives that sought transformation of inequitable systems. The approach of this study explored emancipatory education initiatives from the perspective of how Youth of Color make meaning of their position in society as they form their own sense of identity. This study invited Youth to reflect on how their conceptualization of their identity and position in society interacted with actions they took to address educational issues. This provided valuable lessons to approaching educational inequity. The category of Youth is transitory, and the meaning-making process Youth of Color engage in during their high school years informs the decisions they make as adults, thus engaging Youth in a reflection of their experience now serves both societal stakeholders and participants themselves.

## Chapter Three: Conceptual Framework

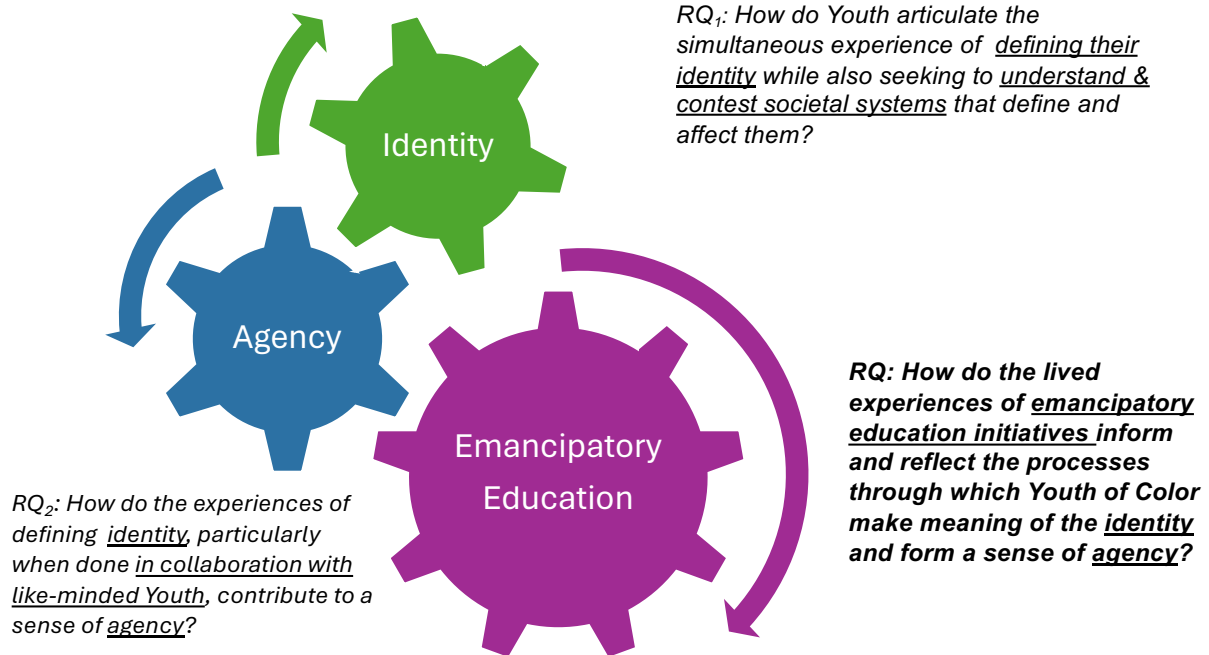
The conceptual framework for this study was intentionally set as a broad scaffolding through which the experience of Youth could be analyzed. Education as Freedom provided a scaffolding for the issues of identity, agency, and emancipatory education that are the focus of this study.

### Education As Freedom

This research is focused on marginalized Youth of Color, including immigrants, within the educational context of Providence, Rhode Island. The study focused on how marginalized Youth explored their identities and made meaning of the social constructs which framed their lives. The study further investigated how the individual process of meaning-making informed Youth's sense of agency as seen through the lens of their experience in non-formal and formal education initiatives they conducted for social justice. Figure 1: *Themes of Research Questions* depicts the relationship between the main research question of this study and the sub-questions around identity and collective agency. The dynamics of identity, agency, and emancipatory education suggest each of these themes influences the others. This interplay between the themes is unique to each individual, but the graphic of the gear mechanisms captures the way these three issues iteratively impact one another.

#### Figure 1

*Research Question Themes*



Amartya Sen's (2000) conceptualization of individual capability to pursue freedom, known as the capability approach (Sen, 2000) served as the theoretical scaffolding for this study. The capability approach has been applied to comparative international education (Calitz, 2018) and is of particular relevance to the field of comparative international education when understood within the context of decolonization. This study utilized the foundational assumption of freedom that undergirds the capability approach to better understand the experience of marginalized Youth of Color, particularly the process of individual meaning-making and identity, their critical analysis of the systems in which they live, and how their educational initiatives seek to transform society. Although Amartya Sen embodies significant privilege as a male Indian national of the highest caste educated in British and American educational systems, his freedom was compromised as an Indian living under the British rule during his formative years. Sen sought to understand the experience of colonization and decolonization through the fields of economics



and philosophy. Although his journey in making meaning of his experiences of colonization and pursuit of freedom are not representative of the entire Indian population, he makes important contributions to the discussion of decolonization. Sen's conceptualization of freedom and human development is intimately informed by his experience of decolonization and proved relevant to this study.

### **Pursuing a Life One Has Reason to Value**

In *Development as Freedom* (2000), Amartya Sen argued that the process of development must be rooted in the conceptualization of freedom as both the means and the end, or purpose, of development efforts. In applying this to education, freedom as a means to education suggests individual agency to learn, including conditions of learning that embody safety and respect for individuals. These conditions of freedom combined with the content of education contribute to freedom through building awareness, capabilities, and opportunities for the individual to explore the possibilities of the life they have reason to value (Sen, 2009) and develop understanding and skills to achieve freedom throughout their education and learning.

Transposing this conceptual framework to education and considering freedom as the means and purpose of education provided a useful framing for the issues of identity, agency, and emancipatory education, central to this research study. The capability approach (Sen, 2009) is predicated on freedom and individual choice and advanced a concept of agency rooted in the individual's ability to convert opportunities to pursue a life that "they have reason to value." Sen (2000) argued that:

If the focus is ultimately on the expansion of human freedom to live the kind of lives that people have reason to value, then the role of economic growth in expanding these opportunities has to be integrated in that more foundational understanding of the process

of development [education] as the expansion of human capability to lead more worthwhile and free lives. (p. 295)

Applying this framework to the field of education indicates that education should not only focus on increasing the productive output of individuals, as advocated in human capital theory (Smith, 1776 & Becker, 1994), but must also embody the purpose of expanding individual capability to lead more ‘worthwhile and free lives.’ This focus on human capability is particularly relevant for the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Stein, 2021) times we face as it is a more adaptive and expansive approach to support Youth in their individual learning journeys and their contributions to society.

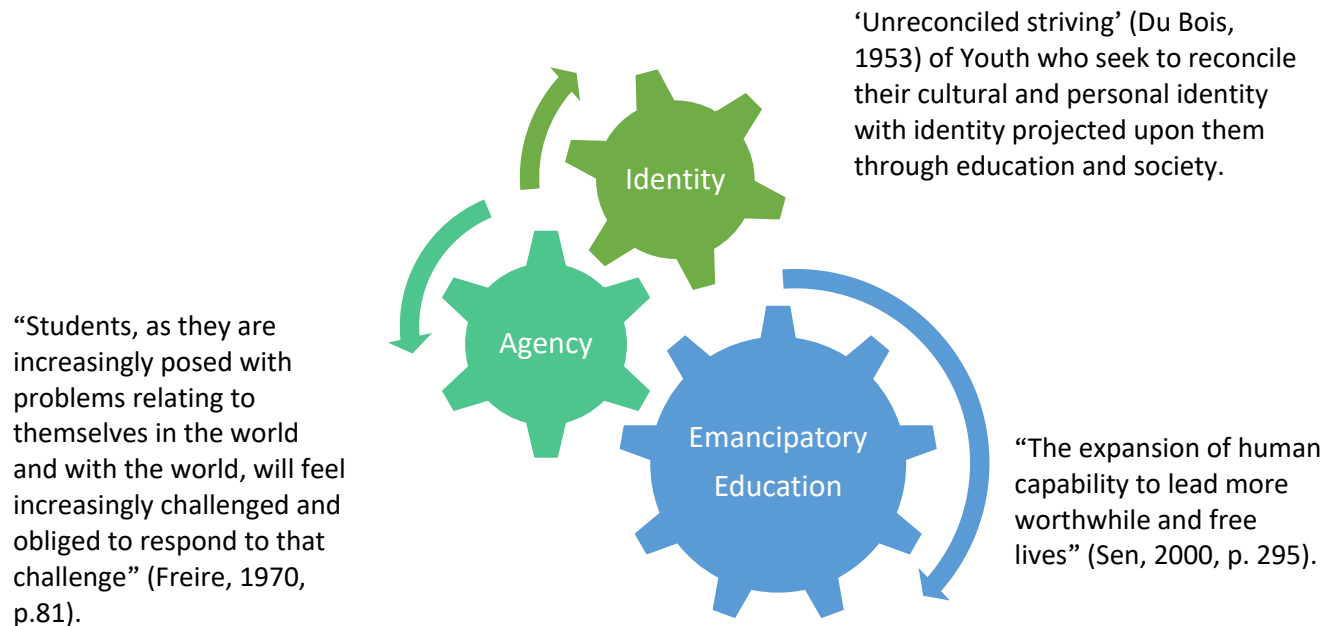
### **Identity & Agency**

Sen (2000) warned that the focus on human capacity must be coupled with a broader understanding that, “the freedom of agency that we individually have is *inescapably qualified and constrained* by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us” (p. xii, emphasis added). Thus, social justice is created through individual freedom and capabilities to ‘live a life one has reason to value’ within societies that offer social, political, and economic opportunities regardless of identity. This caution around the constraints on freedom and agency rooted in one’s very identity is particularly relevant for the study of Youth of Color given the conditions of marginalization they face. Youth as an identity and a social category further ‘qualifies and constrains’ the freedom and agency young people experience. Transposing Sen’s (2000) argument from the field of development to education heightens awareness of the critical role that Youth play in their education and the importance of the “liberty of acting as citizens who matter and whose voices count” (p. 288), both for themselves and to impact society.

The concept of Education as Freedom offered a scaffolding to examine the experience of Youth themselves and to draw on other theories such as Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2017) and other emancipatory approaches (Freire, 1970; Martín-Baró, 1994). I utilize this combination to explore the impact of education on marginalized populations in this research study. This study is grounded in the experiences of Youth of Color and posits that identity is essential to the experience of justice as it is a strong determinant in one's social positionality (Sen, 2000). The critical analysis of positionality Youth undertook is supported by this framework in that Youth seek to understand the social, political, and historical constraints that impact their experience of justice. Freire (1970) complemented this view at the individual level articulating "education as a practice of freedom" (p. 81) and related this to identity and understanding one's place in the world. Freire (1970) observed that "students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (p. 81). Figure 2: *Conceptual Approaches*, is modeled around the studies key themes of identity, agency and emancipatory education and captures examples of key concepts that emerged from and helped interpret Youth experiences of identity (Du Bois, 1953), agency (Freire, 1970) and emancipatory education (Sen, 2000).

## **Figure 2**

### *Conceptual Approaches*



Ong (1996) describes the journey from self-making to building awareness of how state powers have impacted individual and family narratives, to assessing action and taking collective action, as components of pedagogical activism. Pedagogical activism expresses an individual process of identity formation to seek and apply skills and capacities to work towards social justice. The examination and construction of identity builds both skills and critical awareness to exercise agency. This process of meaning-making was evident amongst the Youth in this study who shared their experiences of defining ‘the lives they have reason to value’ and developing the capabilities to adapt and convert opportunities to realize their vision for themselves and society.

### **The Capillary Concept of Power**

The conceptual construction of power is inevitably linked to that of freedom, particularly in how power is utilized through agency. Foucault (1990) negates the assumption that power resides only in the dominant hegemony and highlights how power is exercised throughout

society utilizing the analogy of capillaries (as cited in Levinson, 2011). Understanding power as present across society contests the predominant narrative of ‘empowering’ Youth or ‘giving Youth power’ and recognizes the power Youth already have. This reconceptualization of the locus of power and the demand to foster a critical consciousness of systemic oppression (Freire, 1970) became salient antecedents for further critical theories to explore the experience of marginalized groups. Foucault comes from his position of considerable privilege as a white European upper middle-class male who was also gay, and wrote extensively on various topics, but it is his radical conceptualization of power that was of interest to this research study.

Foucault (1990) contributed further analysis of power critical to the contestation of the grand narrative (Lyotard, 1979) which assumed a dominant power in control of dictating societal systems and social relations. Foucault challenged this positioning of power disarticulating it from the dominant structures and conceptually relocating it. This affirms the productive and creative nature of power developed through the counter narratives espoused by Critical Race Theory (Kumasi, 2011) and decolonizing the production of knowledge (Bhabha, 1994). Asserting that power always entails resistance and is not absolute validates social movements that contest dominant structures. Equating knowledge with power represents the notion of conscientization (Freire, 1990) which captures the process of analyzing and contesting oppressive systems. Foucault (1990) further asserted that “there is no employment of knowledge that does not also constitute a utilization of power” (as cited in Levinson, 2011, p. 150). This conceptual understanding of power elucidated the position of Youth of Color in Providence as they contested educational systems while seeking to learn. Anyon (2009) described a Foucauldian understanding that “power [is] coincidental with resistance; power is a relationship which, by its very definition, involves constant contestation and a measure of freedom” (p. 14).

The theoretical framing of education as freedom facilitates the exploration of the everyday experiences of Youth in a complex context. The power lens is useful in assessing the integrity of adult efforts to incorporate Youth voice publicly; for example, inviting them to sit on the committee to review civics education as a result of *Cook v. McKee*, and also informed the analysis of power in adult-controlled spaces.

### **Critical Race Theory & Decolonization**

Echoing the discussion of power, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is led by scholars and activists who seek to understand and transform the relationship between race, racism, and power (Bell, 1992, 2018; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). CRT both challenges institutional and systemic racism and promotes the voice of marginalized people of color (Walker, 2021). Critical Race Theory has recently become a topic of public debate in the United States; however, these discussions seldom reflect an understanding of the historical legacy of scholarship and activism that contributed to CRT. Kumasi (2011) suggests “two examples of the pragmatic origins of CRT are recorded in the works of Tupac Amaru (1742-1781) and Toussaint-L’Ouverture (1743-1803). Each of these men... fought to end colonialism and slavery in their respective countries” (p. 201). Kumasi deliberately links the development of CRT to decolonial thinking and action. Kumasi (2011) continues to trace the historical legacy of CRT, marking the contributions of WEB Du Bois (1868-1963) and Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950) who published works theorizing around education and social mobility for Black populations within the US and the complexity individuals face in establishing a racial identity.

In the *Miseducation of the Negro* (1933), Woodson expounds upon the intersections of race, power, and education and “critiqued the ways American public schools failed to equip African American students with the kind of education needed to empower them socially,

politically or economically” (as cited in Kumasi, 2011, p. 203?). Woodson argued that the White Eurocentric curricula focus made the culture and history of Black people invisible. WEB Du Bois articulated the personal process of articulating one’s identity in a Eurocentric educational environment as a “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 1953, as cited in Kumasi, 2011, p. 204). This description reinforces the post-modernist critique of marginalizing and othering, but Du Bois’ articulation of this experience exemplifies the creative power and power that entails resistance as described by Foucault (1990).

There is an interesting confluence in the conceptions of power and creation of identity as Foucault’s articulations of power can be seen in the works of Critical Race Theory activists and scholars. Challenging systemic racism is coupled with the production of knowledge through counter narratives to fill in the gaps in education curricula around the history of places and cultures beyond Europe. The stories of Youth of Color in Providence exemplify the multiple identities articulated through the concept of intersectionality conceptualized by Crenshaw (1989). Kumasi (2011) articulates the importance of scholars who understand: “the intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of subordination and recognize that people belong to more than one demographic or cultural group and are consequently affected by disenfranchisement or inequality in more than one way” (p. 210). CRT scholars posit that the impacts of race and racism change across locality and historical moments, and this is evidenced during the period in Providence that was the focus of this study.

### **Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy**

Participants in this study reflected the diverse cultural and racial composition of Providence where over 90% of student population are Youth of Color and more than half speak a language other than English in their homes. The concept of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy embraces this broad array of cultures and ethnicities and offers an articulation of the impact of cultural hegemony in education which is instructive in understanding Youth experiences in exploring their identities. The marginalization of Youth of Color and the racism and cultural hegemony endemic to the condition of marginalization are well documented. Pihl (2015) and other scholars have analyzed this in the US context and in Europe (Ladson-Billings, 2001; May, 2009; and Troyna & Carrington, 1990). The experience of culturally hegemonic systems in the education space is described by Paris & Alim (2017) as “Students and families [are] asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures and histories in order to achieve in schools” (p. 1). To address this, the central purpose of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Alim & Paris, 2017; Alim et al., 2020; Paris & Alim, 2014) is to sustain “Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian and Pacific Islander young people, families, and communities as these memberships necessarily intersect with gender and sexuality, with disability, with migration, with language, with land, with class and more” (Paris, 2021, p. 366). Consistent with the focus on sustaining cultures, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy has been developed through a collective of scholars focusing on different populations including Native scholars (Lee & McCarty, 2017; McCarty & Lee, 2014; San Pedro, 2021), immigrant Youth (Lee & Walsh, 2017), Black, Latinx, and Pacific Islander students in California (Kinloch, 2017; Wong & Peña, 2017) amongst others (Paris, 2021, p. 366).

There are four central features that distinguish the application of a Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy approach. First, the community is central and “their valued languages, practices, and knowledges” are incorporated across the learning settings” (Alim & Haupt, 2017; Bucholtz et al.,



2017; Wong & Peña, 2017, as cited in Paris, 2021, p. 367). Second, Paris (2021) describes a framework of “community accountability” (Lee and McCarty, 2017), where families, elders and students are viewed as key collaborators in learning settings (Eagle Shield et al., 2020; Irizarry, 2017). Third, drawing on collaborators work with indigenous populations (Eagle Shield et al., 2020; Holmes & Gonzalez, 2017; Lee & McCarty, 2017; San Pedro, 2021), there is an intention to establish a “good relationship with the land, the people of the land, with students and communities” (Paris, 2021, p. 367). The fourth feature focuses on the ‘inward gaze’ (Alim et al., 2020; Irizarry, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2017) where the internalization of the beliefs of oppressive systems is examined critically. Paris (2021) describes this as:

Attending to possible internalized false beliefs that our practices and selves as communities of color are not valuable in education settings, contending with false choices between sustaining lifeways and critical uptake of dominant practices... turning that inward gaze upon our own selves and communities as we critically assess what to center and sustain.” (p. 367)

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies complements the conceptual framework designed for this research study by adding dimensions of sustainability, both in terms of identity and in terms of systems, to the notion of freedom articulated by Sen (2000). Through its deliberate centering and valuing of marginalized populations and framing of community accountability, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy applies the Foucauldian position of capillary power by contesting assumptions of the dominant culture. Finally, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy is intricately tied to decolonization and not only contests societal perceptions but encourages reflection to build new awareness. The ‘inward gaze’ is a strong complement to Du Bois’ (1953) articulation of ‘double-consciousness’ in that it asks students to reflect on cultural beliefs and practices that

inform the formation of their identity and also prompts the examination of the internalization of external, or societal, perceptions.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy scholarship engages actively with Youth of Color and calls attention to the critical moment of possibility where the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement opened new space to “reimagine a radically different vision of education... joining the leadership of students, families, and communities we learn with” (Paris, 2021, p. 372). Based on his experience of working with undergraduate students in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, Paris (2021) notes that many “young people ... are asking for and working to create a way out of a system that is fundamentally unsustainable” (p. 372).

### **Operationalizing Key Terms**

Key to this research study were the concepts of identity, agency, emancipatory education, and the meaning-making processes that affected the everyday lives of Youth. I acknowledge that scholarship has defined these terms in multiple ways and offer the underpinning of the operational approach I have taken to these terms for this research. These definitions were shared with participants during interviews to ensure a common point of departure in our discussions.

#### **Identity**

The concept of identity utilized in this research is based on the dialog of the identity the individual seeks to define for themselves (who am I?) and the identity society prescribes to them. Du Bois (1953) described this as the “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (as cited in Kumasi, 2011, p. 209). He continued to describe this process as “two unreconciled strivings” (as cited in Kumasi, 2011, p. 209). The ‘unreconciled strivings’ is a useful framing for the Youth participants in this study who seek to reconcile their

cultural and personal identity with the social identity imposed on them through their formal education. This is further complicated for Youth by the context of: “both structural and developmental contradictions shaped and twisted by the persistence of racial caste in an allegedly color-blind world” (Kirshner, 2015, p. 6).

### **Agency**

For this study, I build on Sen’s definition of agency. Sen (2009) conceptualized an agent as “someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well” (p. 19). Sen (2009) situated the practice of agency within society as agents are participants in democracy and attributed a positive value to agency in enabling individuals to “effectively shape their own destiny and help each other” (p. 11). This concept of agency undergirds this study as it is rooted in identity and imagining a future. Youth often exist in a context in which their “experiences of inequity were compounded by their typical experience of exclusion from public decision making” (Kirshner, 2015, p. 3) or lack of agency. This relates to the concept of emancipatory education exercised by Providence Youth as a further expression of both identity and agency as it seeks to transform understanding and systems towards increased freedom.

### **Emancipatory Education**

For the concept of emancipatory education, I turn to Martín-Baró (1994) who notes:

If our objective is to serve the liberation needs of the people, [we must] involve ourselves in a new praxis, an act of transforming reality that will let us know not only about what is, but also about what is not, and by which we may try to orient ourselves toward what ought to be. (as cited in Fine et al., 2004, p. 96)

Basing the practice of transformation in what is present and what is absent is a useful framing for this research study as Youth interrogate the absence of their experiences in education and seek to learn and create what is missing. Freire (1970, 2000) referred to conscientization as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). In the context of this study, the Black Lives Matter movement forced an examination of oppressive elements in society and precipitated an increased individual and collective consciousness of social justice issues. Conscientization, and the role it plays in Youth of Color’s journey in social justice is a useful lens and liberation-based approaches complemented the broader framework of education as freedom (Sen, 2000) utilized in this study.

### **Meaning-Making**

For the concept of meaning-making I tapped Foucault (1989, 1991) and the process of “self-making and being-made by power relations that produce consent through schemes of surveillance, discipline, control, and administration” (as cited in Ong, 1996, p. 737). This definition was particularly relevant to the Youth population of Providence that is comprised of Immigrant populations, Latinx, and Black American populations where the deliberate process of identity formation is critical in making meaning of one’s position in society. Foucault’s understanding of making meaning is entwined with his conception that “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1990a, as cited in Levinson, p. 150). This definition of power embodied the key research concepts of identity and agency and lent the potential for them to be channeled into emancipatory education.

Lived experience was an important component to the process of meaning-making. Seidman (2019) defines “lived experience as that yet-unreflected-upon experience that makes

up” our days (p. 23). Exploring the lived experience of Youth of Color in Providence through their own reflections adds depth to the conceptual framework and is essential to the phenomenological research methodology of this study.

### **Conceptualizing Youth Engagement in Social Justice**

#### **Resistance**

Resistance theory traces roots to Willis, Giroux, Freire, and Lourde who “offered frameworks for theorizing how people make sense of injustice in mind, body, spirit, movements, and in political gestures” (Fine et al., 2014, p. 48). Willis (1977) studied white working-class lads, or young men, in the UK, and argued the lads understood the false promise that doing well in school would enable them to escape the working class and actively resisted the modes and methods of schooling to preserve their dignity. Scholars of Youth resistance (see Fine, 1991; Tuck, 2012; Ruglis, 2009; Nolan, 2011) acknowledge the influence of the concept of agency Willis attributes to the lads. This influence continues in the work of scholars who:

Seek to lift up the nuances of negotiating the costs of dignity in inhumane and undignified circumstances, the ways in which decisions of self-determination can be punished, and the textured acumen that accrues over the lived life. (As cited in Tuck & Yang, 2014a, p. 6)

In addition to the recognition of the agency of Youth, current literature around marginalized Youth has evolved from a deficit to asset-based approach and an important group of scholars analyzed activism of Youth leaders through the lens of resistance to oppressive systems (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006). Tuck & Yang (2018) posit a “desire-based” approach to counter the pain stories that are too often centered in research of marginalized populations. The ‘desire-based’ approach invites Youth to articulate the acumen they have developed to

navigate and change the circumstances they encounter to pursue the lives they have reason to value.

Scholars have developed theories of change to explicate the dynamic of Youth resistance through active participation of Youth and analyzing their relationship to capitalism, colonialism, and racism (Tuck & Yang, 2014a). Kirshner (2015) highlights the fact that schools and other institutions privilege behaviors and modalities that maintain their institutional power over behaviors, such as critical thinking, that may seek to transform these institutions.

Kirshner (2015) articulates how Youth effect change by “simultaneously becoming part of the existing practices and transforming those practices through their participation” (, p. 18). Analysis based in sociocultural theories that focus on the dynamic between human action and societal change (see Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Weisner; 1998) allows for a dynamic of change, however this change is still framed within the existing systems. Change within existing systems to make them more responsive to human rights and dignity is important, however some scholars claim this is not sufficient and advocate for the transformation of these systems, or dominant frames (see Fine; 2014; Fordham, 2014; Noguera, Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006). The Counselors Not Cops Campaign Youth lead in Providence exemplifies the transformation of systems by advocating that school safety should be addressed through additional counseling resources instead of more vigorous implementation of punitive measures of control or training of school police.

Signithia Fordham (2014) warns resistance “does not transform the existing frame,” or systemic structure of power, and suggests “resisting often entails accepting the legitimacy of the frame” (p. 104). In essence, resistance is fueled by the belief that the system can and should perform better, despite the deeply rooted inequitable social constructs that preserve it. Fordham

(2014) further argues “resistance itself can be a form of legitimizing problematic frames, undermining our ability to transform into a more ideal community” (p. 104). As resistance continues to be defined within the frames of existing systems, it may achieve changes on the margins of those systems; however, these tight frames do not promote a new imagining of how power structures might be. Recognizing the limitations of resistance theory, Fine (2014) echoes framing resistance as a human expression of the search for dignity and action. She notes, “acts of resistance, in the language of Pierre Bourdieu, reflect our human capacity to demand what should be, especially when transformation in the moment seems so improbable” (pp. 49-50). As resistance becomes insufficient, I turn to imagining a new construction of society.

### **Space for Social Dreaming**

As Youth of Color seek to be free within the societal constraints of power and race, where can they find space to imagine the future they have reason to value? Third spaces may offer this opportunity. Scholars (Anzaldúa, 1987, 2021; Bhabha, 1994, 2002; Soja, 1996) have described third spaces as “democratic, grounded in communities” where actors collectively “challenge the hegemony of current forms of economic, political, cultural, and education domination” (Anderson et al., 2023). In the construction of societal spaces, the first space is the individual level and includes our cultural and personal identities, and the second space represents the dominant forces that seek to define us drawing on colonial histories of othering (Bhabha, 1994, Anderson et al., 2023). Third spaces are invoked to “explore issues of domination, power, and emancipation” (Anderson et al., 2023). Gutiérrez & Johnson (2017) draw on Gutiérrez (2008) and Tejeda, Espinoza & Gutiérrez (2003) in defining third spaces as “collective and dynamic spaces” that include reclamation of histories, development of critical social thought, and

“leverage students’ full linguistic and sociocultural repertoires toward newly imagined futures through social dreaming – a collective dream for a more just world” (p. 253).

The process of making meaning of their own lives and ‘self-making’ through activism strengthens the ‘third space’ and creates the sense of the ‘collective’ that Korzh et al. (2020) identify as a motivation for social mobilization and contributes to efficacy in movement making (Gamson 1992; Pinard 2011). Espinoza (2009) conducted research documenting third spaces as “educational sanctuaries in which equitable learning, dignity and educational rights are understood” (cited in Gutiérrez & Johnson, 2017, p. 253), and Espinoza and Vossoughi (2014) further elaborate on third spaces as places where learning experiences are ‘dignity-conferring’ and ‘rights-generative’ (cited in Gutiérrez & Johnson, 2017, p. 253). Dyrness (2021) introduces “diaspora third space pedagogies” that focus on Youth of transnational origins. This lens is utilized to consider the importance of the pedagogical role of activism for marginalized Youth of Color in Providence given the intersectionality across race and immigration.

To lend clarity to the application of the context, literature review, and conceptual framework, this chapter offered the conceptual approaches that informed the use of the key themes in this research: identity; agency; emancipatory education; and meaning making. These concepts construct the conceptual framework of Education as Freedom (Sen, 2000), which articulates the iterative relationship between them. The nature of Youth-led educational initiatives is also framed through the lens of Critical Pedagogy (Martín-Baró, 1994; Freire, 1970, 2000) which proves useful not only in the educational initiatives themselves but also in demonstrating the process through which learning around identity is entwined with conscientization (Freire, 1970, 2000). The conceptualization of emancipatory education is useful in understanding how Youth not only made meaning of their present situation, but also joined to



collectively imagine a world that would support the lives they value (Gutierrez, 2008; Sen, 2000).

This chapter established the conceptual framework of this study to analyze the meaning Youth of Color of identity, agency, and emancipatory education. This included the elements of freedom (Sen, 2000; Freire, 1970), power (Foucault, 1990), and race (Bell, 1992, 2018; Kumasi, 2011; Du Bois, 1953). Literature reviewed identified Youth engagement in social justice through the lenses of resistance and transformation (Noguera, Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006), and through creative spaces of social dreaming (Gutiérrez & Johnson, 2017). The literature presented these models based on various cases of Youth engagement.

In the next chapter, I present how the qualitative research methodology and phenomenological approach are best positioned to answer the research question while respecting the agency and experience of Youth participants.

## Chapter 4: Research Methodology - A Phenomenological Inquiry

This research gives primacy to the lived experiences of Youth of Color in Providence, Rhode Island who must navigate societal systems as they make meaning of their identity, understand how systems oppress them, and seek to transform those systems towards their vision of social justice. Listening to how Youth articulate and reflected on their experience illuminated their perspective and indicated how Youth might best be supported by allies who work with them to pursue social justice. The overarching research question for this study was: *How do lived experiences of emancipatory education initiatives inform and reflect the processes through which Youth of Color make meaning of their identity and form a sense of agency?* The following sub-questions further guided the research: (1) How do Youth articulate the simultaneous experience of defining their own identity while also seeking to understand and contest societal systems that define and affect them?; and (2) How does this process, particularly when done in collaboration with their peers, contribute to Youth's sense of agency?

The qualitative research study is situated within the transformative paradigm of research (Mertens, 2009). The transformative paradigm gives primacy to the lived experiences of marginalized groups and maintains a deliberate awareness of the dialectic tension between how systems oppress these groups and how these groups resist oppression. The transformative paradigm interrogates how and why inequities are reflected in power relations, and how they link to political and social action (Mertens, 2020). My research question focused on the non-formal educational initiatives Youth designed to understand and contest issues of social justice and thus lent itself to this paradigm. The transformative paradigm is rooted in an ontological position that recognizes “various versions of reality are based on social positioning [and that there are] consequences of privileging versions of reality” (Mertens, 2020, p. 11). I applied this position in

this study to focus on the meaning Youth of Color make of their experiences, understanding that they attend schools and live in a society which do not privilege their version of reality. The conception of knowledge, or the epistemological stance, of the transformative paradigm is predicated on an understanding of knowledge as socially and historically situated consistent with the understanding that reality is based on social positioning (Mertens, 2020). This had implications for the relationship between researcher and participants as it recognized the interactive link between researcher and participant, particularly in addressing “issues of power and trust” (Mertens, 2020, p. 11). These philosophical and theoretical assumptions align with my own beliefs of knowledge, power, and justice, and the utilization of this paradigm guided me in crafting my role and articulating my influence as a researcher. The research question is best explored through the qualitative research methodology, and I chose a phenomenological research approach to give primacy to the voices of Youth of Color and the meaning they make of their experiences. These choices informed the research design for this study.

### **Qualitative Research Methodology**

The qualitative research methodology was best suited to explore the processes through which Youth of Color, including immigrants, undertook to make meaning of their identities and position in society and to better understand how this informed their sense of agency and their emancipatory educational initiatives. Denzin & Lincoln (2013) describe qualitative research as stressing, “*how* social experience is created and given meaning” (p. 17), which lent itself to explore multiple Youth perspectives and contexts and center their articulation of their experiences. Within qualitative research methodology various approaches are available. Scholars (Noguera, Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006) recognize the absence of Youth voices in scholarly work and suggest action research involving Youth in the research teams could serve to

address this. I agree that action research is an important approach to document cases of Youth activism and also provide Youth an opportunity to analyze processes of social change, however in this study I focused on Youth reflections and learning from their emancipatory educational experiences. The phenomenological method of this study documented Youth articulation of their experiences and reflections on the meaning they make from them and thus provides an important contribution to current literature. My interest in this research was in exploring the meaning Youth *themselves* make of their experiences of emancipatory education initiatives through reflection on their own experiences which remains a gap in the literature. Cahill & Hart (2007), from their work of engagement with Youth participation since the Convention on the Rights of the Child was introduced, highlight a key question for research: “How adults might support and facilitate young people’s participation in change?” (p. 217). The design of this study created a space for Youth of Color to reflect on their experiences and it is my hope that in documenting the journey of Youth involved in emancipatory education initiatives adults might better understand Youth and create spaces to promote Youth participation and their visions for social change.

### **Genre of Phenomenology**

This study employed the genre of phenomenology which focuses on exploring the individual’s subjective experience (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2019; Wertz, 2005). Mertens (2020) describes the phenomenological approach as designed to “seek the individual’s perceptions and meanings of a phenomenon or experience and calls upon the researcher to suspend theories, explanations, hypotheses, and conceptualizations to be able to understand the phenomena” as the individual has interpreted it (p. 255). This genre was most fitting for the research question of this study, which focused on the meaning-making of *how lived experiences of emancipatory education initiatives inform and reflect the processes through which Youth of*

*Color make meaning of their identity and form a sense of agency.* Patton (2002) describes phenomenological research as typically exploring the “meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people” (as cited in Mertens, 2020, p. 255). In this study, I explored the meaning and essence of the experience of participating in emancipatory education initiatives that Youth of Color shared through the guided interview process.

Phenomenology traces its roots to philosophy and the exploration of how the human experience can be articulated and how meaning is ascribed to it (see, Husserl, 1913, 2014; Schutz, 1971; Van Manen & Van Manen, 2021), and thus phenomenological research is characterized by the investigation of “how individuals create and understand their own life spaces” (Mertens, 2020, p. 255). Scholars consider phenomenology to be the philosophical base for interpretive research strategies, and the key distinction in phenomenological research is that the subjective experience of the participants is given primacy in the inquiry (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Mertens, 2020).

In applying the philosophical tenets of phenomenology (see, Gubrium and Holstein, 2000; Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1956; Schutz, 1967; Van Manen, 1990, 2016) to frame a research approach, Seidman (2019) identifies four themes of phenomenology that inform his classic model of the three-interview series. I followed Seidman’s model in this study. The process for the interviews themselves will be discussed in the methods section, and here I share the four themes Seidman identifies and indicate their relevance to this study.

#### **Four Phenomenological Themes**

The first phenomenological theme defines the nature of human experience as “temporal and transitory” (Seidman, 2019, p. 16). This poses a challenge for the researcher in that the

exact experience cannot be relived and is not permanent, so the researcher guides the participant to “reconstruct and reflect on their experience [to] search again for the essence of their lived experience” (Seidman, 2019, p. 17). It is this essence of the lived experience that informs the meaning the participant makes of the experience itself and applies to other issues in their lives. For example, in my study, it is Youth’s formation of a sense of identity and agency.

In the second phenomenological theme, Seidman (2019) emphasizes that it is the participant’s understanding the researcher seeks. As Schutz (1967) described, the researcher “strives to understand a person’s experience from their point of view” (as cited in Seidman, 2019, p. 17).

The third phenomenological theme establishes the “lived experience as the foundation of ‘phenomena’” (Seidman, 2019, p. 18). This theme introduces several complications for the researcher: what is lived experience? (Schutz, 1967); how can we reconstruct the essence of the experience? (Van Manen, 1990); and how can we reconstitute an experience through language alone when it is comprised through all of our senses? (Van Manen, 1990). Seidman (2019) defines lived experience as “our actions, our observations, our seeing, feeling, hearing... the events of our day that we often take for granted and normally do not call to mind” (p. 22). Through the phenomenological research approach, in this study Youth of Color were guided to narrate their lived experiences and then reflect on the meaning they took from them. In the methods section, I will present how the interview structure sought to address these complexities.

The fourth phenomenological theme addresses the issue of “meaning and meaning in context” (Seidman, 2019, p. 19). This is critical to phenomenological research and drives the structure of the third interview. Seidman (2019) refers to Van Manen (1990) in articulating that “phenomenology, because it is the descriptive study of lived experience, is the attempt to enrich

lived experience by mining its meaning” (p. 19). This theme calls upon the researcher to engage the participant in casting an “intentional gaze” (Schutz, 1967, pp. 71-72) to deliberately reflect on the meaning of their experience. This theme also highlights that meaning must be understood in the context of the individual’s experience which also contributes to the design of the interview structure in which the participant is guided to describe the context of their experience.

### **Site and Participant Sampling**

Providence served as the site for this research as Youth were involved in a significant number of non-formal educational initiatives that were emancipatory in nature. The emancipatory educational initiatives fell into the category of non-formal education that occurs within the Youth-led third space, described by scholars (Anzaldua, 1987/2021; Bhabha, 1994/2002; Soja, 1996) as spaces grounded in communities that contest systemic frames of oppression and that encourage imagining “new ways of learning and being” (Anderson, et al, 2023). Examples of these activities included trainings (e.g., restorative justice) and awareness events (e.g., Transgender Remembrance Day). Youth of Color also engaged in initiatives that sought to change either the content or form of formal education, often through campaigns, rallies, or other mobilization of Youth. This included campaigns for content changes in the curriculum of Providence public schools, such as the inclusion of Ethnic Studies and Civics Education, where Providence Youth filed a legal suit against the Governor of RI. Key initiatives that are linked to a search for freedom include the campaign for *Counselors not Cops* in schools to disrupt the school to prison pipeline, and the implementation of a new lockdown procedure that would make students feel more empowered. During the period of this study there were at least two campaigns that represented the efforts of Youth of Color to engage with formal education structures, and many non-formal educational activities undertaken in “third spaces”

within and between Youth organizations that addressed the issue of individual identity and systemic meaning-making.

Given this study focused specifically on Youth of Color ages 14-18 and the educational initiatives they designed for social justice, I applied non-probability, more specifically purposive, sampling. Cohen et al. (2018) describe this sampling approach as “the researcher targeting a particular group, in full knowledge that it does not represent the wider population; it simply represents itself” (p. 217). This approach was consistent with the phenomenological research approach and my research question. Given the study’s focus on emancipatory educational initiatives I sought participants that had experience in these initiatives. Within the group of Youth of Color in the Providence area involved in non-formal education, I selected five high school participants with characteristics that reflected the demographic composition of Youth in the Providence school system, which was primarily LatinX, Black, and Asian and has a high representation of immigrant populations. Through the purposive sampling, I attempted to establish a balance within the age-range, across gender (male, female, and non-binary), race, and ethnicity, but ultimately the five participants each identified as Black, multicultural females with immigrant backgrounds. Secondary level characteristics included the emancipatory initiatives they had been involved in and membership in Youth groups. Participants had been involved in a variety of emancipatory initiatives and their participation in common campaigns and coalitions allowed for comparison of perspectives. The five participants were members of three Youth-led groups in Providence (Providence Student Union, Young Voices, and Youth in Action) and had been members of those organizations from two to four years.

To recruit participants for the study, I initially reached out to Youth-led organizations that have been active in emancipatory education, explained my research study to them, and requested



an informal meeting with their members to share further information about the project and invite participants to the study. This resulted in two meetings with Youth-led organizations where I shared details (including details of participant and parental consent) of the study with Youth, and one organization that reviewed the information on the project and recommended Youth members to contact me directly. Once Youth expressed interest, I shared the consent forms with them and scheduled interviews once both the participant and parental consent were received. I chose to recruit Youth through Youth-led organizations both to protect Youth from isolated contact and to increase the probability of participant experience in emancipatory educational initiatives.

### **Methods of Data Collection**

To better understand the meaning Youth of Color made from their experiences in emancipatory education initiatives, this study employed a phenomenological approach consisting of a series of three in-depth, interviews of approximately 90 minutes each as outlined by Seidman (2019). In this method, multiple interviews (totaling roughly four and a half hours) with each participant over a span of five to fourteen days enabled me to better understand the context of the participants' experiences. Consistent with Seidman's (2019) description, the series of interviews enabled "both the interviewer and the participant to explore the participant's experience, place it in context, and reflect on its meaning" (Seidman, 2019, p. 21). The three-part interview series is a significant time commitment for participants and Seidman (2019) offers provisional approaches for condensing the series into two interviews. I was fortunate to be able to conduct three full interviews with each of the participants.

The semi-structured design of the interviews addressed the four phenomenological themes discussed above and enabled contextual and narrative data for comparison of patterns and

emerging themes both with each participant and between participants in the study. Seidman (2019) describes the three interviews as follows:

The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (p. 21)

As such, there is not a linear link between each interview and the research questions that guided this study. Instead, the context of the life history of the participant and the details of the lived experience were explored in the first two interviews. I reviewed the transcripts from the first two interviews for participant references to the themes of my research (identity, agency, and emancipatory education) and summarized their references to these themes and other salient themes that emerged at the beginning of the third interview. Building on their previous interviews, in the third interview participants were guided to reflect on the meaning they made from their experiences.

Sharing the summary of my interpretation of interview themes from the first two interviews became an important moment in which I could validate my interpretation and participants built trust in my capacity to listen and hear what they were saying. In most cases identifying the themes led to further elaboration and additional examples by the participants. I used direct quotes from the interviews and shared phrases they had repeated to check my understanding. Participants seemed happy to engage in discussions to clarify their position, or in some cases, share they had reflected further after the interviews and offered additional interpretations or even changed their position. In essence, the dialogue at the beginning of the third interview became an opportunity for member-checking with the participants.

**The First Interview: Life History**

The first interview fixes the phenomena of interest as a point of arrival and asks the participant “how they came to be participating in the program” (Seidman, 2019, p. 22). Seidman (2019) emphasizes that the use of “how” instead of “why” encourages the participant to reconstruct experiences in their lives, or “constitutive events,” they experienced in their community, school, and with friends or family, that led them to participate in the phenomena. In the first interview, I focused on participant engagement in emancipatory education initiatives as the destination of the interview, and asked the participants to select one of their emancipatory activities and share how they came to be engaged in it. The first interview provided important contextual information relating to the fourth theme of phenomenology to facilitate the interpretation of meaning within the context of the participant’s life (Seidman, 2019). I was surprised at the range of motivations from acutely remembered experiences of injustice to seemingly fortuitous engagement through a friend’s insistence.

**The Second Interview: Details of the Lived Experience**

Van Manen (2016) notes that the transitory nature of lived experiences and the need to translate them into language when they are experienced through all the senses complicates the task of the phenomenological researcher. The second interview guided the participants to recount how they felt during their experience of participating in an emancipatory educational initiative. Seidman (2019) advised that “we do not ask for opinions but rather details of their experience” (p. 22). What did they see, hear, and feel? Descriptions of the scene are also important to capture elements of where the events took place, who was present, what was the relationship with different people in the space, and the power dynamics the participant felt. The actions participants took are also part of the reconstruction of their involvement in emancipatory

education initiatives. This interview captured the lived experience – “that yet-unreflected-upon-experience that makes up their days” (Seidman, 2019, p. 23). In this interview I asked participants to draw on all their senses to reconstruct how they felt participating in emancipatory educational initiatives. I found that contrary to Seidman’s description of ‘yet-unreflected-upon-experiences,’ participants often shared extensive reflections on their experiences. A significant part of the interviews included sharing how their reflections guided their experiences in emancipatory learning and agency. The interviews provided what some participants termed a rare opportunity to articulate their reflections. This dynamic may have been influenced by the concurrent COVID restrictions, which presented unique conditions (disruptive events and isolation) for reflection.

### **The Third Interview: Reflection on the Meaning**

The third interview built on the first two in a process Van Manen (2016) describes as “discovering the extraordinary” in the re-construction of the ordinary (as cited in Seidman, 2019, p. 23). I take exception to the term of ‘discovery’ and its echoes of colonialism. Rather, my experience as a researcher was one of learning and building my understanding of the ‘extraordinary’ experiences and agency of Youth. Building my understanding through the interviews required me to be attentive to the elements of the previous interviews and facilitate a thoughtful reflection by the participants on the experiences they shared in the second interview and tapping into the context they shared in the first interview of how they came to be involved in the emancipatory educational initiatives. Seidman (2019) described a more active role for the researcher in this phase in which they “encourage participants to step out of the stream of everyday occurrences, pause, and reflect on what their experiences meant to them” (Seidman, 2019, p. 23). I reviewed the first two interview transcripts before embarking on the third

interview and gently guided the participants to focus on themes that had emerged in the first two interviews related to identity, agency, and emancipatory education. Seidman (2019) noted that a relationship builds between the participant and researcher through the time spent together in the three interviews and the conversations around organizing them. I found this to be true, particularly with graduating seniors who were hearing back on their college applications during the time of the interviews. The recognition of the elements of trust and power highlighted in the Transformative Paradigm (Mertens, 2020) guided me in posing the interview questions for this study based on participant reflections and respecting the participants' process of meaning-making.

### **Interview Logistics**

Pragmatic and logistical concerns in organizing the interviews were driven by participant convenience and access (Cohen et al., 2018) to facilitate participant autonomy and retention over the period of the study and the opportunity for rich data collection. Participants felt comfortable at public library meeting rooms where privacy could be maintained. Almost two-thirds of the interviews took place virtually, which saved time in travel. Participants were able to find places to connect that afforded them privacy and, in some cases, moved to a different room or paused the interview as needed. Interviews in-person were audio recorded. Virtual interviews were audio- and video-recorded on Zoom.

Participants texted with me to confirm their availability for the three interviews, and I was able to conduct three interviews over a period of 12 to 14 days (though one participant completed the three interviews over five days) during March-June of 2023. Interviews with the first four participants occurred between March and early May with some overlaps between participants. The fifth participant was interviewed mid-June. It is common practice amongst

Youth Organizations in Providence to recognize the time (up to four and a half hours in this case) and contributions of Youth, so consistent with this practice, I gave a stipend of \$100 to each participant at the third interview.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The principles of ethical research guided this study. First and foremost, I was cognizant of the risk of contributing to systemic racism. Tuck & Yang (2014b) critiqued sociological research and the primacy of voice in qualitative research to be fixated on the pain of disenfranchised groups (see also hooks, 1990; Youngblood Jackson & Mazzei, 2009). Tuck (2010) posited the antidote to this approach as a *desire-based framework* which invites the participant to speak “not only [of] the painful elements of social and psychic realities, but also the textured acumen and hope” (Tuck, 2010, p. 644). Conscious of the overuse of pain narratives, this research focused on their experience of emancipatory educational initiatives Youth led and participated in exercising power and agency.

This research adhered to the three principles of ethical research: respect for persons; beneficence; and justice (Bailey, 2021). Respect for persons was incorporated into the design of the research through informed consent and voluntary participation in the study. The phenomenological approach respects and values participant experiences and the meaning they make of their experiences. Every effort was made to maintain the beneficence of the research with the guiding principle of “do no harm” (Bailey, 2021), and research design and implementation decisions were made to maximize the potential benefits of the research and to minimize possible harm. In fact, many participants stated they enjoyed the process of the interviews sharing they really liked the questions, and they appreciated the space to think and

reflect on their experiences. There were no problems or changes in the research or characteristics of participants that merited reporting to the IRB.

### **Respect for Persons**

Children 14-17 are considered a vulnerable population in social and behavioral research, as such parental consent for their participation in the research was required. However, given the importance of Youth leadership activities, I mindfully included this age range as they are active in social justice issues, and this is a formative period in their meaning-making around identity and understanding of systemic oppression. Informed consent was implemented to provide information on the study, ensure the participants understand the research purpose and process, provide sufficient time for them to decide on their participation, and inform them they can withdraw from the study at any time with no repercussions in accordance with standards for social and behavioral research (Bailey, 2021). I also held informal meetings with Youth to explain the objective of my research and the content of the consent (parent/guardian) forms, and assent (Youth participant) forms. This double-layered process ensured protection for children, a vulnerable population, while also giving them the information and power to decide on their participation in the research.

### **Beneficence - Do No Harm**

Buchanan & Warwick (2021) discuss potential harm in educational research noting the importance of understanding the temporality of harm in that it can occur during or after the research. They note that much of the literature on harm in educational research is focused on participants with mental disabilities and posit a more general working definition of harm within educational research as:

anything which may cause distress to a participant as a result of taking part in a research project. This may be prompted by hidden or suppressed feelings or memories being uncovered as well as the participant becoming concerned about matters that are raised in the interview or worries afterwards, about what they shared. (Buchanan & Warwick, 2021, p 1092)

In the beginning of the interviews I told participants we could take a break at any time and reminded them of this during the interviews as needed. In describing their experiences, feelings of frustration, anger, vulnerability, and sadness as well as hope and joy emerged. I acknowledged and validated these feelings, holding space for them to be expressed and heard. I also included links to counseling services in both the consent and assent letters as a resource for participants or parents.

An important ethical consideration was that Youth of Color are a highly publicly surveilled population (for example, by police and Immigration and Customs Enforcement). Decisions on meeting places, informed consent, data management, and data analysis were taken to mitigate surveillance risks to participants with an understanding of the generally extractive and controlling nature of data collection from this population. Aspects of their identities, such as sexuality, gender identification and documentation status, were protected by ensuring their identity was not revealed by anonymizing data and contextual details where necessary. Video recordings of virtual meetings were transcribed with annotations of non-verbal communication (e.g., tone, body language). The transcriptions were stored in password-protected files and the video footage of interviews were deleted, once the transcription was edited, to protect the privacy of participants. The privacy of participants, particularly in areas of vulnerability, was protected



through utilizing pseudonyms they selected for themselves and securing the data on a password-protected computer.

### **Justice**

Criteria for the selection of participants was shared with participants, and participants were treated with respect. The interview guide was applied consistently across participants. The participants were asked to engage in over four hours of interviews, but the burden of this was mitigated through the compensation. These were the main issues of justice in this study as there were no services being withheld or differential treatment to participants.

### **Researcher Positionality**

Given how my own experiences shape the empathy I feel for Youth of Color and immigrant Youth (both in terms of my background and in having worked with marginalized populations in many of the countries they are from), the transformative approach (Mertens, 2020) of this research envisions that the results of the process will further social justice and be relevant to Youth. I also subscribe to the research justice position of radical love (Jolivéte, 2015), an approach that “requires that we see research participants as members of our family and not as a group of study participants or sets of data” (p. 25). In a research justice approach, the researcher deliberately works with participants to propel social transformation towards justice, which is an approach that I have taken throughout my career in child-centered human rights work internationally and have applied to this research.

I have been a board member of the Providence Student Union (PSU) over the last three years. In the context of a Youth-led organization, the board has fiduciary and fundraising responsibilities, but the programs are identified by the Youth with support of staff and board members. This position has provided me insight into the campaigns and educational actions

Youth design and participate in and enabled me to get to know some of the Youth better. Two of the five participants in this study are members of PSU, however, given the rich nexus of coalition work in Youth social justice work in Providence, participants were familiar with each of the three organizations participants were members of. I am conscious of the “arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating” (The Anti-Oppression Network, 2021) my understanding of social issues demanded of allyship, both in my role as a researcher and as a board member, and parent of Youth. For example, Youth perspectives have challenged my own upbringing and understanding of power relations between Youth and adults in non-formal and formal educational settings and I have had to re-evaluate the purpose and intention of power relations at an individual and systemic level.

### **Trustworthiness**

There is significant scholarly attention dedicated to how the validity of qualitative studies should be determined, with substantial agreement that the positivist criteria for assessing the validity of quantitative studies are not appropriate for qualitative studies and scholars suggest instead the use of the concept of trustworthiness (see, Ary et al., 2002; Hammersley, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polkinghorne; 2007; Tracy, 2010). Trustworthiness in qualitative research includes the components of member checking, critical reflexivity, triangulation, and peer debriefing.

Member-checking addresses the element of co-construction of knowledge that occurs between the participant and the researcher and demands the constant process of confirmation of interpretations with the participants to “illuminate a better representation of the lived experience of the participants being studied” (Mertens, 2020, p. 287). I undertook this process both during the interviews (particularly at the beginning of the third interview as described below) and in

sharing the complete findings chapters with the participants asking them to review the quotes attributed to them and the interpretations I made. Each of the participants responded to the final draft of the findings chapters. There were no suggestions for changes or withdrawals of quotes and participants were generally excited about the results.

The learning and reflection process of the researcher is another important component of trustworthiness. Mertens (2020) describes critical reflexivity as the process through which the researcher: “openly expresses how his or her own subjectivity has progressively been challenged and thus transformed as he or she collaboratively interacts with his or her participants” (p. 287). I memoed as I interviewed and analyzed the data and discovered both my own learning journey and those of the participants. I was mindful of how my interviews with individual participants might impact the others and did not perform the analysis of the third interviews (meaning-making) until I had completed the full series of interviews with the other participants. I also reflected upon and acknowledged the relationship that developed with participants over the course of the three interviews and logistical discussions and my service as a member of the Providence Student Union board.

Additionally, triangulation was done between the three interviews for each participant and across participants in the study. Multivocality was captured across the perspectives of multiple participants and through multiple, in-depth interviews. Last but not least, peer-debriefing was undertaken with advisors and colleagues in the field of global education who were able to critique the application of the research design, methods, process, and results of the data collection and analysis.

In addition to the above strategies applied in qualitative research, I drew on Seidman’s (2019) four elements through which the trustworthiness of phenomenological research may be

assessed: authenticity; internal and external consistency; relation or connections to the broader field of inquiry; and relation or connection to literature on the topic of inquiry.

### **Authenticity**

Authenticity can be assessed through the form and content of the participant's narrative. Seidman (2019) notes that observing the "syntax, diction, and even nonverbal aspects" of the narrative helps the researcher determine if the participant is engaging in a process of discovery and learning (p. 31). I observed the syntax and the non-verbal aspects of communication during the interviews and found what the participants said was "true for her at the time she is saying it" (Seidman, 2019, p. 30). I captured reflections and observations on the interviews as part of my analysis of transcripts and memoing after interviewing. Participants were authentic during the interviews, sometimes hesitating to find the correct wording to express their experiences and particularly their interpretation of these experiences. Furthermore, participants referred to things they had said in prior interviews, reflecting upon and sometimes even reinterpreting the meaning of their experiences.

### **Internal and External Consistency**

Seidman (2019) described several factors in the interview design that contribute to evaluating internal and external consistency. I followed the recommendation to conduct three interviews over a span of two to three weeks to control for idiosyncrasies that might be related to an event during the time of one of the interviews. Conducting the interviews over 12-14 days maintained a good rhythm to the interviews while also giving participants a few days to reflect in between interviews and manage their other commitments. Over the course of the interviews the participants and I built relationships by organizing meetings and in some cases giving participants rides to and from the interview location. The descriptions shared through the

interviews (particularly the first and second) enabled me to observe whether participants are internally consistent in what they shared through the questions posed over time. I found the participants to be internally consistent with the experiences they recounted and the factors that led them into emancipatory educational initiatives. I observed themes in which the participants were clear, and they noted areas (such as identity in some cases) they wanted to explore and understand better. The contextual interviews were important to understand participant engagement. For example, references to parents and adults who limited their participation in marches to protect them during COVID and the Black Lives Matters protests.

During the interviews I deliberately held silences so as not to impose my views and give participants time to collect and articulate their perspectives. Some interviews required more follow-up questions, whereas other participants would speak for seven or eight minutes based on the initial prompt. The differing length of engagement and membership in different organizations and participation in different emancipatory educational initiatives lent itself to comparative analysis across participants and contributed to understanding the external consistency of the experiences shared by individual participants. For example, participants played different roles in the same rally or walk-out, thus providing multiple perspectives on Youth agency in the same event.

### **Relating to the Broader Field**

Seidman (2019) discusses the relation to the broader field aspect of validity as whether the researcher learns something about the field from the participants' perspectives. This relates to the process of bracketing discussed previously in which the researcher holds their own ideas in abeyance and attempts to understand the experience from the perspective of the participants. Seidman's (2019) comment on an interview excerpt illustrates this concept, "I learned something

both about this particular student and about an aspect of the student teaching experience that had not really been apparent to me” (p. 30). Once the view of the participant is understood, it can then be compared to the dynamics in the field of inquiry and may validate or catalyze new learning or understanding of the field. One example of when I experienced this was around participant experiences of doing their own research on topics that interested them. I learned about the interests and the approach to research individual participants undertook which hadn't been fully apparent to me and related this to better understand the dimension of Youth learning beyond formal education.

### **Relation to Literature in the Field**

Finally, Seidman (2019) referred to connections the participant perspectives may have to literature in the field. In other words, the participants' perspectives may relate to “broader discourse on the issue” in literature (p. 30). The structured interview process with multiple participants enabled comparison of the data to identify emerging themes (Seidman, 2019) and compare them to literature in the field to identify how participant perspectives might validate or contribute new dimensions to current literature, and potentially suggest new theoretical approaches. Participants in this study raised themes that resonated with the literature in the field, such as structural and developmental barriers associated with the societal positioning of Youth. Participants also furthered themes of Youth resistance and transformation in their focus on creating spaces for agency to address social justice issues for future generations.

### **Multicultural Validity**

Given that participants in this study are Youth of Color who represent various cultural identities I critically reflected on the multicultural validity of my analysis. Kirkhart (2005) introduces, the term “multicultural validity” to capture “the correctness or authenticity of

understandings across multiple, intersecting cultural contexts” (p. 22). I held some identities in common with the participants being multicultural and from an immigrant background, but did not share others, such as being Black and the contextual experience of their lives as Youth of Color in Providence during the time of the study. Multicultural validity is a function of the relationship the researcher forms with the participant and the experiences the participants share. I listened carefully to the words participants used and the experiences they shared and validated the themes I identified with them. This informed my critical reflections of the application of theories in my data analysis and hyper-reflexivity of the interpretations I made of the lived experiences Youth shared. I was also sensitive to the cultural appropriateness of the application of research methods (Kirkhart, 2005), for example the power distance between Youth and adults in various cultures. I invited peer feedback to assess multicultural validity in addition to the other measures of trustworthiness, such as member checking and critical reflexivity.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

This study consisted of 15 interviews of over an hour which generated significant data. It was critical that the design for the process of data management met ethical standards and also provided a pragmatic system for data analysis. The data analysis itself was designed to be congruent with the primacy of participant voices and the ethical principle of justice which aligns with both the transformative paradigm and my research question.

### **Data Management**

In this study I recorded the interviews, transcribed them using Trint software, and then edited the transcripts for accuracy (Cohen, et al., 2018) by replaying the recording as I read the transcript. In interviews conducted virtually through Zoom, I recorded both voice and image. During transcription I de-identified participants utilizing pseudonyms they chose. Original

sound recordings were stored using pseudonyms, and video recordings were utilized to verify and annotate the transcription, then deleted. Transcripts were labeled with a date and pseudonyms, and a copy of the pseudonym key was stored in a password-protected file.

I printed the transcripts and hand-coded them selecting colors for the emerging themes. This process enabled me to annotate the transcripts with my observations and reactions while re-reading them. The annotations enabled written analysis and memoing. Organizing the printed transcripts in a binder facilitated my thematic color-coding and annotating, and also maintained a physical presence of the participant interviews. This helped in grounding my process of critical reflection and analysis. Once the transcripts were coded in hard copy, I entered the coding into NVivo software. I utilized NVivo to compare coding between participants and to call up quotes under different themes. The files in NVivo were organized by pseudonyms of participants and interview number (first, second or third). NVivo made it possible for me to access the content of the transcripts by various categories including theme, date, and de-identified participants.

### **Data Analysis**

The phenomenological approach to research maintains the primacy of the participants' experiences and the meaning they make of these experiences. To achieve this understanding of the participants' experience, the researcher must deliberately "bracket," or "hold one's own ideas in abeyance" (Willes et al., 2016, as cited in Mertens, 2020, p. 463), this includes the researcher's theoretical explanations and personal experiences. As described above, the series of three interviews demanded I transcribe and review the first two interviews for each participant to summarize emerging themes before the third interview. This was critical for building trust with the participants and gave me the opportunity to interview, edit the transcription (while listening to the interview), and analyze the interview transcripts within a week, building strong familiarity



with the data. I transcribed the third interviews shortly after they occurred and wrote memos capturing my observations of the participants and the emerging themes of their interviews. However, I did not analyze the data from the third interviews in detail until I completed all three interviews with the first four participants (the fifth participant was interviewed a month after the first four). I chose this approach to temper the influence that deep analysis of one participant might have on the others. This helped me focus my attention on the themes that emerged from each participant in the first two interviews as I undertook the third and reviewing the final interviews (covering meaning-making) together was also helpful to my analysis.

The primacy of Youth voice in my study and the genre of phenomenology indicated the application of inductive coding, an approach that “spontaneously creates original codes the first-time data are reviewed” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 41). I facilitated this by using in-vivo coding, or direct quotes from participants “to keep the data rooted in the participant’s own language” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 11). The process of *in-vivo* coding was iterative between participant transcripts as I developed a list of *in-vivo* codes from each participant and then reviewed the other participant transcripts to see if they had said something similar or contradictory to the *in-vivo* codes of their peers. After several rounds of *in-vivo* (identifying quotes by participants that can be used as codes) and inductive coding, I applied deductive coding to identify the themes laid out in my research question (identity, agency, and emancipatory education). Saldaña (2021) discusses additional coding approaches (descriptive, simultaneous, comparison, versus, pairing) that were useful in identifying patterns and themes across interviews in my initial analysis.

Once I had coded the printed copies of the transcripts I analyzed the data from three approaches. First, I built on the analysis of data by participant that I had begun with the first and second interviews. I analyzed all three transcripts from each participant to identify the

predominant themes inductively, and then deductively analyzed and wrote a memo on how each participant responded to the themes of identity, agency, and freedom. The second approach was a thematic approach in which I defined each theme based on the *in-vivo* coding from participants and wrote a memo on how the participants had responded to each theme. Finally, I analyzed how the themes responded to the research question (and sub-questions) of the study and wrote memos around each of the research questions. Through this process, a storyline of the data eventually emerged that embodied the participant perspectives, the themes, and responses to the research questions.

Once the coding was established, I uploaded the files to NVivo software and coded them in the program so that I could easily access coded data by participant or theme or combinations thereof. I utilized prompts Saldaña (2021) offers to write analytical memos, including a descriptive summary; reflections on what I found intriguing, surprising, or disturbing; an analysis of how the data related to my research question; and reflections on how the transcript related to theory.

## **Delimitations and Limitations**

### **Delimitations**

I confined this study to Providence, Rhode Island and invited Youth of Color who have experience in participating in non-formal education initiatives. I further delimited the study to educational initiatives that have an emancipatory nature or seek justice and enable Youth to show up holistically. My purposive selection of Youth who participated in emancipatory initiatives limited my ability to capture the perspective of Youth who are not involved in these activities which would be an interesting line of inquiry, but not one that was undertaken in this study. In choosing a phenomenological research approach, I opted for in-depth interviews with five

participants over a broader survey approach that could have included more respondents but not have the same depth. The research question sought to understand the meaning Youth of Color make of their experience in emancipatory educational initiatives which gives primacy to the participants' experiences as opposed to focusing on specific campaigns, for example, civic or ethnic education, and interrogating Youth within the confines of those initiatives.

### **Limitations**

Although the research question focuses on the processes of meaning-making of Youth of Color, Youth do not operate in isolation and may be influenced by different organizations. Although this might be seen as a limitation unduly influencing Youth of Color voice and perspective, I believe Youth of Color are influenced by many different actors and sources of information, including social media, and exercise discernment. As critical thinkers, they listen to various points of view, research issues of interest, speak to peers, and assess and reassess their positions on different issues. Hence, influence from any one group need not be seen as prejudicial but rather offer an opportunity to see the ideas that participants take from their interaction with that group. Four Youth-led organizations in Providence were approached for participant recruitment and three of these were represented in the sample and participants articulated the cross-fertilization that occurs through coalition work between Youth organizations in Providence and individual Youth who are active in various groups.

The participants in my study were all Black females from different cultural backgrounds. Although I would have liked to have had more male perspectives, many of the Youth-led organizations in Providence are predominantly female. Four of the five attended the elite public high school in Providence. There was a good balance across age (15-18) immigrant and ethnic backgrounds, and a variety of participation in emancipatory educational initiatives and

membership in Youth-led organizations. The five participants provided a balance of similarities and differences that lent credibility to the analysis of the phenomenon and the study itself.

## **Chapter 5: Identity in a Time of Disruption**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will present three themes to explore how Youth articulate the simultaneous experience of defining their own identity while also seeking to understand and contest societal systems that define and affect them. The first theme focuses on how Youth deliberately navigated and explored various identities in different spaces and understood the systemic influences in how they were seen in society and the opportunities available to them. The second theme reveals that the confluent disruptive events Youth experienced, the combination of COVID restrictions and the Black Lives Matters protests, proffered a new array of choices and time for Youth to ruminate on how they felt about and understood issues unfolding in society and people's (including Youth) reactions to those issues. The third theme demonstrates that Youth contested the absence of their identity and issues they cared about in the school curriculum, in the classroom, and through personal learning journeys in which they researched and reflected on issues of their choice and sought discussions with like-minded Youth.

### **Context and Characteristics of Participants**

High school age (15-18) and involvement in emancipatory education initiatives were criteria for selecting participants and they each associated with a Youth-led organization. During 2020-2023, each of the participants had experienced the disruption of their interactions in school spaces due to COVID restrictions and the Black Lives Matters protests during their time in high school. Each of them responded to these events differently, but for each the disruption caused by these confluent events offered new choices around school attendance such as: Would they watch Netflix or the news while they virtually attended classes? Or, would they avail themselves of the alternate day school attendance or remain remote? In the isolation resulting from COVID

restrictions, participants watched the news coverage and social media response to the murders committed by police and the resulting protests and grappled with the meaning of these incidents. Participants sought to learn more about these incidents, witnessed the uprisings, researched historical events and responses, and contested how school addressed these issues.

Table 2: Summary of Participant Characteristics and the ensuing discussion provide context around key characteristics that influenced participant meaning-making.

**Table 2**

*Summary of Participant Characteristics*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age, Grade in High School</b>	<b>Race, Ethnicity, Pronouns</b>	<b>Youth Organization</b>	<b>Pivotal Moment</b>	<b>High School</b>	<b>Emancipatory Activity of focus</b>
<b>Stella</b>	Age18 Senior	Black Panamanian Bajan Indian she /they	PSU	George Floyd murder and COVID ruminations	Classical	Class Rank Campaign- Various initiatives: Know your Rights, Counselors Not Cops, conferences
<b>Cathy</b>	Age15 Junior	Black, Nigerian-American she/hers	Youth in Action	Found the Counselors Not Cops campaign and walk out on social media	Classical	Counselors not Cops walkout
<b>Ayo</b>	Age15 Sophomore	Black, Nigerian-American, she/hers	Young Voices	Friend asked her to join	Classical	Campaign for Ethnic Studies and Multi-Lingual Learners
<b>Hillary</b>	Age 17 Senior	Black, Nigerian-American, she/they	Youth in Action	Liked a boy	Classical	Youth in Action Program Leader
<b>Lilian</b>	Age17 Senior	Black Haitian Cuban	PSU	Parkland Shooting	Providence Career and	Counselors Not Cops

		Vietnamese Maori Italian she/they			Technical Academy	Action and Walk out- Various Initiatives: Denim Day, Know Your Rights, conference.
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The five participants interviewed for this study ranged in age from 15 to 18 (two were 15, two were 17, and one was 18). Three of them were graduating high school seniors and had just confirmed the colleges they would attend, and the other two were in their sophomore and junior years. Psychologists identify adolescence as a period of transition into increased independence (Hartley & Somerville, 2015). The interviews conducted in this study reflected this transition as Youth described processes of exercising their independence as they explored their identity and engaged in learning and exercising agency.

Four of the five participants attended Classical High School, the elite school in the Providence Public School System. The participants from Classical embraced the competition and prestige of their school while simultaneously understanding its elitism and the specious promises it made for their success. Th experience of the opportunities Classical offered was tempered by their realization that from the fifth grade they had been labeled as “advanced” students, and their peers who were labeled as “regular” did not attend schools of the same quality.

Participants’ age and year in high school influenced how they experienced emancipatory educational initiatives and the meaning they extrapolated from them. Each of the participants was Black-presenting. Their ethnic backgrounds varied from three Nigerian-Americans (one of whom had lived in Nigeria until she was eight, another who had come here as a baby), and two

participants who expressed difficulty in ‘ticking a box’ given the multicultural nature of their families (Cuban, Haitian, Vietnamese, Panamanian, Bajan, Liberian). For each participant, their immigrant heritage was a defining component of their identity and how people perceived them, and this ranged from the participant who had immigrated with her parents to the U.S. to others who spoke of their grandparents having immigrated to the U.S.

The length and extent of participation in Youth-led emancipatory education initiatives shaped participant experiences and reflections on identity and agency. The Youth involved in this study found expression of what they learned about themselves and social issues in Youth-led organizations. Their descriptions of and reflections on their experiences conveyed the story of their journey in learning and agency, often beginning with understanding themselves, expanding out to make a change to impact others, which in turn impacted their understanding of themselves and their agency as they engaged with others. These journeys were each unique and yet took place in adjacent, if not the same, spaces and shared a common denominator of the desire to make things better for ‘future generations.’

### **The Participants**

The five participants engaged in emancipatory education initiatives touched on the key explorations of this study: making meaning of identity and one’s place within society and the formation of agency in collaboration with peers. Through phenomenological interviews, participants shared their reflections on seeking to understand the world they lived in, including the spaces in which they learned, became, and deepened their understanding of who they were in society and their journey in discovering how they might change the world around them.

#### **Stella**



When I first went to pick Stella up for our interview, her hair was free, she wore high boots and had an air of self-assurance about her. In arranging the interviews, she asked to meet in person because she “loves to talk to people.” This proved to be true in the interviews, she articulated her ideas clearly and spoke at length (often over six minutes in response to questions) without much prompting. Stella had reflected deeply on what she described as her “learning journey.” She applied her critical thinking to analyzing her earlier experiences in light of what she had since learned. For example, she reflected back on how she and her peers were ‘tracked’ into ‘advanced’ and ‘regular’ students in fifth grade, and later understood the inequities in the quality of schools and services each group was offered. This was often difficult, and she described it as ‘sad,’ in that she understood her choice in playing a game that had no guarantees and was probably rigged against her.

Stella was 18 at the time of the interview and was in the process of hearing back from colleges. She was the first in her family to go to college and discussed this in terms of being accountable to the opportunity and to her family. She was concerned about the gatekeeping of knowledge and formal education that limited access of knowledge to some of her friends and family members and often expressed that she wanted to be ‘accountable’ to her learning and not exclude people from information or theories. For example, she shared examples of how she took the time to explain theories she had learned about to her family members and shared the context of issues and political decisions to members of her community. This illustrated her self-awareness and emotional intelligence in nurturing relationships with her peers.

As evidenced through her interview, Stella had led and participated in a wide range of emancipatory educational initiatives. She founded the Equity Group at her high school and was on the Leadership Team in the Providence Student Union, a paid position, designing and

implementing learning and actions on various issues including Counselors Not Cops, and the Student Bill of Rights. She was active in negotiating for student events around issues in her school which are held in school spaces. Stella was a recognized leader in the Youth space in Providence. In fact, several of the other participants in this study referred to her work on various issues. Stella undertook a campaign to address the ranking of students according to their grade point average in her school. Her objection to the Class Rank system was that it reinforced a competitive school environment and discouraged collaboration. In her interviews she explained her rationale and process to address the implementation of class rank illustrating her acumen in assessing the impact of systems on individuals.

### **Cathy**

Cathy impressed me as kind, a bit deferential, and soft-spoken in the interview process, while asserting a quiet strength and clarity around her values and processes. She juggled the interviews with her track practice and would often come to the interviews in her track gear. Our first two meetings were virtual, so I was excited to meet her in person for the third interview. She was much taller than I had imagined, and she was a disc thrower in track so appeared very strong. Cathy carried herself with a graceful strength. She had a passion for topics she did not feel were covered sufficiently in the media such as historical events other than those in Europe, and protests that were happening which she researched on her own.

As Cathy shared her interest in research in our interviews, I would explain aspects of the research process of this study to her. This fostered a collegial element in our relationship where she would describe her research processes to me in terms of seeking different viewpoints and analyzing both the content and the emotional tenor of the different perspectives she explored to establish her position. Cathy was keen to support me as a researcher, for example, reminding me

to come back to a point I said I would, or reassuring me when I paused to gather my thoughts. In reviewing the themes that had emerged from her first two interviews, at one point she turned my notes towards her to make sure we had covered the list.

Cathy skipped a grade and at the time of the interview was 15, but a junior in high school where some of her classmates were 18. Cathy came to this country when she was eight and had clear memories of her school in Nigeria, which included corporal punishment, and her first impressions in school here in the US, where she was shocked by how rude students were to their teachers. This seemed to link to her emphasis on consequences and her heightened awareness of adult power. Cathy's articulation of the transnational experience alerted her to different approaches, and she often contrasted issues to explain them and categorized her experiences in Venn diagrams. She shared that her transnational experience shaped her values and who she was. Despite being soft spoken in our interviews, she shared that she likes to 'stand out' and stands up for what she believes in, particularly when it came to values such as referring to teachers by their last names.

At the end of the third interview, she mentioned the research process had gotten her to think critically about issues in a new way. I observed this in the way she would bring up questions or comments she made from a prior interview and tell me she had reflected more and even elaborated or changed her opinion on the topic. Cathy seemed to be exploring concepts in our discussions which was apparent in how she hesitated in phrasing some statements and at times would explore contradictions in comments she made. Cathy was succinct in her responses which were often under 30 seconds.

Cathy was involved in the Counselor's Not Cops action and walkout, taking a behind the scenes role (creating posters for the March and providing logistical information on social media)

as she felt her parents and her school would not allow her to participate in the march. She had also been involved in Youth in Action and Young Voices and Youth Action Board connected to Youth in Action. Cathy had not yet been as involved in emancipatory education initiatives to the degree of some of the other participants, but she was on her journey and the Youth in Action staff have seen her potential as evidenced by the opportunities they offered her.

### **Ayo**

Ayo had an easy smile and seemed happy to engage in the interview process. As with the other participants, her spirit of collaboration and engagement put me at ease as a researcher. She texted me to arrange interviews and was adaptable and friendly in her texts for the various changes we had to make to scheduling and locations. She wore her hair long and tied back and gestured gracefully as she was speaking to give emphasis and energy to her comments. Ayo was an athlete and she talked about how that gave her patience and persistence. In the interviews on Zoom, Ayo was a thoughtful and concise participant. She was confident and clarified any questions she had, which she later revealed was a strategy she used to learn in Youth spaces such as the Young Voices Board. She would give succinct answers and spoke clearly. Her answers were rarely longer than one minute, and I often felt the need to ask her to expand on them. As we were closing, I shared with her that I felt I had pressed a bit in my questions, but she told me, “You are really good at asking questions, you really made me think.” In citing Ayo’s interview, I have indicated when I prompted her to expound on her answers to capture this dynamic. The fuller answers that emerged from my prompting reflect her process of thinking further on issues she identified.

Ayo was 15 at the time of the interview and was the only sophomore in high school amongst the participants who were juniors or seniors. The quickness with which Ayo engaged in

Youth initiatives is notable. In fact, she shared that people were surprised to hear she was ‘just a sophomore’ when they heard of how many Youth initiatives she was involved in. Her use of the word, ‘we’ in discussing the initiatives she was engaged with demonstrated a sense of community in reference to other students, or, in the context of a campaign, included all the agencies involved. She attended two summer programs and then became part of the Young Voices Board. She described her process of learning on the Board to be in a position to take decisions that matter. In her case, the Governance Committee that set the parameters of who could sit on the Board of Young Voices and term limits. Ayo also quickly learned skills and gained confidence in facilitating Youth from various organizations in the Our Schools Providence (OSPVD) initiative.

When asked what emancipatory education initiative she would like to focus on for this study, Ayo chose her experience of testifying for the inclusion of Ethnic Studies before the RI Congressional committee reviewing the bill. Ayo was involved in the Multi-Lingual Learners Coalition that worked with Providence schools, teachers, and students to include ethnic studies in the school curriculum. She was motivated by not wanting other Youth to feel left out of the history taught at school like she did. She also referenced the implication of having more representation of Youth of Color in classrooms or other meetings and asserted that their presence changed the dynamic, making it harder to disregard their perspectives.

### **Hillary**

The first two interviews with Hillary were virtual and she was at home and wore a hooded sweatshirt. Despite being on zoom she gestured with her hands to clarify and accentuate her comments. Her hair was shoulder length and she wore it naturally. Hillary had shared how she liked to experiment with different styles and looks, including bleaching her eyebrows. This is

how I recognized her when I met her outside the PSU office and drove her to the library where we held the third interview. In an early interview Hillary described meeting new students and being “just that person you’d want to talk to,” and I found this in her warmth and interest in conversations. I’ve experienced various cultural contexts in my work and in my family life, and I have often found a person who understands that I don’t understand the cultural nuances and comes closer to interpret. In some ways, Hillary played that role for me in this group of participants. She was the fourth participant I interviewed and touched on many of the same topics, but more explicitly explained dynamics of race and education. Hillary was 17 and a senior in high school at the time of our interview. As we drove to the final interview, we talked about the different colleges that had accepted her and the factors she was using to select where to attend. As I drove her home from the final interview, she asked about my experience in high school, echoing many of the questions and discussions we had had about her experiences in high school.

Hillary was hired by Youth in Action as a summer program coordinator and shared the experience of being a Youth hired by Youth Organizations which served as an opportunity to develop skills, be positioned as a mentor and leader to younger students, manage resources, and manage agendas for the organizations. The paid positions included decision-making and helped her to build her skills and apply her emotional intelligence to her roles with colleagues and Youth members.

The emancipatory education initiative that emerged in interviews with Hillary was active participation in the Youth in Action organization space as both a student and staff member.

Hillary provided important contextual insight in describing her experience in Youth in Action,

both as a student and as a Program Coordinator for one summer where she organized activities and outings for the Youth.

### **Lilian**

Lilian had expressed interest in participating in this research early on when I spoke with the Youth at PSU. However, as she noted, she was doing “10 million things,” and I was only able to interview her as my last participant. At the time of the interview, Lilian was 18, had just graduated from high school and was about to leave for college. Our interview reflected the excitement of this transition. Lilian has a powerful presence which she carries gracefully without pretension. She also wore hooded sweatshirts for our interviews. I had interacted with Lilian as part of PSU and had seen her participate in a Public Budgeting Meeting and co-lead a Denim Day School Walk-out and March, where I served as a marshal. On both occasions she wielded her power in service of others and exhibited an ease with her role either as a participant or leader. In her leadership of the Denim Day March, I was able to see how she ‘created space for agency’ in her facilitation and support of other Youth who were moved to speak at the event.

At the time of the interviews, Lilian was scheduled to leave for college the following week and was already building community with students there. As with the other seniors I interviewed, this moment of transition was particularly relevant to participants’ contemplation of the meaning of emancipatory education initiatives they planned to take forward into their college experience. The dialogue of my interview with Lilian was layered with the dialogue she had with herself and with others. In her interviews, Lilian often recounted questions she asked herself and quoted statements others made to her or conversations she had with them. These were often followed by, ‘so,’ or ‘because’ to introduce the conclusion she drew from those conversations. This engagement seemed to characterize how she processed and explored ideas.

Lilian has been involved in many emancipatory education initiatives and is widely recognized as a leader in the Providence Youth space. Her participation includes Counselors Not Cops, coalition work around school safety, a pass/fail campaign during COVID, the CROWN (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) Act, the Denim Day march around sexual assault, and participation in campaigns and appointments to Providence School committees to include Ethnic Studies and Civic Studies. These events typically involved Actions, where members of Youth Organizations would organize teach-ins in the Youth organization, or sometimes school spaces. These actions would be accompanied by social media informational campaigns. In some instances, such as Ethnic Studies, Counselors Not Cops, or Denim Day, these educational actions would then include an organized march and walk-out from school, typically marching to the Capitol building or school administration building downtown. Marches were attended by 50 to 500 students from various schools across the city.

Lilian had also organized educational activities for students, testimonies and OpEds on key issues for these and other events that affected her community such as active shooter protocols in schools. She also represented students in committees formed by the RI Department of Education (RIDE) around civics education. Throughout these activities, she deliberately worked to *create spaces for agency* which she articulated as essential to her identity. In fact, this intention was confirmed by Cathy who utilized a space in the Counselors Not Cops campaign as someone who was only able to be involved in the action from behind the scenes and could not participate in the Marches themselves due to adult rules.

Lilian highlighted the impact of COVID lockdowns on community organizing and public events as well as how it affected norms of communication in classes where everyone was on Zoom with their cameras off and not talking. Nonetheless, she described how as a member of the



Leadership Team at PSU, a paid position, she helped organize a Counselors not Cops action and two marches during this time. For these interviews, Lilian chose to focus on the Counselors Not Cops actions and campaigns she led during the period of COVID restrictions.

### **Articulating Identity**

In defining and articulating their identity, participants in the study were clear about the concept of identity and the duality of defining one's own identity whilst interacting with the expectations of others, and society itself, about who they should be. They articulated various dimensions of who they were including the perception of them as Youth, as People of Color, their cultural heritage, and other aspects that defined them such as which school they went to, church and sports activities, and their engagement with Youth-led organizations. Participants also differentiated how they could express their identities in different spaces. These spaces included school, Youth-led spaces, and family or other cultural spaces. Their analysis of these spaces demonstrated an awareness of systemic factors that influenced how they experienced these spaces for example, cultural norms, racism, or meritocracy.

### **Youth Identity**

The category of 'youth' itself is an identity that the participants articulated in terms of societal, and particularly adult, perceptions of them as Youth, and how this informed their interactions in Youth and adult-led spaces and their agency more broadly. As Hillary explained:

I think one thing I've really noticed is that some people really assume that a lot of teenagers are just always doing bad. Like they are never working on anything good, or they are never trying to develop good habits.

This reflection related to the notion of being 'monitored' by adults raised by Ayo, and

the heightened awareness that Cathy and others had regarding spaces, such as school, that were tightly controlled by adult agendas. Hillary contested the negative image of Youth noting, “It’s nice to be around people that challenge the idea that teenagers are always just doing bad things, because they can contribute a lot to the community around them.” This statement hints at a sense of agency in asserting the potential Youth have despite constraints implicit in societal perceptions. Stella articulated the prevalence of an “adultist” attitude, particularly in school:

It's pretty adultist. And it is hard for them to listen to students because it's like, ‘Well, why should I listen to you? Like we grew up in two completely different generations.

You're like barely 18. Like you're about to leave this school. Why should I listen to you?’

Here Stella demonstrated the emotional intelligence characteristic of the participants in explicating the logic behind the attitude she termed “adultist.” The practice of adultism negates the value of Youth perspective and capacity. Stella echoed Hillary’s view of the significance of adult perceptions of Youth and identified the need for strength and agency in combatting adultism:

I feel that way of thinking really needs to be changed. Because if they were more open, I think we could get a lot more done because a lot of campaigns are just people who have really good ideas. But it's a whole other can of worms being able to actually, stand in an idea.

For Providence Youth, this issue moved beyond mere semantics and Youth feeling uncomfortable around adults, to physical threats as they marched for issues. These threats included posting names, schools, and addresses of Youth and mentioning them in podcasts targeted at people who did not support their marches. Lilian described how one podcaster described Youth, as “all these stupid little kids think they know what the hell they’re doing,” and

felt threatened by “just the amount of vulgar language that he was using.” Lilian explicitly drew the connection between Youth identity and the vitriol in response to Youth taking a stand. Threats were not only promulgated through the podcast but were also physically present when counter-protestors screamed vulgarities from across the street as she led the Counselors Not Cops walkout.

### **Immigrant & Cultural Identity**

Of the five participants, two immigrated to the US (one at two and one at eight years old), another was born in the US, though her older siblings were born abroad. The other two participants were second generation immigrants as their parents immigrated to the US, but they were born and raised in the US. The participants felt their immigrant identity influenced how they were perceived in society and choices they made in expressing their identity. Ayo observed that immigrants were perceived as “lesser than” and contested this through speaking up and asking questions. She emphasized that the more immigrant and Black and Brown people in the room, the more their presence had to be reckoned with. Cathy questioned the dominant media messages about immigrants with the lens of ‘what’s missing?’ For example, Cathy observed: “The government talks about immigrants but doesn’t talk very much about why they are coming to our country.” Cathy shared there were common assumptions about immigration linked to illegal residence which made her avoid mentioning her immigrant background in many settings. Cathy described her immigrant identity:

I feel my, like I said before, my immigrant self is a huge part in who I am and just knowing that where I come from, we don't do stuff like this. In trying to like adjust my life style to the more American lifestyle and doing more stuff like you guys do it here.

In this quote, Cathy shows that she utilizes the lens of her immigrant experience and values of her culture in assessing choices life in the United States offers her and is conscious of the differences. Stella conceptualized education and the immigrant experience using Maslow's Hierarchy of needs and was appreciative of the early struggles her family made to bring her to a point where she had her own room, internet, time to think, and the ability to surround herself with a community that prompted her to introspect.

Participants echoed a sense of accountability to family members and previous generations that had made sacrifices to immigrate. For Cathy, the connection to Nigeria is tangible, given that she lived there until she was eight, and she identified that this transnational experience shaped her: "I know if I was born in this country, I would definitely be a different person than I am today." This acknowledgement informed the choices and decisions she made, particularly when faced with choices around her behavior or actions. As Cathy described:

Being that my mom came over here to this country to give me a better future. I always have to have that in the back of my head. 'Is this going to make Mom happy, whatever you do?' I have to think about that.

Stella affirmed this sense of accountability in her gratitude for the life her mother and grandmother offered her. Stella was determined not only to take advantage of the education she was able to access, but also held herself accountable for sharing the knowledge she gained by making what she learned accessible to her family members that didn't have a chance to be exposed to the same ideas through formal education.

Dimensions of immigrant identity became entangled with cultural identity as participants navigated both within home and societal contexts. Cathy reiterated, "I would definitely not be the same person if I were born in the US." She identified moments where her values were

critical to defining how she stood on issues, sometimes as simple as calling her teachers Mr. or Mrs. instead of by their first name as other students did, and she was not afraid to ‘stand out.’

Cathy was aware of the values that drove the choices she could make to fit in.

Definitely my values came in place when I moved into this country. I feel the way I was taught and my personal background, in the way that my mother and father brought me up, I was not willing to jeopardize that for the feeling of being included.

In this statement Cathy attributed her values to her personal background and upbringing, essentially recognizing the choice to immigrate as part of her parents’ decisions in raising her and the cultural values they had instilled in her. Hillary realized that Youth outside her cultural community, ‘immigrant Christian Nigerians,’ had different experiences than she had, and this comparative perspective enabled her to critique some of the perceptions held in her family.

Whereas Cathy, Ayo, and Hillary came from Nigerian immigrant backgrounds, Stella and Lilian represent various immigrant experiences and cultural identities. They found it hard to accept the societal desire to compartmentalize them into one identity while also having to defend their cultural background within ethnic groups of any one of the cultures they represented. Lilian described the cultural formation of her identity:

I know where my family’s from. I experience my life with them, whether that’s cultural events, whether that’s family outings, and just having the music and the food and the language being spoken at home or at cousin family’s houses.

Lilian’s experience of having been raised in a family space where various cultures were embraced and incorporated into a way of living is the basis for the meaning she makes of her cultural identity. The various cultures that make up Lilian and Stella’s families also share their own stories of immigration. Their interpretation of U.S. society is informed by multiple cultural

perspectives or what Medina (2013) introduces as a kaleidoscopic consciousness, calling in various identities to interpret and respond in different settings.

## **Expressing Identity**

### ***“Identity is Hard”***

Lilian captured the frustration that all participants shared in communicating the multiplicity of their identities when she described the challenge of defining and feeling confident within her identity whilst systems and people around her sought to categorize her and project their assumptions about her identity upon her. Lilian tried “not to doubt” herself when her cultural background was questioned, grounding herself in her experience of family life:

‘That’s my family. This is what I’ve grown up around. These are the people that have raised me. These are the people that I’ve been able to *learn* from over the years.’ So this is, this is my culture. This is my family. I know that. And so just reassuring myself that, ‘Yes, Lilian. You are this, this is who you are.’

Lilian contested challenges to her identity ‘reassuring herself’ that the constellation of cultures that comprise her family had made her ‘who she is.’ Lilian deliberately *learned* about her cultures by being involved in cultural spaces and events, speaking languages, and visiting family in other countries. Lilian recounted encounters with cultural gate keepers who asked her, “How Haitian are you? How Cuban are you? Can you do this? Can you do that?” in essence testing her identities and even casting their verdicts as to who she is declaring: ‘No, you’re not’ from our ethnic group. Lilian shared she “had to *learn* to be like, ‘But I am.’ because I am. And it’s been hard.”

Lilian shared the dynamics of being accepted into the communities of her various cultural backgrounds by people in the communities themselves. Similar to other participants in the study,

she was forced to manage societal demands to isolate and categorize her ethnic identity. She illustrated her frustration using the example of public forms that asked her to check one box for her ethnicity: “How do you check off the boxes if there’s only one to check off?”

The phrase of “checking a box” was familiar to all participants and illustrated the challenge of forming their own sense of identity whilst simultaneously contesting the societal compartmentalization of forms and the informal gatekeepers of cultural spaces. Lilian used the analogy of ‘checking off the box’ to articulate the need to learn how to manage the challenge of contesting external views of her identity:

I feel it’s hard. But also being able to learn how to navigate those conversations and create spaces or go into spaces where there are other people that look like me or who are in the same situation as me are trying to figure out what their identity is or how do they check off a box, or how do they have conversations with their closest of friends or their family members.

Lilian was hopeful that she would be able to find groups of likeminded people in college:

“people that I can talk to about these things. And maybe they share similar experiences to me.”

The contestation of external perceptions of their identity was challenging for all participants and each was actively engaged in learning how to ‘navigate those conversations’ to assert their own understanding of their identities.

### ***“My Identity Gets Mixed Up”***

Cathy did not share the need to defend her cultural identity to community gatekeepers, but expressed the difficulty in correcting perceptions of her as Black American when she identified as African American. Cathy is Black-presenting and identified with her Nigerian heritage and found that her “identity gets mixed up.” She shared the problem of ticking the right

box on forms stating: “I'm not Black American, I'm African American. Definitely, that happens to me all the time.” The problem of ticking the right box on forms also appeared in interactions she had where she described: “People come up to me like, ‘you're Nigerian. I didn't know that. I thought you were Black American,’ just getting my identity mixed up.” Cathy was sensitive about the need people feel to assign her to a specific identity and anticipated the interpretation people had about her identity:

I find it uncomfortable to talk about how I'm Nigerian and I come from a different country. People mix it up with being an illegal immigrant and stuff like that. And I just don't feel comfortable explaining the whole thing.

This ‘uncomfortability’ resulted in a decision not to share what she called “that part of myself was fully not... I don't feel I've fully, opened it up to anybody.” Another strategy Cathy employed was to manage her identities in what she described as a ‘Venn Diagram:’

I find that in my personal life I have a different part of myself... Like every part of my friend group has seen a different part of myself. If it is my track friends, or my Nigerian friends, or my Christian friends, or my school friends. I feel like these are different parts of my life. And it's sometimes crazy to balance everything up, but I feel it all comes together nicely. Definitely. And my family, has helped me, balance that Venn Diagram up because different pieces are moving at once and it could go... maybe go crazy.

Cathy acknowledged the difficulty of this compartmentalization of her identity and explained that she juggled her interactions in each of these socio-cultural spaces, “each space has a different view of me, and we have different conversations. I wouldn't talk about the same thing I talk with my Nigerian friends with my track friends.” Cathy hastened to add that her identities all



have a “common ground.” When I asked what that common ground was, though she hesitated, she shared her sense of how she wanted to show up:

I think it's ... I value all of my friendships ... All my friendships in each identity. I feel they all know that whenever they need me, I'm only a phone call away. Yeah. And it's kind of a weird common ground. But I know I'll figure it out soon. (laughter)

This answer underscores how Cathy made sense of managing her identities and her relationships and echoed the conceptualization of this as a process, as Lilian described, that can be managed. Cathy actively decided how she would act in each space, but the emphasis on friendship across ‘each identity’ emphasized the importance of relationships and the value of who she wanted to be for her friends.

Ayo built on the concept that one needs time to oneself to really reflect on who you are which resonates with Stella’s thoughts on developing a strong self-concept. Ayo described as follows: “you don't just only have one identity. You have many more... And different sides of yourself that you show to different people.” When I asked how she made sense of them, Ayo replied “I think you definitely have to spend a lot more time with yourself to be able to find out who you really are when no one's there and you can sort of say that's how you really are.” She then added for emphasis, “When no one's there.” Ayo echoed Cathy’s Venn Diagram in differentiating what you can “show to different people,” and also asserted the need for self-reflection where one might keep societal assertions on identity at bay.

Hillary also experienced identity differently in several spheres of her life and is conscious of the norms each space proscribes. She emphasized the experience of not having a place to be herself, particularly during the era of COVID restrictions:

So I would just go home. I mean, I would go to school and go home and go to church. So I didn't have that place to be myself. You know. Like I was always acting a certain way for church or acting a certain way for school. ... I didn't have that space to just be myself freely and do the things I wanted to. I was always monitored.

Hillary described the recognition of norms of behavior in different spaces which was common across the participants and overlaid with their ability to express various aspects of their identities in each space. In the next chapter, I will discuss how Youth-led spaces play a vital role in establishing a place where Youth can explore their different identities and be themselves.

### **Identity in the School Space**

Identity within the school space was characterized by stereotypes of who belonged in the elite school, and the treatment that students received was directly linked to who they were perceived to be. For example, Cathy observed the circumscriptions assigned to the opportunities she might pursue in society. She was aware of the skepticism people had when she told them she attended Classical High School and attributed this to assumptions they made about who she is:

People get shocked when I tell them I go to Classical. They're like, 'you really go to Classical? Are you sure?' and I'm like, 'Yeah, I go to Classical. I go to class, then I go in the building.' 'Did you have a family member that works there?' I'm like, 'No, I got into Classical by just taking the test.'

This dialogue Cathy recounted illustrated a posture of contestation in understanding the bias and assumptions behind people questioning her attendance at an elite high school, and her choice to politely reply to the underlying assumptions of the query by explaining the physical process of 'going to Classical,' thus standing her ground and claiming her space.

Stella was keenly aware of how teachers perceived her in school. For example, teachers' comments about young black women's hair as: "disparaging and hurtful comments that would kind of just make you want to straighten your hair... just, just to not deal with that." These judgements about appearance were coupled with assumptions about language: "When it comes to how we speak, we speak in African American vernacular English, you're automatically seen as less than and less intelligent because of how you speak, and a lot of teachers can judge because of that."

Stella understood the norms of behavior established in school at a practical level and how they didn't favor her identity and expressed how these assumptions threatened to undermine her ability to be rewarded with good grades. Stella not only shared the personal manifestation of this but also articulated the systemic challenges she faced and the decision it forced:

It's not as simple as I'm just going to work hard. There are people who are against me, and structures who are against me and don't want me to be in these places no matter how hard I work. And how I'm in it to still work as hard as I can by recognizing this and being able to challenge it and move around these ways.

This statement demonstrated Stella's acute understanding of how the system of meritocracy is not without particular barriers for her that manifested in her public school and impact her at an individual level. Her understanding informed her choices of how to embrace a system of meritocracy in the competitive environment of an elite school. She recognized how the systemic mechanisms of 'tracking' produced 'regular' and 'advanced' students with clear ties to their identity- who they were and where they lived. Stella articulated the dynamic of tracking students systemically, whereas other participants raised this in terms of the physical separation of 'regular' and 'advanced' students who studied in different wings of the same building, or

attended the same school but were not in advanced placement classes. Stella captures the contradiction in wanting to achieve within the educational system and the false promise it offered to people like her.

### **Participant Experiences of Educational and Social Disruption**

In many ways identity, particularly for Youth of Color, had a critical impact on their experiences of educational and social disruption. The confluent events Youth experienced of COVID restrictions and the Black Lives Matter protests proffered a new array of choices and time for Youth to ruminate on how they felt and understood issues unfolding in society that directly linked to their identity in terms of limiting opportunities available to them or existential threats and people's (including Youth) reactions to those issues. Each of the participants was in high school during COVID and shared how they managed their schoolwork through the restrictions. This included classes via Zoom where they could turn their cameras off and watch Netflix or YouTube. There was also a point at which students were given the option of attending school on alternate days (so as to diminish the number of students at school and reduce the risk of spreading the illness). This was an optional measure and one participant spoke of how she stayed home because the weather was nice and it felt like an extension of spring break, until she realized that she felt isolated and alone and felt the need to go back during alternate days.

Stella watched the news while learning virtually and realized she “felt a certain way” about Black Lives Matter and the murder of George Floyd and “had things to say about it.” Stella noted that “I realized that in school, there wasn't really a space to talk about them and it was something that you're supposed to deal with outside of school.” Not only was there no space created in school to discuss the issue of police brutality and injustice, but Stella also felt an implicit threat in what would happen if she really talked about how she felt in the school space.

It did not feel like a safe space in which to express her vulnerability and the feelings that were deeply rooted in her own identity and her sense of safety in society at large.

Lilian also discussed the confluence of the disruption to schooling and the social disruption around Black Lives Matter. She drew the connection to seeing protests earlier in her childhood around Trayvon Martin's murder and the 2016 elections: "I was really just a child, but seeing all of that on the news and seeing all these uprisings happening and seeing community members come together. People across the country protesting" led her to question 'their whys.' Similarly, these images were formative for Lilian as she reflected on how she had processed this at a younger age:

I think learning that was really content heavy. Then you have to take a step back because you also don't know what's going on as a ten-year old. And you're like, 'What does this mean?' But I think seeing it just makes you feel some type of way in your chest. When you see that, it kind of makes you, it makes you cry. Honestly, I've cried a lot.

Throughout the interviews, Lilian often posed the question, "What does this mean?" as she sought to understand events around her. Lilian also reflected on the motivation and reasons for people's reactions to these events, trying to understand their "whys":

It was really just seeing how other people reacted to situations and seeing their why. Why am I a part of this? Why did I show up today? I think hearing and seeing other people's whys was really important and inspiring for me.

Lilian's question of "What does this mean?" speaks to the existential threat posed by murders of Black people by police and was echoed by other participants in reflecting on the link between their identity and the inequities spotlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement. Participants not only observed and reflected upon the events transpiring around them, but also focused on

people's reactions to them and their 'whys,' as Lilian articulated. The observation of agency was an important part of the learning journey during the educational and social disruption which led to actions that will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **Ruminating: How Do I feel?**

Stella linked COVID virtual learning, the simultaneous Black Lives Matter movement, and the murder of George Floyd as key factors in creating a space where she could ruminate and reflect:

When the pandemic hit and everyone was forced to go home, I was in my room a lot more and in my own space and I had a lot more time to ruminate and think about myself. And I started to think about a lot of the issues that were going on around me. And that was especially when the Black Lives Matter movement was being like, like showcased. Stella introduced the word "ruminate" to describe her response to the COVID and Black Lives Matter period. Participants thought deeply and critically about the events taking place around them. This was combined with intense feelings of sadness and even an existential threat in terms of the health threat of COVID and the threat of police violence, both for which Black and Brown people were overrepresented in casualties and long-term health issues. Hillary described the feelings around the George Floyd killing and how Black and Brown people, "genuinely understand what it's like for this to... it could keep continuing." The word 'ruminate' captured the process of thinking and feeling that participants described during this period of disruption. The realization that 'it could keep continuing' as Hillary expressed was shared by other participants and this led them to seek collective spaces and as Stella articulated, voice their opinions.

The isolation of the COVID restrictions led Stella to be online and watch the news which not only changed her thinking, but also led her to want to be heard. Stella described how her ruminations evolved watching the news:

...especially the George Floyd incident. That was something I was heavily shown, like the media and the news. And so I would see that and I would just sit and watch it. And it kind of like changed my mentality because I realized that I had a lot to say about these kind of things, but I was never asked about them.

As the news covered the protests and murders of Black people, Stella noted the change in her mentality. The highly competitive school environment was disrupted with COVID, and general isolation during that period allowed time to sit and reflect. As difficult as it was to watch horrific incidents of brutality unfold, Stella was grateful for the time to reflect and strengthen her self-concept:

If you get to a comfortability space when you're in your teens and then you have your whole life to continue being able to strengthen that self-concept. I think it's really important. So I think for me, I'm very lucky that I had, I have the opportunity to be able to have time on my side to sit in and think.

Cathy also touched on the notion of ruminating stating, “The reflect piece is, more of like thinking and learning, beyond what you're taught. I feel that's the reflect piece.” This suggested that the reflection and rumination of this period were acts of agency in which participants exercised power to think about what was important to them, conduct additional research, and form opinions that embodied both information and their feelings. Interviews with each of the participants made reference to the disruption of the COVID lockdowns as an escape from the heavy agendas of the adult-monitored school space and an opportunity to think deeply about

themselves and how they fit in the world around them. As Ayo described, to ruminate on your self-concept, “when no one is there.”

Ruminations, however, were laden with heaviness. Stella summarized the ‘heaviness’ of ‘ruminating’ on the inequities and injustices spotlighted during the educational and social disruption:

I would say, realizing that everyone gets different treatment - depending on how you look and where you live, where you were born, and what middle school you went to - was something that was really hard for me to unpack because it's like, *how do you even negate that?*

Stella’s conclusion that ‘everyone gets different treatment’ depending on who you are is one she noted was ‘really hard’ to come to as it is difficult to imagine how it might be contested.

### **Personal Learning Journeys & Contesting Absence of Identity**

Participants grappled with the inequities they experienced linked to their identities through research and independent reflection, and contested the absence of their identity, community, and issues of social inequities they cared about in the school curriculum. Their personal learning journeys explored information and feelings and they sought discussions with like-minded Youth.

The social and academic disruption described in the last section augmented participants’ sense that ‘something was missing’ in what they were learning in school and what was being broadcast in the media. Participants shared experiences of correcting messages and lessons in school that did not fairly represent their experiences. Stella and Cathy described an individual process of rumination and research. Their research helped them formulate their position on different issues, such as meritocracy in a school context, or the Counselors Not Cops campaign,



and they were then keen to engage with other Youth who had come to similar (or different) conclusions. For Ayo and Hillary, it was their engagement in Youth-led organizations that catalyzed their learning about systemic issues, such as the absence of Ethnic Studies or police brutality, and how Youth might participate in local campaigns. Lilian, as presented previously, had reflected upon social justice issues, such as the murder of Trayvon Martin and the Parkland shooting, from an early age, and the learning journey she shared was around how she might understand social movements to be effective in her advocacy and create spaces for others to learn and act.

***“Why is this missing in school?”***

Understanding that school was critical in contributing to their learning, Cathy contested the content and emphasis around what was taught at school and what was not taught, and Stella illustrated how the very inequities of her school were reinforced through a class assignment. For instance, Cathy wondered why so much time was spent on learning about Christopher Columbus and no time was spent on sex education that would be more useful for high schoolers. She addressed this through conducting her own research on themes that sparked her interest and often found it strange that these themes were not discussed more in school or in mainstream media:

I just feel there are topics that aren't talked about a lot. There's a reason why people aren't talking about it. So I personally do my own research on why the topic gets little to no media coverage. And then it's fascinating because I'm like, 'Oh, this should probably be something that is broadcast because people need to know more about this.'

This statement demonstrated critical thinking about what was being presented in school and in the media, and an understanding that decisions were made about what was and what was not broadcast or included in the curriculum. Cathy described the contrast between what she

researched and what was covered in the media as “fascinating” in that issues she felt “people need to know more about” were not given sufficient media coverage.

Ayo challenged the teachers’ treatment of Black History month because of misinformation, content, and incorrect pronunciation of the names of people and places. Ayo posed the larger question of whether the teachers showed respect for the information and if teachers themselves had really learned the material and would remember it. Ayo described her experience of Black History Month at school when she was in fifth and seventh grade:

I remember during Black History Month, the teachers would... they would just be reading lines off the paper and some of it wouldn't make sense. So I'd have to correct them and they would stumble on the pronunciation of some people's names because they're not familiar with them. So I would have to sort of tell them how to pronounce it because I knew how to. And yeah, just a lot of, misinformation.

Ayo remembered having the confidence to correct her teachers at a relatively young age (10-12), but this experience also made her begin to question what was taught in schools. Ayo shared how this experience made her feel:

It made me feel annoyed, you know. It was clear they didn't really care enough to look into it and, I don't even know if they remembered it after I corrected them. ... if I asked them now, would they remember?

This comment introduces a concept of accountability around the degree to which cultures are valued. Ayo expected teachers to treat knowledge of her culture and background with respect and was annoyed that teachers didn’t seem to ‘care enough’ to do that. The treatment of Black History Month increasingly perturbed her:

As the years went by, I remember they would teach us our history for Black History Month in February, and then they would just be like, ‘okay, that’s it, guys. We’re going back to our regular curriculum.’ And then I was like, ‘What?’ Because they would teach us so briefly and they wouldn’t give us any details. And they just sort of left it on a cliffhanger.

Ayo reflected on this experience of the treatment of African history and began to ask critical questions: “I was always wondering, ‘Why? Why didn’t you tell us the full story? Why would you just tell us a few lines on a paper and call it a day?’” In the next chapter, I will present how Ayo translated this frustration into her participation in the campaign to legislate Ethnic Studies throughout the State.

In addition to the Black History month focus, Stella offered an example from her psychology class of how teaching could be generally more inclusive. In her Psychology class, students were asked to survey students for a project and the teacher advised them to go to the front of the school where the buses came in to interview students. However, Stella noted that the buses that came to the front of the school covered the wealthier areas whereas other bus routes dropped students from less wealthy areas in the back of the school where they had a seven-minute walk to get into the building. She questioned whether the surveys would be representative if they were only taken from the front of the school which catered to students from a wealthier demographic. In this case the teacher acknowledged he was not aware of the two bus drop-offs and incorporated the perspective she raised into the lesson. Stella essentially contested the inadvertent reinforcement of inequity at her school asserting the need to deliberately include the participation of students from different neighborhoods in the survey process.

### **Personal Learning Journeys**

**Stella**

Stella conceptualized the process of experiences and concepts she explored as a “learning journey.” She showed a high degree of self-awareness of how her learning journey enabled her to arrive where she was “at this age.” This awareness was consistent with her conclusion that “you can never have a final position on anything, there will always be a new perspective, a new opinion, a new experience.” Stella highlighted that different spaces impacted the freedom to hear and present different perspectives and cautioned that learning can be sad:

So I think learning is very powerful, but it's also very... it can be very *sad*... Learning of the truth about things, because then it forces you to find different ways in which you can fight the system or play the game.

Stella’s summary of the learning journey suggested it was both liberating and daunting in that knowledge forced one to take decisions and acknowledge the compromises one might make to ‘play the game.’ In Stella’s case, she chose to excel in school while understanding the system did not favor her or people that shared some of her identities as a young Black woman from an immigrant background. Stella’s acknowledgement of the feeling of sadness in this process was echoed by other participants. As we will see in the next chapter, this sadness is ameliorated in collaborative Youth spaces where it can be openly shared, explored, and decisions can be made about how to address issues of inequity and threats to opportunities.

Stella not only reflected on her own reactions but chose to deepen her understanding of social injustice and inequities and their manifestation in her community. She explained how doing her schoolwork at home enabled her to ‘educate herself more’ through the news and YouTube:

I think it was mostly because I was at home a lot and I was able to educate myself more on what was happening around me because beforehand, I did not watch the news. I hadn't read any articles. I did not engage in any current event discussions, at all because I was just not inclined to. But I was also not pushed to do that either.

This comment highlighted the shift towards being more attentive to the news that was expressed by other participants as well, particularly with the disruption of school attendance and the focus on doing well on tests and schoolwork was temporarily lifted. Stella shared that she hadn't watched the news before, but "she was also not pushed to" which aligned with the absence of civics education in the Providence School system and the class action suit by students to demand this be taught.

As Stella moved through her learning journey, she questioned what she learned about systems in terms of how she could navigate her learning and life. For example, she linked merit and the competitive environment of her school to a capitalist system, and recognized how merit is distorted by racism. Stella didn't agree with the systemic drivers of the system of education but explored what space she might have to adapt it to the vision she had for her life. In stating her position, Stella was initially hesitant:

I still... I really like... I like the word merit. I think it's a good word. I like the concept of it. I think it's cool. But I do know that it's not something that is necessarily true in our society or in our world. But I think of it as a way of... I'm still going to use merit to my advantage. I'm still going to work as hard as I can. I'm going to have to do it in a way that's very precise and logical and intentional with how I do it.

Having begun to chart a course and understand the choices she can make around merit, and other concepts, she turned to different sources of information that enabled imagination and the

exploration of different ways of being within socio-political systems that sought to marginalize her.

### **Cathy**

In her learning journey, Cathy explored the concepts of experience and knowledge. For example, she wondered if one could really know about something without experiencing it. She used the example of homelessness to illustrate how the ‘experience of feeling rain on your skin and wondering where you will sleep’ causes you to understand what homelessness is in a way that you would never learn by studying about it. However, in seeking to understand, she paused to reflect that she probably experienced racism but didn’t know to identify it until she later learned about the concept of racism. This process of reflecting and considering and revisiting was apparent in her series of interviews. Cathy reflected on the relationship between school and learning, stating at first she ‘loves school,’ and then upon reflection, during the next interview asked me to adjust her statement to she ‘loves learning.’ Cathy echoed Stella’s interest in becoming more informed about local events, sharing, “I want to be more informative [sic] about my surrounding environment... and know what's going on beyond my space. It’s definitely better.”

### **Ayo**

For Ayo and Hillary, education about their surroundings and further exploration into systemic issues came through their involvement in Youth-led organizations. The motivation for both Ayo and Hillary to join Youth-led organizations was through peers who were involved. Ayo shared that she did not know anything about government processes for citizen engagement before she joined Young Voices:

No classes have anything to do with that. So Classical, I think they're going to be adding a class like that next year.... So they taught everyone at the Young Voices office because not a lot of other schools have that either.

The role of Youth-led spaces in contributing to Youth learning, such as training in civics education and giving testimonies, will be discussed in the next chapter.

Ayo's learning journey is revealed through her eagerness to participate in the opportunities Young Voices offered including the congressional testimony, becoming a representative in the Our School PVD coalition that provided student responses to the Providence Schools takeover, and to participate in this research. She noted that she enjoyed the interviews for this study because they gave her a chance to reflect on her engagement in emancipatory educational processes. At the time of this research Ayo was a sophomore in high school and had just been involved in emancipatory educational initiatives for about a year. In contrast, the participants who were in their senior year had been involved for four years and longer and had had opportunities to discuss their experiences extensively with their peers and in some cases present their experiences in Youth conferences.

### **Hillary**

Not only did participants note the absence of Civics in their school curriculum, Hillary assessed the relative practicality of school subjects but struggled to identify what was missing for her in her courses:

So schools from a practical side, I guess you could say, teach you, how to write and how to do like stats or whatever. It's not about... I guess it's not like humanities or like there's not a lot of world education going on except for history. But even that is talking about past history and not what's currently going on in the community.

Hillary conceded that school might teach you basic skills in reading and writing and perhaps math and science. However, there was an underlying frustration as Hillary noted, “I didn't know anything about what was going on with me.” What she learned in school did not help her understand herself or her community. She reflected on this stating the following:

Prior to Youth in Action, I probably couldn't tell you anything that was going on in Providence. I didn't know the news I didn't talk about it to anyone. No one mentioned it in my classes. So it was nice to know what was going on in the city that I'm staying at. It just made me feel like I was more aware, I was more active, and that I was trying to solve issues that are in my community.

Hillary juxtaposed what she was taught in school with what she learned in Youth-led spaces. She skipped very quickly from learning in school to taking action in the community: “With community service, it felt like I was adding something to a city that I've always seen but never knew what was going on.” The exercise of agency will be discussed further in the next chapter, but it is important to note that Hillary is not unique amongst participants in this equation of learning and agency. It is difficult to untangle the two concepts which suggests an iterative process of learning and agency forming and informing one another.

### **Lilian**

Lilian summarized the power of Youth owning their learning journey through research and discussing issues they cared about: “Because all you can do is learn in the end. Life is a learning game.” She also linked this to the importance of developing a self-concept and understanding yourself as was discussed in the section on ruminations during COVID. The learning journey she shared in our interviews was focused on her learning about agency as captured in her experience of watching protests and asking, “What does this mean?” Lilian



sought to understand the rationale, or ‘whys,’ that motivated people’s involvement in protests. She learned about contesting injustice and agency from observing and reflecting on the actions of protestors.

Lilian observed that Youth were not only watching the protestors in the streets but were also seeking out the spaces that Youth-led organizations were facilitating online. She applied her learning about agency to create spaces for other Youth to learn and take action. Whereas initially many people attended these virtual meetings and observed without speaking, Lilian highlighted a shift in Youth’s desires to play a more active role and described the transition after the COVID lockdowns where everyone was talking on Zoom with their cameras off, “To now, being like, ‘I’d like to facilitate,’ or, ‘I’d like to sit in a on a board meeting.’” Youth who hadn’t been involved vocally before had been learning and wanted to be involved, for example they volunteered to facilitate the ‘Know Your Rights’ actions in schools.

### **Summary**

The findings unveiled in this chapter demonstrated how Youth articulated the simultaneous experience of defining their own identity, while also seeking to understand and contest societal systems that sought to define them. This process was deepened through the confluent educational and social disruption of COVID lockdowns and Black Life Matters protests. Youth contested the absence of their identity, community, and issues they cared about in the school curriculum, and through personal learning journeys in which they researched and reflected on issues of their choice and sought discussions with like-minded Youth.

Participants articulated how their different identities of race, culture, immigration status and including that of being a Youth itself, contributed to how they were perceived and treated in society. They articulated how they had to act within their cultural spaces, and how this identity

affected their values and sense of accountability to family members who had sacrificed for them. Participants found ‘identity hard’ in terms of establishing who they were in the face of societal compulsions to compartmentalize them. This was particularly difficult for participants who represented several ethnic heritages as they not only had to contest societal definitions, exemplified through their struggle in ‘ticking the box’ on forms, but in many cases also had to pass the tests of gatekeepers of their own ethnic groups. Finally, participants articulated how they navigated their identities within the school space and highlighted the systemic issues that defined and affected them in school.

Participant exploration of their identity deepened through reflection and learning during the confluence of COVID restrictions and Black Life Matters protests. The disruption to the structure of school learning and the social disruption they experienced enabled and revealed choices of what was possible at an individual level in terms of understanding and contesting structures, such as school and policing, that defined their lives. The period of COVID restrictions was characterized by isolation that created opportunities for students to ruminate over how they felt about the events of the Black Lives Matters protests and social injustice, and afforded Youth the time and space to think about their own self-concept and identity and how that influenced the way they were treated in school and in society.

The findings also demonstrate how Youth contested the absence of their identity, community, and issues they cared about in the school curriculum, in the classroom, and through personal learning journeys in which they researched and reflected on issues of social inequity linked to their identities. They sought discussions with like-minded Youth. Perhaps ironically, this finding reveals that despite (and potentially due to) the academic and social disruptions, Youth expanded their notion of learning, took more responsibility for learning about issues they

cared about, and were able to contextualize school education within larger systemic frameworks related to their identities and communities.

In the next chapter I will present findings around how these individual processes of exploring identity and the array of new choices linked to engagement with Youth-led emancipatory education initiatives offered the opportunity for participants to validate their identities and experience agency in collective spaces.

## **Chapter 6: The Experience of Identity and Agency in Collective Youth Spaces**

### **Introduction**

This study explored how the lived experiences of emancipatory education initiatives inform and reflect the processes through which Youth of Color make meaning of their identity and form a sense of agency. The previous chapter explored this at the individual level through the personal journeys of participants in making sense of their identity and agency in the context of a time of academic and social disruption. This chapter presents findings on how participant experiences in collective Youth spaces informed their sense of identity and offered opportunities to explore and exercise their agency. Although the structure of this chapter presents the personal and collective learning in separate chapters, Youth often expressed these as iterative processes. For example, participant reflection on their own cultural identity was enhanced by sharing and hearing their peers articulate their cultural identity. Similarly, participants brought their research on critical issues to the collective space for discussion and enrichment. Although participants explored agency in decisions they made about their own learning and interactions, the collective dynamic of Youth Spaces described by participants are inextricably bound to emancipatory educational initiatives central to this study.

### **The Context of Youth Organizations in Providence**

Each of the participants in the study was an active member of three Youth-led organizations and described their engagement in activities over at least five emancipatory educational initiatives involving several Youth organizations. In the context of Providence, Youth organizations work in coalitions around social justice issues that Youth prioritize, and Youth often participate in events co-sponsored by several organizations. Additionally, participants followed various Youth organizations on social media and attended trainings and

events at their offices. The rich nexus of Youth-led organizations enabled Youth to learn about social change and agency from different perspectives. In addition to the variety of learning and agency opportunities, participants shared they felt comfortable across Youth organizational spaces.

### **Youth Spaces**

The findings presented in this chapter indicate Youth spaces offered participants the experience of freedom to express their identity, thoughts, and feelings, and empathize and support one another. Youth continued to construct their sense of identity through an iterative process of reflections on their experiences in the personal and collective spaces. Youth channeled their reflection of identity into collective learning and imagination, and participants revealed that Youth deliberately created collective spaces for learning and imagination. The experience in Youth spaces was critical to participant journeys in exploring and exercising agency. Participants defined Youth spaces in terms of how they felt in those spaces, often by contrasting them with how they felt in adult spaces. The experience of Youth spaces included five themes prevalent across all participants: the experience of freedom and support; the exploration and validation of identity; collective learning; collective imagination; and the exploration and exercise of agency.

#### **The Experience of Freedom & Support in Youth Spaces**

In describing emancipatory education initiatives and their influence on forming a sense of identity and agency, Youth highlighted the importance of Youth-led spaces, often by contrasting them to adult-led spaces. Participants shared the impact of being able to bring both their feelings and research into the Youth space and described the humor and vivacity that characterized the dynamics of Youth spaces. School spaces were generally seen as adult controlled. There were some instances participants described of shared or delegated power in school spaces and the hope

that more opportunities for Youth agency could be created in school settings. Table 3: *Key descriptors of Youth and Adult-Led Spaces*, captures the key words participants used to describe their experiences in Youth and adult-led spaces.

**Table 3**

*Key Descriptors of Youth and Adult-Led Spaces*

Youth-Led Spaces	School & Adult-Led Spaces
‘Feels like home.’	‘Gas lit’
Peers know concepts and definitions – ‘get you’	‘Have to explain yourself’
Love research	Criticized for doing ‘too much research’
1-2 hour conversations – being able to talk	Made to feel irrational
Feel validated	Highly monitored, controlled
Feel motivated	‘respectability politics’
Feel free	Not safe to express how you <i>feel</i> about events
“Calling me in”	“Calling me out”
Safe space – feel ‘comfortable’	Fear – afraid not to give the ‘right’ answer
Space you can bring your feelings to	Not asked about feelings

Note: “respectability politics” speaks to the expected norms of behavior and expression

The context of Youth organizations and the description of Youth spaces are important to understand the experiences participants shared. I now turn to the description of findings and the agency journeys participants shared.

Youth often contrasted the experience of how they felt in Youth spaces with how they felt in adult spaces to capture the sense of freedom and support as illustrated in Table 3: *Key Descriptors of Youth and Adult-Led Spaces*. The experience of ‘feeling monitored’ was shared across participants to describe school and adult-led spaces. This contrast was highlighted by Hillary: “that’s the one thing at Youth In Action, no one’s monitoring you.” This descriptor is not only important in terms of the space it cultivated for Youth, but also suggested that Youth did not have many spaces in which they did not feel monitored. As Hillary shared, “I had never felt

anything like it.” When asked to elaborate, her answer reflected an exploration of how to articulate the experience of freedom found in Youth spaces to express her identity and the collective energy generated through this shared experience:

I think, I don't know. It's just the energy. I think when you go to a lot of programs, you feel the need to censor, maybe the way you talk, the way you act, and it doesn't come off... like you can't ... you don't feel. It's like you have to get comfortable. But I feel like the first day at Youth in Action, I was already comfortable. There was just something about being able to talk.

Hillary marveled at the freedom in Youth spaces which she characterized through the absence of external monitoring and self-censoring. The Youth space enabled free expression and actions that generated a collective energy. This description stands in stark contrast to the fear participants expressed in not saying the right thing in school, or not being able to share how they felt about BLM protests. Stella articulated this as “respectability politics” or knowing “what you can talk about where,” reflecting an awareness of the norms and judgements of different spaces and how one must adjust themselves to be seen as respectable.

Cathy echoed the freedom to communicate in Youth spaces, noting “I can just talk to people however I want so I don’t have to be more cautious around people.” She expounded to share that not only did she feel free to express herself, but peers at Youth in Action often empathized with what she said, responding “Oh, I understand how you feel,” or, “I can relate to that.” In addition to communications, Cathy observed the schedule of Youth spaces was more flexible noting the difference with school where the agenda was ‘controlling’ as you go from “this period to that period to that period. You have teachers, lectures...” There was a sense of personal validation in Cathy’s experience of Youth in Action and she described it as, “a safe

space for me. I come there whenever I feel down. Whenever I'm happy I come there. It's just a place that I feel that I could share my beliefs and opinion and it will be respected.”

Understanding the importance of Youth-led spaces, the Our Schools Providence (OSPVD) initiative that engaged Youth from various institutions deliberately set aside days that were facilitated by Youth. Ayo, like Hillary, spoke to how the freedom to show up as your full self created a special energy in Youth-led spaces noting, “There's more energy on Youth days and then less on adult-led days.” She went on to describe the experience of a ‘room with more Youth:’

I feel like in a room with more Youth. It's definitely a more, lively place. And you can calm down and be yourself in those rooms. When it's a room of mostly adults, then it's just like there's less to talk about and it's more of listening because of how they just talk. ... Youth may have few chances to say anything, and adults, they take over the conversation.

In her description, Ayo combines the lively environment of Youth-led spaces with the description of being centered and calm. This suggests that being able to be free to express yourself relieves the stress of the self-censoring that Hillary described and generates energy. Stella complemented the descriptions of the experience of the Youth space as a place she ‘wants to go’ and described the sense of solace and solidarity she found there:

If I come to PSU [Providence Student Union] just after school, just because I *want* to go. I sit there with my friends. We can just talk about something like, ‘Oh, hey, did you hear about this?’ And it's cool because I have a bunch of different people weighing in on it and providing me different ways in how they thought about it. Or we can be talking about



how we feel the same way about it, but we can really go deeper into it because we've been doing this work for a while.

Stella's description of discussing issues with peers suggested a space for critical thinking around ideas and learning from peers that struck her interest and which she wanted to explore further, and indicated this was an ongoing process that she and her peers were engaged in collective learning and reflection over time.

Lilian expounded on another aspect of peer conversations in how Youth-led spaces provided support: "that support group that you may not have during the school day. But after school hours you have them to talk to." She described the deliberate process of checking in with members to share how they felt:

Like, 'I really hated today, you know? [laughter] Right?' Like, 'I really just didn't like it.' Just getting that off your chest and being like. 'Oh, okay, well [sigh], now what?' Now it'll get better. Hopefully. If not, we always have tomorrow. So just kind of letting you... like a release, just letting that stuff go and then hoping for the best.

This notion of a 'release' included being able to share experiences with people who understood and empathized with what Youth were going through and held a space for Youth to move forward. Lilian's conceptualization of the space included the deliberate architecture of establishing a safe space, and the confidence that Youth would occupy that space and continue to build it:

It's such a reward. It makes me feel good to make others feel good and to make others feel safe. That they have a space to be able to talk. Or meet new friends and meet new people in their community.

Lilian expresses how Youth transmute their experiences of having their freedoms curtailed to create a collective space where Youth are safe and supported to act freely.

Stella described the Youth space as “feeling like home” and a place that motivated her.

The sense of safety and support while being vulnerable was an important aspect:

I love spaces where I can be vulnerable and I can feel like, okay, even if what I were to say were to come out by accident, I feel so content with how everyone in the room is giving the time and attention and respect to other people and to me.

Stella also used a concept of ‘going into circle’ to convey a safe space of loving and open dialogue. She discussed that at the Providence Student Union, Youth naturally fell into ‘circle’ where there was always room for everyone to share.

### **The Exploration of Identity in Youth Spaces**

In the Youth space, participants described a ‘safe place’ to share their feelings and thoughts around events and issues. The events and issues they discussed in the context of this study were ones that had a direct bearing on their identity, for example the shooting of Black people in a New York grocery store, or issues, such as the lack of Ethnic or Civics courses that limited their formal education. Other issues that directly affected their freedom to express their identity included the CROWN Act, sexual assault, or Counselors Not Cops. Issues linked to their identity were a common and important topic in Youth spaces, however, participants also mentioned they would talk about a range of topics such as TV shows or celebrity scandals.

Youth felt comfortable to continue their exploration of identity amongst peers in collective Youth-led spaces. Ayo linked her exploration of identity directly to the agency of Youth spaces, or advocacy work, noting:

I feel like before I wasn't really expressing my identity. Like I kind of just, ignored it and I was like, 'okay, whatever.' And then when I did get more involved with advocacy work, I did find more of my identity, because I was surrounded by other people who were also finding their identities. And we were talking about identity. So it led me to think on. Ayo shared that the collective process helped her to explore what "she wanted to associate" herself with and what she wanted to "filter out." Her statement "it led me to think on" is corroborated across participants in that they framed the process of exploring identity and learning as an ongoing process. The iterative experience of building a sense of identity hints at the application of agency as Youth are defining their identity for themselves and taking support and inspiration from the collective space with other Youth on a similar quest.

Hillary had a similar experience in her exploration of identity in the Youth space. She noted that before she joined Youth In Action, she "was always around people who were very similar to me, you know, Nigerians, Christian Nigerians." With the exposure to other Youth who openly discussed their identity she "realized that my world is bigger, there are people who don't maybe have the best family life. Or there's people who are really big on change. They want to protest..." This exposure opened her mind as she described: "When I got to Youth in Action, I saw all these different views on things and how people thought and just everyone's thought process behind some things. It made me open my own ideas." This resonated with the Stella's description of the kinds of conversations she had with peers in the Youth space in which there were "different people weighing in" and "providing me different ways in how they thought."

### **Collective Learning in Youth Spaces**

The descriptions of discussions participants had in Youth spaces amongst peers indicated a process of collective learning through which they felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and

feelings about their identity or issues linked to their identity. They often indicated they did not feel comfortable having these discussions in other spaces, such as school where the emphasis was placed on having the right answers and they were more cautious about the judgements of their teachers and classmates.

### **Discussing Events in the Media**

When asked what she learned at Youth in Action, Hillary described the experience where Youth “discuss the issues that were going on” in relation to the Black Lives Matters movement and other incidents that affected them. She described these discussions as follows:

It varies on a day-to-day basis. I mean, I think we just learn a lot about *what's not taught in school*. It's also a space to just talk about things that have happened in the media. I remember one time there was the... I think it was a shooting in New York in a grocery store, and we had a day to debrief about that. And even though, like you could leave, you didn't have to stay if you want. But it was a *space* to talk about it. And we talked about previous shootings of Black individuals and stuff like that. We just shared about how we thought about that.

Given the period of this study with the Black Lives Matter protests, and the multiple incidences of racial violence and discrimination, Youth-led spaces were a critical space to open discussion of these events amongst other Youth of Color. Hillary described an organic process in which Youth were able to discuss what they were seeing and experiencing in the world around them. Youth shared their feelings and how they made sense of events that revealed injustices and threats often linked to their identities. This resonated with Lilian’s reflection of “you grow in these spaces with other people,” underscoring the collective nature of learning and growing.

As presented in the previous chapter, Youth often described the experience of the social issues of injustice and inequity as ‘sad’ and that the rumination over these issues often made them cry. In contrast, the participant descriptions of interactions in the Youth space where they felt freedom to discuss their feelings, thoughts, and later actions with their peers were often described as happy or joyous. This suggests the opportunity to express and discuss these feelings, and find them echoed in their peers, created a safe space to learn more deeply about issues such as racism and oppression. The capability to manage feelings of sadness and joy emerged as an important element of the collective learning space.

### **Learning From Youth Models**

Stella reflected on the importance of having “deeper conversations about things around us. About life and about inequities - [conversations] that we did not get to have.” She emphasized the absence of spaces for conversations about injustice. She was able to further explore issues, such as inequity, and learn through Youth organizations spaces by:

going to workshops and then seeing leaders, student leaders talk and being like, ‘wow, they are so wise.’ They have so many experiences that they're talking about and I want to learn more about that. I want to become like that one day.

Stella’s reflections directly linked the process of learning in collective spaces. In collective spaces, Youth modeled agency through their facilitation and sharing experiences. Participants noted how other Youth utilized their power for change, exercising their agency. Seeing their peers exercise agency brought the realization of their own power and possibility of agency into reach for Youth, and they observed their peers and volunteered for opportunities through which they could learn about issues they cared about and undertake actions to address them. The examples of their peers informed Youth desires and aspirations.

Participants recognized their ability to exercise agency needed to be informed by a deeper understanding of what was happening in society. Stella echoed other participants in describing the importance of expressing oneself and becoming more informed about what was happening around her:

So setting a goal of trying to become more informed about my surroundings and what's going on, not only just around me, but in other places, far away from me, so that I could feel like a more well-rounded person. And I could try and finally find my voice because I did not have the space to ever talk about how things made me feel. And PSU gave the space to be able to express how I felt about things happening around me.

The combination of learning and finding her 'voice,' rooted in the dynamics of her environment resonated across participants and reflected personal journeys of learning and agency that were interwoven with the collaborative experience of Youth spaces and the exploration of identity in the context of societal events.

Stella took advantage of the Youth space as a safe space to learn through sharing her feelings and the research she did on issues of interest to her. In the Youth space she discussed her research with peers who validated her efforts which helped her resist others who challenged her as being "irrational" or doing "too much research." Stella's descriptions of conversations in Youth spaces resonated with Hillary's experience and conveyed a process through which knowledge is constructed through a collaborative analysis and integration of different perspectives. Stella described the process of collectively analyzing issues with her peers, tapping into different perspectives, and questioning one another to build their learning:

I can really assess varying aspects or levels or approaches and analyze the structures around me *with other people who also want to analyze*. But also recognizing that we

come from different places and different perspectives. So while we all want to analyze, we can all take in what we've *learned from each other* and grow that way. It makes you really *happy*, too, to be able to have these conversations.

The respect for “different perspectives” echoed across participant interviews and was not only supported but also considered a resource for further learning. The multiple perspectives of peers were particularly important to the participants in the study who came from immigrant backgrounds where their social interactions were heavily influenced by the values of their ethnic community. However, participants also referenced learning about different family dynamics and school experiences and how this helped them reflect on their own experiences and learn about others.

Youth had opportunities to explore concepts such as decolonization and restorative justice, that responded to their experiences. Youth spaces were powerful in supporting Youth to learn and foster their experiences of freedom, growth, and joy. Stella articulates the importance of learning about systemic oppression:

For me, it's taking the things in life that we used to take advantage of before we realized how oppressive they could be. Thinking about the good old times in how we would want to live, to be, or how we thought it used to be. Still, maybe being able to think that way, but tailoring it in a way in which we're able to still be aware of the systems that are in place against us but still achieve happiness and joy in what we're doing.

Stella referred to the ‘good old times’ as before she realized how systems influenced how she understood the world and what she dreamt of. Although she articulated this as her personal interpretation, she quickly moved to the collective ‘we’ when she mused over how one might follow their dream recognizing the impact of systems and manage the sadness and anger those

systems evoked while still finding satisfaction in their work. With a deepened understanding of the inequitable systems participants developed in collective learning, the refrain of ‘happiness and joy’ described their sense of the possibility and exercise of agency.

### **Collective Imagining in Youth Spaces**

Youth spaces offered a safe space amongst peers for Youth to learn and engage in collective imagination. Stella describes a process of collective imagining that begins with confidence in one’s own potential:

I really enjoy imagining spaces in which people *feel* their full potential... they actually feel self-actualized, and fulfilled, and happy with what they're doing. Of course, there's always some level of stress. But I enjoy imagining spaces where we use stress as motivators and not things that hinder our daily life.

This acknowledgement of the daily stressors grounded imagination in *all* that Youth experience. In addition to the ‘release’ of that stress presented above, Stella suggested a transformation of the stress into motivation in the collective Youth space. The aspects of experiencing freedom and support, exploring and validating identities, and collective learning prepared the ground for collective imagining. Building on their collective strengths and power, Stella described a place:

Where we're able to collaborate with each other, we're able to help each other with our goals, and we're able to motivate ourselves *through ourselves* and our fight to go through our life in our own way. Navigate to our own lens.

Stella’s description of collaborative spaces built on many of the descriptors used for Youth spaces in enabling individual fulfillment and happiness, and where people worked to motivate one another and collaborate around goals. The last part of Stella’s description acknowledged the difficulties in emphasizing the need to motivate and find strength in one



another and in their collective agency to fight for social justice. The notion of fighting and going “through our life in our own way” spoke to how participant understanding of how identity shaped their place in society, and the link to action spoke to asserting the need to “navigate to our own lens,” or how they made sense of their opportunities in the world. Through the Youth space, this lens was informed by the validation of lived experience and the imagination of new possibilities.

In addition to the discussions and research Youth shared in their collective spaces, Stella described additional creative dimensions to this in “sharing knowledge with my friends and being able to connect about our dreams.” In this the Youth not only incorporated the news and analysis of different issues, history, and events, but also turned to the arts and imagination:

It's usually through fictional worlds, like in cartoons and stuff where this stuff does work. But it's cool to be like, ‘imagine if it was like this,’ and kind of using those kinds of cartoons or those characters as inspirations to keep going and use as parallels in the real world.

The collective space enabled Youth to bring their full selves to discussion and exploration including the imagination of new possibilities that might be translated into reality.

For Hillary, imagination literally traveled into new physical spaces through trips to outdoor spaces that Black and Brown Youth in the Providence area often didn't experience. Youth In Action organized trips where Youth engaged in activities such as kayaking, hiking through the woods, rock climbing, and camping. Hillary described outdoor activities as, “things I had only imagined doing one day.” This approach complemented the imagination Stella described by physically introducing Youth to new spaces and activities in which they learned

about themselves, each other, and jointly explored the possibilities available to them in these spaces.

Cathy highlighted the spontaneity and playfulness of the Youth space in comparing it to the school setting:

I get a different point of view from being at Youth In Action than being at school. In school I get a more conservative point of view, if that's the word. Then at Youth in Action I get more of a *playful*... youths just talking and putting it out there.

The description of Youth spaces as 'playful' was an important reminder that Youth not only shared painful feelings and experiences around their identity described above, but also brought their vivacity and joy to Youth spaces where they had the freedom to interact as they chose and felt safe to 'just talk and put it out there.'

### **Space to Explore and Exercise Agency**

Youth organizations offered participants various means to explore their power through agency, or taking actions to make changes. Most participants were paid by Youth organizations and were given authority to plan activities for their peers and design campaigns with educational and action elements, such as the marches. Participants were also invited into Youth governance participating on the Board of the organization or on leadership teams. Finally, participants engaged in advocacy actions that included workshops and marches and testified in support of Rhode Island bills that spoke to their identity and experiences such as Ethnic Studies, the CROWN (Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) Act, and Counselors not Cops in schools.

### **Sense of Time & Urgency**

The interviews demonstrated that participants gained experience in exercising agency, or actions designed to effect change, through emancipatory educational initiatives by participating in workshops, campaigns, or marches in relatively short time spans (two to six months). Their involvement catalyzed more action as they continued to grow in their agency journeys. There was common agreement around the motivation to *do something* and to make things better for *future generations*. When asked to define future generations, responses referred to classmates in lower grades in high school (a gap of one to three years), and included younger siblings, and their own children. These definitions suggested an accelerated notion of time and the urgency for change. This is reflected in Lilian's description of a review meeting at Providence Student Union:

This year went by so fast! So everything I'm thinking of, I was like, 'did that happen my junior year or this year?' There're things that happened in September, but it felt like it happened two years ago. It's like, 'oh my gosh, all these things are happening. Wow, we did all this in only one year!'

Youth organizations also seem to appreciate the pace of student engagement. For example, after participating in several initiatives at Young Voices, Ayo was asked to join their Board as she recounted:

Not even two months after, I was elected for co-secretary because I just became so involved with it. And I was thinking of different ways of how the program could be better. ... There're different committees for the program. I'm on the governance committee, so we're thinking about different things about the board, like term limits.

Ayo not only took on the leadership role, but also chose to participate on a committee that impacted the future governance of the organization. Ayo's experience was characteristic of

participants in that they had a sense of their limited timeframe of engagement in Youth organizations and deliberately acted in ways that would impact Youth that would follow them. They took advantage of the multiple opportunities Youth spaces offered for them to exercise agency.

### **Participant Agency Journeys**

The participants conceptualized the exploration and experience of agency as a journey and described their growth in terms of their sense of identity and how the process of thinking critically, voicing their opinions, and engaging in actions and campaigns evolved as they exercised their agency. Lilian conceptualized the experience of agency as a journey: “It's really nice to see how that journey goes. How you can look back and be like, ‘wow, I did that.’” Through the phenomenological approach of this study’s series of interviews, participants shared how different experiences in exercising power shaped their agency journeys and the meaning they took from these journeys. Participant accounts of their agency journeys illustrated subthemes of learning through agency, practicing leadership, and contesting policies or practices. Each of these journeys was unique but also resonated and harmonized with the others. In what follows, I share the agency journey of each participant beginning with how they joined emancipatory educational initiatives and highlighting the main themes of their experiences. I call attention to where each journey echoed, complemented or diverged from the others. This approach maintains the integrity of the data in sharing more details of emancipatory education initiatives each participant selected to discuss, thus providing the reader context on the entry point and types of emancipatory activities each participant engaged in. The participant accounts of their agency journeys encompass a variety of emancipatory educational experiences and

illustrate the common sub-themes of learning through agency, practicing leadership, and contesting policies or practices.

### **Hillary's Agency Journey**

The participants in this study had different motivations for joining Youth organizations. Some were motivated by friendships, and others found the space through social media.

Hillary's entry into Youth in Action was fortuitous:

So the reason I joined was really funny. There was this boy at school and I thought he was really cute. ... Eventually, it didn't become about him. I just genuinely fell in love with the program and the people that were there, the environment. ... So I just started going for my own reasons.

The environment continued to attract her, and Hillary found this was not only her experience but also that of friends whom she invited who "felt the same way." She concluded that "Youth in Action just has that effect on people. The first day you're there, you just wanna keep going." On a personal level, Hillary attributed her increased self-confidence to her participation, "I felt so much more confident since I joined." Hillary shared that she "wasn't really involved in a lot of things" before but, "a lot of the programs I'm doing are because of Youth in Action. I think Youth in Action has opened up a number of opportunities."

**Working for youth agencies as a form of experiencing and exploring power.** Almost all of the participants in this study were paid for work with Youth agencies. This was either through positions, such as leadership team membership at PSU or program coordinator at YIA, or being paid a stipend for participation in collaborative action around Ethnic Studies or Providence school reform. In addition to enjoying these positions, participants demonstrated a

strong sense of responsibility for their work and the opportunity to make change possible for Youth.

Hillary's summer job at Youth In Action became the emancipatory educational initiative she spoke most about. Hillary shared how the summer position enabled her to practice self-agency and deliberately explore choices in how she interacted with others. She noted she "spent a lot of time thinking about my actions and how I'm treating people, because I didn't want anyone to feel weird or sad or upset by anything I said or had done." This consciousness of being deliberate about her actions reflected how Hillary explored her experience of the leadership position she was given at Youth in Action both in terms of how she exercised her power and the impact she had on others. She managed the potential threat of making people 'feel weird or sad or upset' by deliberately reflecting and practicing her leadership. Hillary articulated how the job was meaningful to her: "I'm really grateful for the opportunity. I would have never thought that job would have changed my thinking about everything. I really love the job." Hillary linked her leadership experience to learning in that it 'changed her thinking about everything.'

**Planning activities for other Youth.** Through her position Hillary was charged with organizing excursions such as kayaking, hiking, and camping for Youth of Color. These excursions contested the physical boundaries subtly set for Youth of Color who did not typically feel welcome in these spaces. She enjoyed her task of running summer excursions and her description revealed her sense of responsibility: "It was fun to plan things that I knew would be fun for other people my age and to do them. I was, just outside enjoying nature." Experiencing the power of planning for Youth her age was important for Hillary and made her "feel like I'm doing something."

The concept of exercising power to ‘do something’ was a recurrent theme across participants and spoke to the experience of agency. Hillary recognized the unique opportunities that Youth in Action offered her to fulfill some of her childhood dreams: “Youth in Action has given me a space to do the things younger me wanted to do. And I don't think there's ever been a space that's allowed me to do that.” She underscored the importance of contesting informal boundaries linked to identity and literally exploring new spaces in parks and camping. Hillary’s reference to her ‘younger self’ having wanted to engage in outdoor activities is transposed to the ability her position gave her to create those opportunities for her peers.

Hillary’s entry into the Youth space was fortuitous, but once engaged, she her agency was characterized by self-reflecting and managing the potential threats of the impact of her actions on others. She led Youth of Color into new spaces complementing theme of collective imagination by contesting or reimagining boundaries felt by Youth of Color. Hillary’s agency journey captures the joy and transformation of Youth spaces and reasserts the importance of action that catalyzes change.

### **Ayo’s Agency Journey**

Ayo had a similar fortuitous entry into the Youth space and joined because “a friend asked me to.” Consistent with the experience of all participants, entering the Youth space offered opportunities for Ayo to exercise agency through different roles. In these roles, Ayo volunteered to give testimony at the Rhode Island State House to support the incorporation of Ethnic Studies into RI school curriculum, she was asked to participate in the Young Voices Board, and she represented Young Voices in the collaborative initiative of Our Schools PVD where she was asked to facilitate Youth days. This variety of engagement was typical across the participants,

and Ayo's reflection on these experiences illustrated how the development of skills and the practice of agency enabled her to 'do something.'

**Testifying for the Ethnic Studies Bill.** The testimony on the incorporation of Ethnic Studies was an invitation into an adult-led space to share her experience. This related to Ayo's discussion of her identity, and she was clear on the reason she wanted to testify:

I hoped to achieve a difference so other people wouldn't be sitting in classrooms and thinking what I did. They would actually get to hear about their culture. They would not have to put the missing puzzle pieces together to create a story, but rather [school would] give them to you so you can understand it. And you don't have to learn about things later on.

In this quote, Ayo's revealed how her own struggle with not learning about her cultural background in school motivated her to give testimony so that 'the missing puzzle pieces' can be addressed in the curriculum so future students would not experience the gaps she did.

The opportunity to testify for Ethnic Studies validated her own self-confidence and sense of agency. As Ayo reflected on how she felt testifying, she sought to articulate the experience:

While I was reading it... I felt like... Maybe a sense of... Yeah. Just being proud of myself and being able to say all of that and having my words get to them. When I was done reading my testimony, it *felt like I got over what I needed to do*. It was another hurdle that I just jumped over. Mm hmm.

This description resonated with what we will see later in this discussion when Lilian described Youth agency as a process that can be validated in terms of accomplishments of what Youth can do in the moment, fully aware that there will be additional hurdles along the way. An important



meaning Ayo articulated in giving her testimony was the impact it would have on other Youth, particularly those who were younger or who had not yet been involved in these kinds of actions.

I think for them, it means that they're able to make a change too. And then they'll be able to stand up for what they want because they see other people standing up. So, sort of having the confidence because of other people with the power.

The notion of building confidence in other Youth because they saw her exercising power spoke to the symbolic leadership Youth play in public places and underscored the absence of Youth voice that makes this notable. Ayo's statement reveals an understanding of how Youth agency models that opportunity for others.

Ayo described waiting for hours at the Rhode Island State House to give testimony on the ethnic studies act. Many other people had provided written statements to the Assembly Committee, but she felt that it was important that she was present and deliver her words directly.

She noted that, "to see people coming together and helping me and me helping them definitely does give you the confidence. Because if I fall down, there's someone who won't, and say something." When asked to describe the event in one word, Ayo chose "community," reflecting her understanding of collective action and acknowledging that through her testimony she spoke for a group of students and families that would benefit from the incorporation of ethnic studies into Rhode Island school curriculum. Community also represented the people that shared the opportunity with her and helped her to prepare her testimony.

Ayo's perspective reflected a strong degree of hope that stemmed from her confidence in her own experience and the practice of agency. It had a quiet strength in the assumption that as people heard about the experience of the absence of Ethnic Studies, they would think differently. *Thinking* is a verb of choice throughout her interviews. Ayo *thought* about her testimony, how

people responded to it and how it made her feel, and also projected this process of *thinking* onto those who heard her testimony and would *think* about the implications of the experiences she and others shared. Ayo presented a tangible example of the underlying theme of critical thinking across the participants in this study. Her conceptualization resonated with others to suggest that the act of thinking itself was agency as Youth explored identity and their power to understand and change issues around them. The reaction participants had to other Youth who articulated their experiences and thoughts reaffirmed the power of sharing critical thinking amongst Youth.

**Exploring leadership.** Ayo articulated the opportunities to experience agency through Young Voices as developing leadership. She shared that the first few Board meetings left her confused as they were based in discussions held prior to her joining, and described how Board members had to explain things to her and she asked questions to be sure she understood. When asked why she agreed to join the Board, Ayo responded:

What was enticing about it was the *leadership* part of it because I was never one to take the lead in anything. So I wanted to give it a chance. I always let other people lead because I didn't feel like it, or I just didn't think I was brave enough to. So I let other people lead. And then I was *thinking*, this is my chance to finally do something that's nice.

In this statement Ayo acknowledged her own journey from being 'one to take the lead' to finally assuming a leadership role. This echoed the safe environment participants described in the Youth space and spoke to the continual process of learning and growth Youth identified.

Ayo not only stepped up to take on a leadership role in an adult-shared space, but also agreed to facilitate Youth days for the Our Schools Providence collaboration, which worked on the campaign to incorporate Ethnic Studies in schools. She described how her friend from

Young Voices first “signed them up” to facilitate and as she “got used to it,” she “started signing us up.” The courage to try new things, even when they make her feel uncomfortable, and then learn how to master them characterizes Ayo’s agency journey. Ayo shared that she was “really nervous at first,” and “wasn’t sure if I was doing it right, but I think I’m ok now.” A friend drew her into the process, and she learned how to facilitate in an audience of her own peers. Ayo described the experience as follows:

I'm usually excited when I'm facilitating the Youth days because it's always so loud and it's kind of, it's fun. So, I don't feel nervous or anything when I'm facilitating because it's like we're already having fun and I don't really think about it. ... And I'm speaking to my own audience people.

This quote indicated that Youth accept the leadership of other Youth and that Youth facilitators are not threatened by the ‘loud’ energy but see it as ‘fun’ and feel amongst their ‘own audience’ or peers in these environments. When I asked what she meant by ‘loud,’ Ayo’s explanation reflected the sense of freedom in Youth spaces: “It’s louder when there's less adults because they're not afraid to say what they want to say ... because they are surrounded by more people in their audience.” Ayo described being amongst Youth as being in her ‘own audience’ and the feeling of ‘fun’ and feeling comfortable in this dynamic were shared across participants.

Ayo also described the dynamic of these meetings as having more movement, and Youth weren’t afraid to criticize the agenda or points that were made through non-verbal ‘eye rolls,’ or verbally contesting the agenda. Ayo shared an example of how she managed the facilitation: “I do feel stronger in my opinion when it’s Youth days. If they're like, ‘no this is stupid.’ I'm like, ‘why is it stupid?’ And, you know, sort of challenge them.” This quote demonstrates that the experience of power in these spaces is shared, and Ayo recognized her own role as a facilitator

and also held space for the opinions of Youth. Ayo also emphasized the importance of agency, or doing something to effect change, and tapped into the collective energy of the Youth space. Ayo shared that the collective work of Youth days made her “feel lighter when I’m leading. It’s motivation to do things because I wasn’t sitting bored. I was actually *doing something* during the meetings.” The word she chose to describe facilitating Youth days was “exciting,” which reflected the vivacity of the meetings and her role as a leader.

Overall, Ayo reflected on the different opportunities to exercise agency as a process of pushing herself to reach her potential:

I feel it was a desire to want to do better for myself because I never thought I would be doing this now. I always thought that I would let other people talk and I would just be agreeing and sitting there not really expressing my own thoughts.

When asked what changed to bring her from not speaking in middle school to facilitating meetings as a high school sophomore, Ayo explained the following:

I think what changed was the opportunities that were given to me because the opportunities I had before, there weren't a lot of them. And then when they were given it was, it wasn't really a Youth space. It was more like adults talking to Youth... Just *being able to lead* in them changed.

In this quote Ayo reflected on the experience of learning through opportunities to exercise agency and was aware of the constraints set on this agency in different settings. To practice leadership, Ayo cultivated new skills, such as facilitation, through which she contested the constraints of adult-led meetings enabling Youth to openly express differing views and not seeking to control movement and ‘loudness’ typically curtailed in adult facilitation. In her experience of testifying to support Ethnic Studies, Ayo underscored the importance of validating

her own identity and experiences, being able to do something for future generations, and how her agency would provide a model to other Youth.

### **Cathy's Agency Journey**

**Engaging in the Counselors Not Cops campaign.** Cathy's entry into the Youth space began in the era of COVID and Black Lives Matter. Whereas Ayo and Hillary were motivated to engage with Youth groups by their friends, Cathy found Youth groups on social media. Cathy was attracted to the *Counselors Not Cops* campaign through the social media of Youth organizations and the posts of specific Youth associated with Providence groups. She followed the hashtag around the *Counselors Not Cops (CNC)* campaign and then did additional research by reading the articles these posts linked to and searching other articles on the same topic. Her sources ranged from New York Times articles to various studies, to testimonies of Youth themselves.

Cathy was inspired by Youth who were posting things that she also thought about and from which she could learn more. She was attracted to the shift in power where she saw Youth 'taking the lead' and addressing issues that were important to them. She noted that Youth were 'in control' of these spaces. Cathy also acknowledged that she had to be vigilant about the choices she made which informed her research and engagement in discussion with the Youth on social media.

Although Cathy herself did not march in the CNC walkout, she supported the march through promoting it on her social media and answering logistical questions the days of the marches. Her role in the march was important and she "felt like a leader" doing this, and also felt that the marchers were doing this for "them and me." As she exercised the agency of her logistical role, Cathy was 'scared she might mess up.' When asked what that would look like,

she replied, “say the wrong thing. Do the wrong thing. Support the wrong things.” This expressed the awareness she had of the implications of her participation, which resonated with the sense of responsibility participants had in exploring the opportunities to exercise agency that were presented to them through Youth organizations. Cathy’s approach complemented Ayo’s awareness of how her modeling of power through testimony was seen by other Youth, and the importance of taking responsibility to be present for her testimony in the RI Assembly.

As will be highlighted below, Cathy had stepped into what Lilian, who was a key organizer and speaker in the march, discussed as a space created for agency so that everyone can participate in the way that best suits them. Negative repercussions from school administrators and her parents drove Cathy’s decision not to march, and yet she felt proud that the marches took place and was proud of her role in supporting them. Similarly, Hillary also wanted to attend the march, but her parents did not allow her to. Hillary acknowledged the community, “I appreciate the people that did march. But also, I know there were people at home supporting too.” Recognizing supporters that could not be seen showed an understanding of Youth agency in that it runs more broadly and deeply than just the people with the megaphones.

**“Looking for the best for our upcoming generation.”** Consistent with her interest in research and with her upbringing, Cathy researched the Counselors Not Cops (CNC) campaign before she decided to participate. Part of the reason Cathy felt the urge to participate in the CNC campaign was because “people in our community are looking for the best for *our upcoming generation*.” She was proud to feel “like a leader in my community.” Cathy defined community as Youth in her school, in her class and others that she may never physically meet but who shared and supported her interests. Her description echoed Ayo’s experience of leadership and community. The word Cathy chose to articulate her involvement in the *Counselors Not Cops*

march was “joy”: “Joy being part of my community. It includes increasing inclusiveness.” When asked to expound, Cathy shared ‘inclusiveness’ was not only around the themes of the March, but also the experience of: “Taking charge and just being together. So included as a *leader*. Like *being a leader and leading*.” Cathy, like Ayo, associated the exploration of power and agency as being a leader and gave emphasis to the opportunity and action of ‘leading.’ For example, when she responded to the texts about logistics she felt: “Like a leader, like I’m leading my community.” The notion of community was one Cathy had thought about, “It goes back to the community theme and taking a stand and taking a position in your society. Being a change and bring your voice for people that can’t.” Having experienced the March Cathy noted, “We feel like our new generation is in great hands,” using ‘we’ and speaking into the community of Youth.

In summing up her experience of exercising agency through the *Counselors Not Cops* March where she was able to ‘do something’ for ‘upcoming generations,’ Cathy used the words “summer day joy.” When asked to explain this conceptualization, she expounded: “Just fun. Free spirited. And just taking, *having control* of your day and your schedule. Uh huh. That’s summer joy.” Her conceptualization of ‘summer joy’ captured the essence of Youth spaces in not feeling monitored and being able to experience freedom in knowing that you have power to set your own agenda around what is important to you.

Across her interviews, learning and expanding her knowledge was important to Cathy. She moved to convert knowledge into agency which was illustrated by her use of the word, “informative,” acknowledging, “I don’t know if that’s a verb.” In paraphrasing her statements, I substituted “informed” as an adjective to capture her comments on wanting to be more knowledgeable about topics, but she insisted on using the word “informative” as a verb,

suggesting agency. She conceptualized this as the knowledge she needed to build and share for advocacy, explaining:

I feel like as the year goes by, as we go, there're always more issues arising in our community. And I want to be an advocate for these issues. In order to be an advocate or be somebody that is in a leadership position, you have to be educated and you have to be *informative* about what was going on and why the issues arose.

When asked to explain the link between being educated and advocacy, Cathy explained: “If you're uneducated, you can't speak or analyze topics because you're not aware of what's going on around you.” The importance of being aware of and actively learning about the issues around oneself and being able to analyze them is an important basis of agency that was raised across the participants and is a core value of the Youth organizations.

Cathy's agency journey occupied the spaces designed for entry into emancipatory educational activities with full understanding but low risk in actions. Preparing posters and letting folks know where to meet on social media involved Cathy in the CNC walkout in a meaningful way that she was proud of, while also enabling her to navigate the constraints of her household. In participating in the emancipatory education initiatives Cathy felt part of the larger Youth collective agency. Cathy echoed the aspect of learning about issues in her community that was an element shared across participants in recounting their agency journeys. She also emphasized the satisfaction, joy, and pride in seeing Youth exercising agency in public spaces for the present and future generations.

### **Lilian's Agency Journey**

Cathy occupied an agency space that Lilian deliberately created. Lilian was the participant with the most experience, having begun to engage in social movements and Youth



organizations when she was in seventh grade around the Parkland school shooting. For Lilian, agency carried a sense of accomplishment. The phrase “I did that” or “we did that” was a refrain throughout her interviews and suggested a sense of power and agency associated with Youth action which was critical given a general environment of systemic oppression and limited space to control agendas and exercise power in adult-led spaces. The acknowledgement and ownership of Youth contributions and power to cause something to happen appeared throughout the interviews with all five participants, not as braggadocio, but rather to confirm evidence of the concerted efforts Youth undertook.

Lilian’s more recent participation in emancipatory education initiatives included being a member of the Leadership Team at PSU, participating on the state Civics Education task force, and being on the organizing team for various campaigns, including Counselors Not Cops education action and marches during COVID in 2021; Know Your Rights promoting the Student Bill of Rights to establish education that treats students with dignity and respect; and Denim Day action and march on raising awareness on sexual assault.

**Learning in the change space.** Lilian had extensive experience in issues such as climate change and the arts in addition to Youth spaces. She reflected on how spaces of change can be intimidating in terms of jargon that is cast about around social justice which made her doubt whether she could make claims to the space. Lilian shared the following observation: “My freshman year of high school there were so many terms I had to learn so quickly. In this social justice environment.” She sometimes questioned, “Do I really belong here? Because I don't know what they're talking about,” referring to the other organizers in the space. Lilian initially felt she needed to learn more to be a legitimate actor in the social organizing space. She used the

example of racial inequity and asked, “What does that really mean?” wondering, “Can I even be working? Can I do the things I want to do?” She shared her self-questioning around this:

I'm not the most well-versed in this. ‘Does that matter?’ I think it matters because everybody else is talking about that. But then. Slowly figuring out that it's okay not to know everything, like you will learn it as you go. And I think that's why PSU is my ally. I've been able to learn as I go.

Lilian’s agency journey included her own doubts as to whether she belonged in the protest space. She was initially intimidated by the complexity of concepts and the vocabulary of these spaces and wondered if she belonged in these public protest spaces. Lilian identified “PSU as my ally” because it offered her opportunities to learn along the way and to be “able to ask questions and not feel judged,” which enabled her to build her confidence in public leadership. Other participants also articulated the importance of Youth spaces providing a sense of belonging and a space to grow into leadership and opportunities to exercise agency. Despite the support, Lilian shared she still had moments where she ‘doubts herself’ or was scared to speak in front of a public crowd. She found ways to manage her emotions during these events as she explained:

You just have to say, ‘Okay, we got this. We can do this.’ And then when you’re with the people you know support you or who are helping you. Or even if its’ your peers that show up in support of you or for the cause that you care about... it’s a sense of relief. Like ‘I can do this.’ So yeah, it’s really just happy.

In the quote above, Lilian described the practical and physical experience of leading in agency, and the ‘relief’ that peers brought in their support and to remind her she was leading because this kind of work was important and ‘happy.’

**Creating spaces to exercise agency.** Lilian's efforts to make meaning of her situation and learn from the experience transferred into her vision of creating a space for agency for other Youth. She described her goal to offer opportunities for Youth to participate in emancipatory educational initiatives from various entry points. Her goal was to:

*Create that agency for other students.* Even if they're not say, if they're not on leadership team and they're just a general member, or just a Youth in the community that would like to learn more and to figure out how to advocate for themselves and their peers... So just being able to *create that space* and be in these spaces with other Youth and in coalition work.

Having participated in many emancipatory education initiatives, Lilian had seen cases where having had that first moment, Youth continued on agency journeys and became leaders. For Lilian, creating those opportunities for Youth was powerful. When asked for a word to describe this experience, she responded, "I think *joyous* would be my word." This feeling of joy stood with the sadness and heaviness participants experienced around the issues of injustice they confronted. The feeling of joy was coupled with the experience of agency, where Youth were able to drive the agenda and do something for themselves and others. For example, Lilian shared the following:

We may have those things... that that come at us, but at the end... Being able to do that... especially people when it's their first time speaking and just being able to create those spaces for them. It's really a joyous occasion.

Participants were measured in their understanding of agency and though they recognized their achievements, they did not think that causal change would come quickly. The interviews reflected a persistent belief that engagement of Youth and their enactment of agency were

needed to address the different things that ‘come at them’ and provide community to one another in seeking change. Lilian’s commitment to change came from a belief in involving more Youth in agency for the wins that will come, and also for the youth to feel they can ‘do something.’

Lilian deliberately constructed these spaces for agency with other members of the Youth leadership team at PSU offering various ‘ways Youth can be involved.’ Lilian spoke to the active design of different paths to agency:

You don't have to be the one at the forefront of a walk-out or an action. You can be on an art and design team. You can be the one creating the fire, spreading the news, posting on social media. You could be the one helping to create the banners... you can contribute to change in any way.

As seen in Hillary and Cathy’s experience, these roles enabled the experience of agency and were respected across the Youth community.

**Practicing leadership and managing threats.** Lilian described clear personal threats she received both online and by counter-protesters as she led the Counselors Not Cops marches during the height of COVID restrictions and Black Lives Matter Protests. The visibility around these marches attracted the attention of factions opposed to the ideas she represented. She shared her response to a right-wing podcast about Youth activities she had led:

Now that you've said all these horrible things about us. People know where we live. God forbid one of the people who follows you takes it into their own hands to come to our houses. To come into our neighborhoods and potentially harm us. Comes to our schools and harms us... So it was really a fear.

Lilian understood the threat when the home addresses and schools of her and other Youth activists were shared publicly. Given these threats and the emotional toll this took on her and

other Youth, Lilian practiced self-agency in taking care of herself to manage both her fear and commitment to action. She described this as “picking your battles:”

Sometimes we're like, ‘you know, we're going to protest.’ Or, ‘you know, we'll stay home,’ or we won't be active on social media or things like that. But really. Seeing and having [the threats] was really like having to mature quick too. And understand.

Many of the participants shared the need to ‘mature’ quickly or that it was difficult to have to ‘understand’ things at a young age when they discussed the early recognition of systemic oppression and how it affected them and their peers. Participants learned to lean into community and understood when to call in help and when to take a step back and take care of themselves. The Youth space offered understanding and encouraged self-care decisions.

**Effecting change now.** Lilian’s work in creating spaces for others to explore their agency became part of her own sense of identity, and she was proud the community recognized her organizing work. She reflected on the significance of her agency journey:

This whole journey that I've been on since finding out in seventh grade and then to now. Seeing how much I've done and what I've done. And being able to give a part of my energy to other students, and then having them lead the work now is really rewarding.

Lilian underscored the importance of supporting future generations to have ‘them lead.’ She understood the commitment of people that had come before her in social change who ‘cared about her’ and wanted to make a better world so she didn’t have to live through what they did. But sadly, she noted, “I *did* have to live this.” Now she felt the mantle had been passed to her:

Now the work that I do is to, well, I'm going to do what the other people said. I want to be able to make sure that no other student or no other kid or family has to go through

racial tragedies, has to go through climate tragedies that are affecting them. Just really taking on those questions and seeing what that looks like.

Lilian managed the complexity of her belief in creating spaces for agency for Youth, her realization that threats in the space were real at a collective and personal level, with an abiding commitment to make changes for future generations. Lilian was inspired and motivated by the power and continuity of the Youth space:

Being with PSU for four years and seeing the kids who were ahead of me graduate and go to college, and now the kids that are under me coming up into their sophomore, junior or senior years. Just seeing what that looks like and then putting them out into events or things like that. Or having them facilitate our workshops.

Lilian recognized that just as people before her had not been able to realize all the changes they had wanted to see, her collective efforts in Youth agency may not always bring victory in the moment. However, she also understood that the process of exercising agency was powerful and often incremental in progress. Lilian described the often incremental nature of change and claimed a feeling of joy from Youth social actions:

We may not get what we want in that moment. But we have other successes that come out of it. If we have other events or other people that we are able to network and connect with that are helpful to us in our organization and our Youth at the end of the day. So I think 'joyous' would be my word.

As the above account demonstrates, Lilian's agency journey began with questioning why people were taking to the streets to protest. As she entered the protest space herself around "racial tragedies" and social justice, she initially doubted herself when she didn't understand words or concepts that were used. She then understood that she could learn along the way and this

experience informed her goal of creating different avenues for Youth to practice agency. In contesting policies through education and action, Lilian took a long-term view and understood offering more Youth the space to explore and exercise agency was as important as progress on specific campaign themes.

### **Stella's Agency Journey**

Like Cathy, Stella joined PSU during the COVID pandemic and initially participated virtually. She described her early transition from listening during COVID to wanting to speak, learn, and lead in the following way:

Over the summer was when I joined PSU and even though the pandemic was going on, there were a lot of virtual meetings, and I attended a lot of virtual workshops. I wouldn't even say anything either. I would just go in them and had my camera on and just like watch and hear other people speak. And I would take that in. And I did that for a whole summer.

After learning from the workshops and witnessing Youth exercise their agency by facilitating meetings, designing campaigns, and generally speaking their minds, Stella engaged:

Then I realized that I really wanted to have my voice heard as well, and I wanted to be the person to speak first so that other people who were maybe like me and shy or scared about what could happen to them could feel like they also had someone to go to. Or that you can still do that at my school and still, like, everything would be okay.

The progression Stella described informed her leadership in the Youth space. Stella was drawn to Youth that shared their experience and curated spaces for learning for other Youth. Stella took advantage of this for her own growth. In acknowledging that students from her high school might be “scared,” she recognized the symbolic power of her participation in the collaborative

Youth space as a top student at her elite high school where competition between students was rewarded. In “making her voice heard,” she opened space for others to do the same. Stella echoed Ayo in understanding that her actions served as a model for other Youth.

Stella was initially inspired by Youth who spoke in workshops and meetings in Youth-led spaces and then took up a more vocal role realizing that she could motivate others through fighting against injustice in her way, thus empowering others to do the same.

Stella’s ongoing commitment to Youth spaces came from the realization of “wanting to surround myself with individuals and organizations that give me or allot me the time to be able to have *meaningful conversations in my life.*” Like critical thinking discussed above, the desire to have ‘meaningful conversations’ was an act of agency that informed the collective space and actions designed to do something for future generations.

**Leadership in emancipatory initiatives.** Since her involvement as a Freshman in the Youth space, Stella participated in a broad spectrum of Youth actions, and her role as a member of the PSU Leadership Team gave her a key role in the planning and implementation of many events. Her participation included advocating for the Rhode Island Civics Literacy Act of 2021, the *Counselors Not Cops* campaign, and Our Schools Providence (as was Ayo) that worked to incorporate Ethnic Studies in the RI school curriculum.

Stella also highlighted the initiatives she had taken within her High School. She noted working in the school space is “a little bit harder because you have to make the space yourself by starting a committee, or a club or group, that allows for this to happen.” Participants expressed the importance of opening spaces for Youth agency to work on different issues within school settings which would involve close work with adult allies amongst teachers, school administrators, and Providence Public School District officials. Stella was one of the founders of



the school's Racial Equity Committee that "works in conjunction with Classical administration to make sure that our students are receiving equitable opportunities and resources, but also have a safe space to come and talk about the issues that are happening at school." This was a significant initiative that hosted a "Respect Conference" three times a year involving middle schools and high schools throughout Providence. Stella facilitated these meetings to support schools to develop goals and action plans around racial equity to the Providence Schools' Equity Office. Stella described this as "a way to not only bring high schoolers together, but also to start that work in middle schools." Stella opened spaces for Youth voice and agency within the schools, enabling the practice of agency for students and engaging schoolteachers and administrators to support and learn from this space.

**Contesting systems.** Given the vast array of experience Stella had in emancipatory education initiatives and her emphasis on Youth spaces, in the interview, I was initially surprised she chose to focus on her class rank reform campaign. Class ranking is a common practice in schools to assign a sequential number to students based on their grade point average. Stella's class rank campaign addressed how class rank was communicated and utilized to foster a highly competitive and non-collaborative environment amongst students at her school. Stella chose this campaign to emphasize the importance of finding tangible entry points to address the conflict between a highly competitive environment in the school space and the collaborative environment she articulated as necessary for personal growth, learning, and collective agency characteristic of Youth spaces.

Stella did extensive research on the issue of class rank and shared the document with her principal but received no response. She then approached a local journalist who specialized in school issues who published an article in the local newspaper utilizing the research that Stella

had done. When the principal saw this, he called her into the office with the Assistant Principal to express his discontent with her ‘going to the press,’ despite the fact she had shared the document with him previously and received no response. Stella was not satisfied with the outcome of the meeting and enlisted Providence Public School Administrative staff and one of her white male peers from the Racial Equity Committee to have a subsequent meeting, in essence orchestrating a do-over of the meeting. This example demonstrated her resourcefulness and keen awareness of the power dynamics of how she, as a young Black woman, was perceived as lesser than despite the fact she ranked in the top ten of her graduating class. Stella searched for words to describe the essence of this experience:

I could say for my class rank campaign how I felt... Yeah it was... it was odd because I felt very empowered. But at the same time, I also felt suppressed. Like I was trying to be like... Suppressed. People were trying to suppress me.

Stella captured this contradiction poignantly noting she felt both ‘empowered’ and ‘suppressed.’ Powerful in her ability to undertake the research that made her confident in her position and to draw on her support groups, juxtaposed with the fact that her own school administrators tried to ‘suppress’ her attempt to change the class rank system regardless of her ability to exceed in the standards set by the school and her careful research and proposal around the issue. This experience resonated the threat and fear she mentioned that other students from her school might experience in speaking out. Cathy corroborated this threat when she shared ‘being afraid of saying the wrong thing’ at school. Although the threat in this instance was not the physical threat Lilian and students faced, there was a tangible threat to Stella and her vision of change.

Stella was aware of the positions of the different actors in her meetings and her task in navigating the interests and opinions of these actors. Although she was successful in launching

the discussion of the class rank process, she was skeptical about the commitments the administrators made, saying “I’ll be watching.” In practicing her leadership in the school setting, Stella wagered her success in the school’s merit-based system to contest the practice of the class ranking system. Although her ultimate success was uncertain, she was able to learn and adapt through this exercise of agency. As a graduating senior who had ranked in the top ten of her class, the class rank campaign Stella waged had no direct impact on her. As she explained in the interview, she contested the policy for the sake of future generations of students.

*“How we want to fight our fight.”* Across her interviews, Stella was clear in her theoretical analysis of systemic oppression and shared concrete examples from her own lived experiences and the institutions she interfaced with. She understood the impact of capitalism at the institutional level (school competitiveness), individual level (false promise of hard work) and, and systemic level (gate kept resources and education), and further understood their contributions to larger inequities in society. Stella’s systemic understanding had a strong presence in both her personal learning journey recounted in the last chapter and in her agency journey shared here. Stella had come to terms with her position reflecting: “I think it's really interesting being able to stand in how I feel now and being fine with it. Even if I'm standing in a place where the majority may not agree.” This statement reveals her strong sense of identity and learning that enabled her to take a clear stand, and even change issues, regardless of whether or not the majority supported her. Stella was clear in ‘navigating to her own lens.’

### **Conclusion**

This chapter revealed that Youth built on the experience of freedom cultivated in youth-led spaces to express their identity, thoughts, and feelings, and empathize and support one another in Youth spaces to deliberately create collective spaces for learning and imagination. The

collective experience of exploring identity was intrinsically linked to participant personal journeys of exploration and exercise of agency. The agency journeys of the participants illustrated that opportunities to explore and exercise power enabled Youth to learn through agency, practice leadership, and contest inequitable policies or practices. Although the entry point to Youth spaces, the emancipatory educational initiatives they engaged in, and their agency journeys were distinct, participants shared a common desire to ‘do something for future generations’ and experienced ‘happiness and joy’ in their agency.

## Chapter 7: Discussion

### Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the main findings in relation to the conceptual framework and literature review. The conceptual framework of education as a means and end to freedom combines an individual vision of the kind of life one has reason to value and “the expansion of human capability to lead more worthwhile and free lives” (Sen, 2000, p. 295). This framework is useful in conceptualizing the participants’ personal reflections on their identity, or how they integrate their multiple identities, and their individual and collective agency through emancipatory educational initiatives. The personal and collective experiences participants shared confirmed the importance of the studies themes of identity, agency, and emancipatory education. The Youth journeys of learning and agency presented in this study will be discussed in relation to the societal and developmental contradictions (Kirshner, 2015) of the social position of Youth, collective spaces for social imagination (Gutiérrez & Johnson, 2017), and conceptualization of Youth resistance (Fordham, 2014; Kirshner, 2015; Noguera, Ginwright & Cammoratta, 2006).

This discussion will explore the findings at both the personal and collective levels presented in the previous chapters responding to the study’s main research question: *How do the lived experiences of emancipatory education initiatives inform and reflect the processes through which Youth of Color make meaning of their identity and form a sense of agency?* This question was particularly relevant to the context of Providence during the period that Youth reflected upon in their interviews. Youths’ journeys through emancipatory educational initiatives and their processes of making meaning of their identity and how they chose to exercise agency took place during a period of educational and social disruption defined by the confluence of the public

recognition of school failings, the isolation and disruption of COVID restrictions, and the events and protests of the Black Lives Matter movement.

### **Primacy of Youth Perspective**

The phenomenological approach of this study centered the participants' articulation of their lived experiences in emancipatory learning and how their experience informed their agency. Seidman (2019) defines lived experience "as that yet-unreflected-upon experience that makes up" our days (p. 23). Although the interviews did support new reflection on lived experience, they also provided an invitation for participants to share reflections and ruminations they were typically not asked to share. The design of the study was based solely on participant reflections and did not draw on news articles, social media, or other perspectives to corroborate participant stories. This choice was made to maintain the primacy of participant reflections and enabled me to journey unencumbered with the participants as they shared their experiences and reflections without the need to check their stories.

The research design afforded me the liberty to focus only on the participants' experiences and meaning making through a series of three individual interviews (see Annex B) with each participant (Seidman, 2019). The tension between "self-making and being-made by power relations" (Foucault, 1989, 1991, as cited in Ong, 1996, p. 737) marked the journeys Youth traveled. Focusing only on participant recounting and interpretation of events also addressed the risk of research contributing to systemic racism that Tuck & Yang (2014b) critique by utilizing a desire-based framework through which participants spoke "not only [of] the painful elements of social and psychic realities, but also the textured acumen and hope" (Tuck, 2010, p. 644). I explored participant experiences at the personal and collective levels to better understand how

the lived experiences of emancipatory education initiatives informed and reflected the processes through which Youth of Color made meaning of their identity and formed a sense of agency.

Chapter Five explored the personal processes Youth shared around their experience of making sense of their identity while seeking to understand and contest societal systems that attempted to define them. Though the experience of each participant was unique, analysis of the interviews demonstrated that each participant was aware of their various identities, and described how they navigated and explored them. These processes were supported and challenged in different spaces, highlighting participant acumen in navigating and expanding the freedom available to them based upon the perception of their identities in different spaces. Most notably Youth differentiated between Youth-led spaces and adult-led spaces and explored the systemic influences in each of these spaces.

Youth personal experiences revealed how the confluent events of COVID restrictions and the Black Lives Matter protests proffered an array of choices and time for Youth to ruminate on how they felt about and understood issues of social injustice unfolding in society around them. As they participated in remote learning, students viewed the protests which were widely shared in the news media and on social media. In observing, and sometimes joining protests, participants registered the public's, particularly Youth's, reactions to social justice issues. The disjuncture between what they were learning in school and what they observed in society prompted reflection. The interviews revealed how Youth contested the absence of their identity and issues they cared about in classroom discussions in their formal education. To address the absence of their history and experiences in the classroom, Youth turned to non-formal education and embarked on personal learning journeys that included research and seeking discussions with like-minded Youth. Additionally, Youth articulated the school disruption alleviated the constant

pressure and expectations of the adult-led educational agenda and enabled them to research issues of interest to them. As they researched these issues, participants found Youth-led discussions and campaigns provided perspective that resonated with their individual ruminations and research.

Chapter Six explored how the experiences of defining identity, particularly in collaboration with like-minded Youth, contributed to the exercise of agency. Analysis of the experiences Youth shared through the interviews revealed that building on the experience of freedom to express their identity, thoughts, and feelings, and empathize and support one another, Youth deliberately created collective spaces for learning and imagination. Youth experienced freedom and transposed this experience into agency to further conditions of freedom (addressing injustices) in society for future generations like them. This last finding links back to the first finding of the Youth's awareness of how systemic influences circumscribe the opportunities available to them and that these influences can be impacted through the exercise of agency.

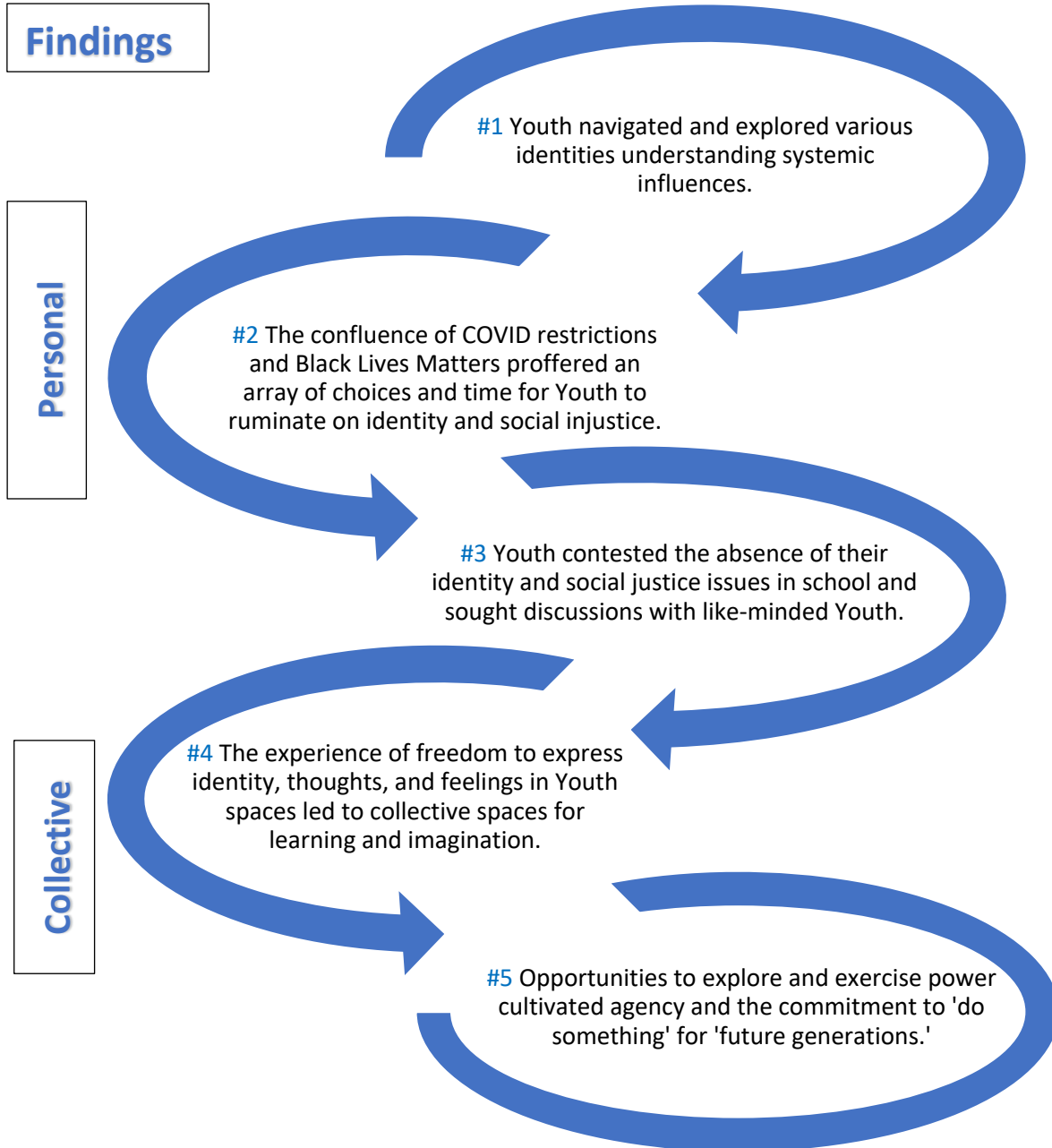
The participant interviews revealed that Youth conceptualized their learning about their identity and issues of social justice that impacted them as a journey, not an outcome. The process they described was iterative in pursuing individual reflection and research and bringing that to the collective space where they could discuss, explore, and compare their own journeys and reflections on identity to those of their peers. Sharing with their peers in the collective space enabled them to critique one another and also themselves and their relationship to their multiple social and cultural identities. The participant conceptualization of learning as a journey captured a continuous process where engaging with new information reflected their journey and also informed new areas of exploration.



Participants also articulated their experience of agency as a journey through which they observed how other Youth translated their power into agency to change conditions. These observations of like-minded peers and the opportunities created for them in Youth-led spaces, enabled participants to convert opportunities for leadership and engagement in emancipatory education initiatives into their own practice of agency. Youth deliberately created spaces for their peers to experience agency by designing multiple entry points, or means, to be involved in emancipatory education initiatives including public positioning, such as giving speeches at rallies, to less public but equally important roles of developing materials and managing logistics. Individual Youth learning and agency journeys found purpose in immediate actions for their community of peers and actions to prevent future generations from having to experience the injustices they did.

**Figure 3**

*Summary of Findings*



### **Exploring Identity & Navigating Spaces**

Given the absence of Ethnic Studies and Civics Education in the school curriculum in Providence, Youth organizations played an important role in holding space for marginalized Youth of Color to frame an identity they could understand for themselves (self-making) in relationship to the history and narratives that were etched upon them and their families by their country of origin and of their country of settlement in an interplay of state power interests. This cultural citizenship (Ong, 1996) provided an important complement as many immigrants came from a marginalized status within their own countries (Indigenous, refugees) which added additional dimensions to the web of oppressive systems that marginalized the experience of Youth of Color (including Immigrants) in the U. S., and specifically in Providence.

The findings revealed Youth deliberately explored and navigated their various identities and understood the systemic influences in how societal perceptions of them defined the opportunities available to them in different spaces. At the personal level, participants emphasized that their identity as Youth limited their opportunities to express themselves, particularly in the adult controlled school spaces where they felt they had to censor their opinions and actions to conform. Situating the experience of Youth in school within the observation made by Tuck & Yang (2014a) that compulsory schooling is a key societal condition for Youth underscores the power of adult control in school spaces. Within the conceptual framing of freedom as the means and end to education (Sen, 2000), adult control of school spaces is problematic in its failure to achieve institutionally defined learning outcomes and to provide a safe and secure environment for students, both in terms of physical infrastructure and spaces to feel safe in expressing opinions. Participants were attuned to the expectations to succeed in school and ‘have the right answers’ which inhibited their sense of freedom to ask questions and

share experiences. Although schools are predominantly inhabited by Youth, participants navigated the adult expectations for their learning and behavior in the school space.

The participants demonstrated emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) in their discernment of how they were perceived by different actors, particularly in the school setting, as they described incidents of racism and adultism and drew meaning from these experiences. This contrasts with the common tropes of Youth described by Males (1999) which assume that “young people are apathetic, self-absorbed, and apolitical” (as referenced in Roholt, et al., 2018, p. 1). The findings demonstrated that Youth were aware of the stigma and constraints associated with their Youth identity and both navigated them and advocated to expand their opportunities. For example, they promoted the “Student Bill of Rights” better positioning Youth to participate in decisions that affect them as outlined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Participants also highlighted their socio-economic and racial identity in the context of systemic influences in schooling such as ‘tracking’ children at a young age and the disparity between schools based on the economic level of communities. Linked to this was their recognition of the absence of their culture and history in school curriculum. In the school setting, participant every day experiences resonated with the description of the effect of cultural hegemony in school curriculum that Paris & Alim (2017) describe where “students and families [are] asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures and histories in order to achieve in school” (p.1).

In terms of agency at the personal level, or the decisions they made about how to present themselves in different spaces, Youth referenced managing the choices they made in expressing their identity. For example, by understanding the cultural differences between their immigrant

culture and the US culture, they deliberately chose to ‘fit in’ to US cultural values or ‘stand’ in values their family expected from them despite the fact this made them ‘stand out.’ As Youth had greater opportunities to explore their identities in collective spaces, they often noted being ‘more comfortable’ in themselves, or ‘standing their ground’ even when others did not agree with them. The choices participants made in asserting their identity in the classroom were also described in relation to public bureaucratic forms where Youth described how ‘checking the boxes’ limited their expression of their multiple ethnicities or races. Youth recognized society’s compulsion to categorize them which illuminates Sen’s (2000) theory that “the freedom of agency that we individually have is inescapably qualified and constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities that are available to us” (p. xii). Youth frustration with public forms not only reflected their inability to express their identity as they understood it, but also their understanding that classifications of their identity affected their future opportunities.

The notion of individual agency participants exercised was closely linked to learning and research. Before Youth became involved in collective emancipatory initiatives, they often sought to learn independently. Each of the participants referred to individual research they had undertaken to understand issues of interest to them. Emancipatory learning, or learning that was self-motivated and directed, was described as a means for Youth to explore their identity and how their identity was situated in different issues of social injustice. The deliberate process of independent research participants undertook echoed an aspect of agency captured by Foucault (1990) who asserted “there is no employment of knowledge that does not also constitute a utilization of power” (as cited in Levinson, 2011, p. 150). Youth exercised agency by wielding power in expanding their knowledge through research and taking decisions to select topics and

explore sources of interest to them. Here, agency manifests itself as using their power to change their own knowledge, a precursor to their social action.

### **Rumination In a Time of Disruption**

In the interviews, Youth reflected on their experiences during high school, which was marked by the confluence of COVID restrictions, social injustice, protests of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the Providence School Takeover in which their schools had been declared to be failing them. The catalytic combination of these factors is evident in Youth ruminations on their identity, agency, and learning. Participants were aware of the racial over-representation in police shootings and COVID mortality and morbidity and understood their very identity was a threat to their survival. Freire (1970) captures this dynamic in observing that, “students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge” (p. 81). Youth were motivated to respond to the issues of social injustice around them and by the protestors exercising their agency in challenging these issues in public forums. The agency journeys of participants in this study were marked by growing awareness of issues around them and the inspiration of their peers taking action and creating spaces for Youth agency. In essence, there were issues to be addressed, Youth of Color modeled how they could be addressed, and participants utilized spaces created by Youth led organizations to develop and exercise agency.

Participants were forced to confront the existential threats based on their identities in terms of the disproportionate morbidity and mortality of Black and Brown people from COVID *and* the brutality of police violence and murder and the risk of police interactions from participating in protests. One impact of the COVID restrictions was for Youth to spend more time at home which was a safer space to explore their ethnic and racial identities and process the

news. Their deliberations over if and when to protest, often conducted with family members and factoring in school restrictions, underscored the relation between their identities, as Youth and People of Color, and the health and security risks of demonstrating.

During this time of confinement and rumination, Youth observed the agency of large numbers of people, including Youth, through the protests that were aired on television and social media. Many participants reflected on the “whys” of the protestors who took to the streets in record numbers. Over half of the participants did not participate in the Black Lives Matters protests due to parental restrictions; however, they voiced their support for the protests and even ‘wished’ they had been able to participate. Regardless of whether or not they participated in the protests, Youth experienced the fundamental equation of agency: the realization of social injustice and the choice to respond despite clear risks. The process of conscientization (Freire, 1990) was furthered as Youth analyzed the events around them, became more aware of the implications for them, and contested oppressive systems.

At a personal level, the confluence of school and social disruption facilitated reflection on “how do I feel about these events?” Many participants shared that they were not asked how they felt about the events transpiring around the BLM marches and did not feel safe talking about them at school. For participants, the absence of dialogue regarding the protests and the impact of COVID in their communities and the failure to engage their feelings around how this affected them underscored the dissonance between their own experiences and what they were taught in school. Kirshner (2015) refers to this dissonance as the structural contradiction of the exhortation to work hard in school to succeed that negates the lived experiences of structural dispossession which “lands disproportionately on People of Color” (p. 9) through disenfranchisement. Even if ‘successes’ were achieved, they could be swept away in an instant by systemic violence, such as

an interaction with the criminal justice system. Paris (2021) also found that the confluence of the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement opened a new space to “reimagine a radically different vision of education” (p. 372). The process of conscientization was described by participants as a learning journey through which they educated themselves to make sense of the impact of COVID and Black Lives Matter on them, and how these issues manifested systemic oppression.

### **Contesting Education & Seeking to Learn**

Youth contested the absence of their identity in school curriculum, disparagement of their hair and use of cultural vernacular language in classrooms, and the absence of learning about the Providence community through advocating for legislation such as Ethnic Studies, the Crown Act, and Civics education in school. Youth’s contestation of formal education sprang from the realization that their history and culture were largely absent from history courses, and there was a lack of civic and ethnic studies. As they researched and explored their identities, participants contested the racism they experienced in school and the exclusion of their cultures from the curriculum. Du Bois’ (1953) articulation of the “double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (as cited in Kumasi, 2011, p. 209) is useful in understanding the growing realization participants experienced of societal perceptions of their identities. Decolonization (Bhabha, 1994) illuminates the historic roots of the decisions around the content of school curriculum that othered and invalidated the histories and experiences of colonized peoples. This is echoed by participants in the study who felt ‘they weren’t getting the whole story,’ and contested the missing references to their histories and cultures in the school curriculum.



The absence of their identity in formal education was juxtaposed with the presence of Youth and People of Color in protests. The power of the protesters was visible to Youth. Foucault's (1990a) conception that "power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (as cited in Levinson, p. 150) is helpful to understand the significance of Youth's observations of agency in protests and in Youth organizations. Youth recognized and were inspired by the power of the protesters and of Youth who held discussions and trainings around social justice issues. Regardless of whether participants joined Youth groups fortuitously or deliberately, they each described distinct processes of engagement that included an underlying process of listening and learning, and then quickly, within weeks or months, participants exercised leadership roles through speaking, facilitating, or taking leadership positions in the Youth organizations. In exercising agency, participants understood they were modeling the practice of agency for others, as Youth leaders and protesters had modeled for them.

Many of the participants referenced the model of Youth leaders and protesters as they traced their own journeys from articulating how they felt about social injustice to finding Youth that were discussing the issues they cared about. Participants shared that the dialogues held by Youth-led organizations resonated with what they were thinking, and the meetings provided a place in which they could listen and learn about the issues they cared about. The import of the discovery of Youth discussions can be understood through the vision of emancipatory education articulated by Martín-Baró (1994) who noted liberation required: "a new praxis, an act of transforming reality that will let us know not only about what is, but also about what is not, and by which we may try to orient ourselves toward what ought to be" (as cited in Fine, et al., 2004,

p. 96). The approach suggested by Martín-Baró addresses the unsettling realization Youth articulated – that important information ‘was missing’ from their education.

### **Experiencing Freedom & Dreaming in Collective Youth Spaces**

Building on the experience of freedom to express their identity, thoughts, and feelings, and empathize and support one another, Youth deliberately sought to create collective space for learning and imagination. Youth described their experiences in Youth-led spaces as a place where they could express their full selves freely and receive empathy and support. The experience of freedom described in these spaces included dynamic movement and loudness; a space where Youth could talk about events that affected them; and where everyone could express their opinions and be heard. The sense of freedom and joy in the Youth space was emphasized by all participants. The participant descriptions of Youth spaces align with how Espinoza & Vossoughi (2014) describe third spaces where learning experiences are ‘dignity-conferring’ and ‘rights-generative’ (cited in Gutiérrez & Johnson, 2017, p. 253) in that Youth identities and experiences were respected and they learned about their rights and practiced agency. One example was the Student’s Bill of Rights promoted by Youth-led organizations that educate students about the rights they have within the school context; another example was organized school walk outs to protest issues of concern to students.

However, part of bringing one’s whole self and sharing experiences in the Youth space included sadness in realizing the impact of systemic oppression. Participants observed systemic oppression in school power structures and in the recurring murders of Black people with seeming impunity for the police. Sadness was not the dominant theme across these interviews but was raised by all participants. Building a greater understanding of systemic injustice was a harrowing experience for participants. Stella captured this shared sentiment: “Learning is very powerful, but

it's also very... it can be very sad. Learning of the truth about things... forces you to find different ways in which you can fight the system or play the game.” Duncan-Andrade (2009) presents the concept of ‘critical hope’ in the context of urban education and advocates for it to be taught in ways that “connect the moral outrage of young people to actions that relieve the underserved suffering in their communities” (p. 181). Participants in this study highlighted the power of the collective space where sadness could be ameliorated through sharing feelings with their peers that they did not feel comfortable sharing in school. Youth Spaces offered a chance to discuss sadness and frustration, give testimony and bear witness, and often to frame actions to address causal issues of social injustice.

Many participants used the word ‘joy’ to describe the feeling of being in collaborative spaces with other Youth which suggested the relief and sense of belonging they felt in being able to share and relate to the feelings of others. However, participants maintained a realistic and practical view of the struggles they must face. For participants, hope was linked to a shared acknowledgement of sadness, and as participants articulated, a systemic awareness that things are difficult. In the face of their experiences and understanding, the collective decision was to move forward and through. Spaces created by like-minded Youth offered the opportunity to move forward with ‘critical hope’ (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) seeking to better understand the actors and issues and crafting actions to address them.

While Tuck & Yang (2018) caution against a sole focus on the pain story of marginalized people, I cannot neglect the issue of sadness that Youth raised in the interviews, acknowledging that sadness is coupled with the joy they experience in Youth spaces. Holding both sadness and joy to be true gives depth to the understanding of the importance of Youth spaces and their resultant agency.

As described in Chapter 6, Youth deliberately cultivated Youth spaces to promote the expression of identity and agency in accordance with their values. Youth self-agency was transposed to create the conditions for other Youth to feel comfortable, welcomed, and heard in the Youth space. The freedom to express identity was quickly translated into agency. The link participants in this study drew between identity and agency suggests a different framing than Kirshner (2015) articulates as the choice to see Youth as citizens of today or citizens of tomorrow. Kirshner's conceptualization of agency is based on adult-led conceptions of how young people should be trained to participate in society as citizens. In contrast, Youth of Color were quite skeptical of the citizen framing and its correlated assumption that the government will provide services to their citizens, particularly in the context of failed schools and police brutality. Youth participants engaged in governmental processes, such as testifying for the Ethnic Studies Bill, but were motivated by a larger goal linked to Sen's (2000) conceptualization of creating conditions in which 'one *can* live the life one desires.'

Youth articulated their vision of society as one free of racism and climate catastrophe, which spoke to the foundational assumption of a common global humanity beyond citizenship. The emancipatory educational initiatives of Youth of Color in which they participated embody the creative possibility of breaking silences and moving toward their dreams of a more just world, demonstrating a desire for a "fundamentally creative" use of power (Foucault, 1990, as cited in Metro-Roland, 2011, p. 150). The creative use of power was illustrated through the multiple avenues Youth created for students to engage in emancipatory education initiatives and campaigns increasing access for students with various personal and familial barriers by offering many paths through which students could exercise agency. Youth described bringing their research to the Youth space and discussing it with their peers. They sought to understand

systemic issues that framed social injustice and limited their own opportunities. Not only did they actively learn from one another and the multiple experiences of their peers in the Youth space, but they also deliberately identified issues with Youth for further learning and action. The dynamic of the Youth space was described as a place for collective imagination. The emancipatory learning in Youth spaces illustrates the third spaces (Anzaldúa, 1987,2021; Bhabha, 1994, 2002; Soja, 1996) described by Anderson et al. (2023) as “democratic, grounded in communities” where actors collectively “challenge the hegemony of current forms of economic, political, cultural, and education domination” (Anderson, et al, 2023).

The experiences of the Youth in collective spaces are also consistent with the findings of Gutiérrez & Johnson (2017) who drew on Gutiérrez (2008) and Tejeda, Espinoza & Gutiérrez (2003) in defining “collective and dynamic spaces” that include reclamation of histories, development of critical social thought, and “leverage students’ full linguistic and sociocultural repertoires toward newly imagined futures through social dreaming – a collective dream for a more just world” (p. 253).

### **Youth Exercise Agency for Future Generations**

Participant descriptions of identity were tightly woven with a sense of belonging to the collective group. The personal ruminations on identity and social positioning translated into the exercise of agency. Youth deliberately created spaces and opportunities for other Youth to build skills (e.g., facilitation), understanding (trainings and workshops on different issues), and to explore various means of exercising agency (marches, organizing, testifying, serving on Youth Leadership Teams or boards). Kirshner (2015) identified the developmental contradiction Youth face in being “developmentally ready to participate under conditions of support but lack opportunities to do so. There is a lack of fit between paternalistic societal institutions and young

people's rapidly growing cognitive capacities and desire for personal agency" (Kirshner, 2015, p. 6). Participants from this study participated in various opportunities offered by the Youth-led organizations to exercise agency both personally and collectively.

The deliberate design of inclusive opportunities for Youth to exercise agency demonstrated the creativity and understanding Youth had of the process of practicing agency and the particular constraints Youth might face from personal anxiety to school regulations, or parental restrictions. Agency opportunities included creating posters, creating 'fire' around events broadcasting them through social media, facilitating training, participating in workshops hosted by other organizations, and marching. Within the marches, Youth accommodated different school timings, locations, and offered different forms of participation, including walkouts and scheduled and spontaneous speaking. Youth offered support to others to prepare speeches or stood with Youth at the podium if they felt nervous, they were even asked to read poems that students had written but couldn't present. The creativity and inclusiveness of the spaces for agency Youth created illustrate what neurologists Hartley & Somerville (2015) identify as the context for adolescent decision-making which "typically occurs within rich environments that often involve complex motivations" (p. 14).

The decision-making participants undertook in emancipatory education initiatives, through opportunities crafted by their own peers, provided a key opportunity for Youth to experience power that they are typically denied in society. The context of the structural resistance of 'paternalistic societal institutions' (Kirshner, 2015) to offer opportunities for Youth to exercise agency underscores the importance of Youth creating and cultivating spaces for different voices to be vetted publicly. Youth demonstrated what Hartley & Somerville (2015) highlighted as the strengths of the much-maligned adolescent decision-making processes:

Adolescents are tasked with attaining independence despite limited amounts of direct experience. Therefore, it might be advantageous for the adolescent brain to be attuned to more proximal outcomes, to be tolerant of uncertainty, and to benefit from robust learning signals that can entrain a richer experience base to scaffold the transition to independence. (p. 9)

Exercising agency is a deliberate and formative process for Youth. Ong (1996) posits that activism, or the exercise of agency, has critical pedagogical importance and describes the process of identity formation to the felt need to build and apply skills and competencies to work towards social justice. The emancipatory educational initiatives Youth in Providence engaged in provided multiple learning opportunities, or a rich pedagogical context, where formal education did not value civics education. This is starkly illustrated by the *Cook v. McKee* case in which students sued the state for the right to learn about civics in school.

The pedagogical importance of the exercise of Youth agency in this study is consistent with the contextual assessment of Ginwright & Cammarota (2006), in which the authors posit that Youth activism is fueled by the lived experience of contradictions between what students learn in school and what they experience in life outside of school. One way youth respond to these contradictions is through harnessing their collective power through civil disobedience such as walkouts and marches. Within the context of the pandemic restrictions and the Black Lives Matter movement, Paris (2021) notes that many “young people... are asking for and working to create a way out of a system that is fundamentally unsustainable” (p. 372). The findings of this study demonstrate Youth agency provides new models that integrate the complexity of Youth identity and the importance of Youth spaces where Youth learn, imagine, and create responses to the injustices they experience. Participants articulated this transformative process as the power to

‘fight their fight, navigating to their own lens’ corroborating Sen (2009) who described freedom as the capacity to “effectively shape their own destiny and help each other” (p. 11).



## Chapter 8: Conclusions

This qualitative research study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of five Youth of Color in Providence, Rhode Island who navigated societal systems as they made meaning of their identity, sought to understand how systems oppress them, and exercised agency to transform those systems towards their own vision of social justice. The overarching research question for this study was: *How do lived experiences of emancipatory education initiatives inform and reflect the processes through which Youth of Color make meaning of their identity and form a sense of agency?* This study contributes to scholarship by documenting non-formal learning Youth undertake to better understand their identity and design and engage in emancipatory educational initiatives to address social issues Youth identify as critical to their experience of justice and freedom. This study also demonstrates the potential of phenomenology as an organizing methodology to enable deep reflection, listening, and understanding of the meaning we make of experiences at a personal and collective level.

### Summary of Study

Participant experiences revealed how the confluent disruptive events of COVID restrictions and the Black Lives Matter protests proffered an array of choices and time for Youth to ruminate on how they felt about and understood issues of social injustice unfolding in society. Participants registered people's, including Youth's, actions in response to injustice and were motivated by the power embodied by protestors and Youth leaders to exercise their own agency for change. The interviews demonstrated how Youth contested the absence of their identity and issues they cared about in classroom discussions at school. They also embarked on personal learning journeys that included research through which they explored issues important to them in understanding societal dynamics, and more importantly, their place within society. Participants

exercised agency in selecting issues of importance to them and critiqued the absence of these topics in their formal education. They also analyzed different viewpoints and sources around the issues they investigated and gravitated toward other Youth who were articulating similar explorations. In the Providence context, participants were able to connect with Youth in Youth-led organization who shared their interest in social justice issues. Participants sought discussions and forums with like-minded Youth of Color.

Participant individual and collective explorations of identity and agency were revealed to be iterative. The collective space offered a freedom to express their ruminations and critique and learn from other Youth. In the collective space of predominantly Youth of Color, participants described a unique feeling of freedom and validation of their identity and experiences. The ability to bring their full selves, emotions, and ideas to this space enabled processes of collective learning and imagination. The opportunities for collective imagination were channeled into emancipatory educational initiatives to address issues that impacted Youth of Color. Youth took great care in creating an inclusive space for other Youth to practice and exercise agency through offering many entry points and linking Youth to opportunities to learn and engage further in issues such as workshops or committees focused on issues of concern. The motivation to do something for their community and for future generations reverberated across participant explanations of why they engaged in emancipatory educational initiatives. In essence, Youth witnessed, exercised, and created space for the capillary power (Foucault, 1990) to contest power held by institutions and promote their vision of social justice.

### **Contributions to the Comparative International Education Field**

#### **Documenting Experiences of Youth of Color**

The strength of this study lies in documenting the experience of Youth of Color in learning outside the formal school setting both individually and collectively. The universal themes of Youth identity and agency within the context of justice and education are relevant to Youth throughout the world. The phenomenological approach explored how the meaning Youth made of their engagement in emancipatory educational initiatives in the non-formal space informed and reflected their personal journeys of learning and agency. Documenting the learning and agency journeys in social justice of transnational Youth of Color in Providence, Rhode Island, complements studies within the CIES field that focus on citizenship education (Kubow, et al, 2024), rights education (Bajaj, 2011), and peace education (Bajaj & Brantmeier, 2011; Blickmore, 2014) and suggests the need to embrace Youth experiences and perspectives.

This research contributes perspectives on priorities Youth of Color themselves set through non-formal education in Youth-led spaces. The dual focus on Youth priorities and educational initiatives outside formal education identified and implemented by Youth offer a new contribution to the field of CIE and how Youth create spaces for action in a society dominated by white supremacy. Although this study was conducted in the United States, the Youth are transnational, and Providence itself is undergoing demographic changes, where People of Color comprise over 90% of the population and over half the households speak at least one language in addition to English. The comparative perspective of Youth from different ethnic backgrounds is evident in the emancipatory educational initiatives of Youth and in the measures Youth undertake to ensure inclusion.

### ***Learning in a Time of Academic and Social Disruption***

During the period of this study, students contested the absence of their identity in formal education while witnessing the presence of People of Color in social justice protests. This study

provides a counterpoint to studies of learning loss during the time of COVID (Muscoviz & Evans, 2022; Donnelly & Patrinos, 2022) and Black Lives Matter suggesting that academic and social disruption proffered Youth time to reflect and learn about issues they found relevant to their lived experiences. This study contributes documentation of the deliberate process Youth of Color undertook to organize non-formal education to address gaps in their formal education. The issues they prioritized such as the history of Africa, Transgender and Queer issues, or Counselors Not Cops are critical to their identity and freedom but are not offered in school.

### *Understanding Youth Agency*

Providence is instructional as it offers a context where the recognized failings of the public school system are juxtaposed with examples of effective agency of Youth-led initiatives to change the educational systems. Government actors recognize student agency as evidenced by the commissions that invite Youth to participate and their openness to coordinate with Youth coalitions around various issues. The State legislature has responded to student demands and testimonies and has passed laws to address the issues Youth raise, such as the need for ethnic studies. This suggests an opportunity to partner with Youth to shape the school curriculum despite the refusal of the U.S. Government to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which grants children the right to participate in issues that impact them (Article 12). This study builds understanding of Youth processes and frameworks for identifying and pursuing change around key issues and lends additional credibility to Youth efforts. This study demonstrates the learning value of Youth advocacy processes for Youth themselves and the impact they have in influencing policy. As discussed, Youth in Providence have established credibility amongst Youth and the government officials that enable them to impact approaches to policy and its implementation.

### **Methodological Contribution**

This study makes a methodological contribution in utilizing a phenomenological approach in which Youth voice and experience are at the center of the research which complements the participatory action research approaches more commonly used with Youth populations. Methodologically, though there is an increasing body of work that engages Youth in participatory action research (PAR), the utilization of phenomenological research that is designed for Youth reflection of the meaning they make is less common. The phenomenological approach grounded this study in the deep exploration of Youth experience without the demand for it to be translated into action as required by PAR. This research focused on how Youth themselves made meaning of their identity and experiences of agency through emancipatory educational initiatives. The documentation of Youth reflections on identity formation and meaning making during the period of academic and social disruption enabled a clear focus on the learning and change Youth felt were most relevant to them. The phenomenological approach offered participants time to explore and reflect upon their own experiences as Tuck (2010) describes “not only [of] the painful elements of social and psychic realities, but also the textured acumen and hope” (p. 644). Participants noted that the interviews for this study helped them to reflect on their experiences and think about the meaning of their own experiences. Thus, this study not only offers the documentation of their experiences but exemplifies a methodology in which Youth are asked to analyze themselves in the world, a potentially radical act individually and collectively. The phenomenological approach enabled an understanding of the learning and agency journeys of Youth of Color as they described them, which fills an important gap in the field of CIE that more typically writes *about* Youth. In fact, the methodological approach of phenomenology may be utilized as an organizing approach to support Youth engagement

amongst their own peers and with adults. The deep listening required in phenomenology could facilitate processes of building understanding and fostering collective visions. Phenomenology provides a deliberate structure for listening and reflection, holding the participant as expert, which provides an alternative to hierarchical power dynamics between adults and Youth and counterbalance to the goal of learning to enhance test performance.

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This study builds on scholarship around the concept of emancipatory education with transnational Youth in Providence using the conceptual lens drawn from Amartya Sen and the capability approach. Sen's (2019) framing of freedom as inextricably linked to identity and the ability to envision a 'life one has reason to value' is particularly relevant to the participants of this study during educational and social disruption of the Black Lives Matter and COVID isolation. Sen (2019) places emphasis on the individual's responsibility to define the life one values, implying that the systemic definition of the ideal life may not be what the individual values. During this period, participants ruminated and watched George Floyd murdered by the police and other racial violence. The interviews in this study reflected participant desires for the life they would value and the urgency in creating capabilities and conditions to live that life. This resonates with Sen's experience of the fight for Indian independence from British rule and the period of nation building in which Indians redefined themselves as individuals and as a nation. Although distant in time and space, the decolonial construct of Sen's work is relevant to Youth of Color in Providence who also had reason to question whether their government supported the development of their capabilities and freedom. The existential nature of examining one's identity in the journey to live a free and worthwhile life is highlighted in this

study. Youth undertook this both through converting opportunities to learn and to exercise agency to contribute to the conditions of social justice.

Applying international theories of liberation to the emancipatory educational initiatives of Youth in Providence revealed these theories offered insight to the learning Youth prioritized to understand the systemic factors of oppression in the place they live and more broadly in the U. S. The transnational demographics of Providence Public Schools validates the utilization of Sen's (2009) conceptualization of freedom, and liberatory education espoused by Freire (1970) and Martín-Baró (1994).

The protestors during Black Lives Matter and students contesting education exemplified capillary power (Foucault, 1990), or the understanding that power exists everywhere and is not limited to institutional structures and hegemonic forces. Participants in this study witnessed the agency of their peers and the decision to speak and act became a model for their own exploration of agency. This study revealed that Youth of Color were inspired by the model of their peers; and as they claimed their power and agency Youth deliberately created spaces for other Youth to access opportunities to exercise agency to impact issues of social justice critical to their identity and freedom.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

#### **Partner With Youth Allies**

Youth are important allies to engage in discussions around formal education and how it might better address social justice issues for diverse and transnational students and inform societal change. This study highlights a critical opportunity to partner with Youth in global education and learning, moving beyond the tokenistic practice of inviting a couple of Youth to participate in committees, to offering Youth significant positions of leadership in framing the

educational and learning dialogue. Sharing power in the formal educational space with Youth will challenge adults to think differently and contribute to a partnership more reflective of and relevant to Youth experiences resulting in more innovative approaches to address issues of social justice for ‘future generations.’

### **Create Spaces for Youth Agency Within Schools**

Fostering spaces for Youth leadership within schools has the potential to strengthen Youth skills, demonstrate their capacity to adults, model the effect of agency for other students, and contribute to addressing issues significant to Youth within schools and beyond. In this study, Youth offered examples of where students worked collaboratively with school administrators and teachers to develop spaces for dialogue and learning which built respect and understanding between adults and Youth. Examples included Youth-led initiatives within schools, such as teach-ins around the Student Bill of Rights, and Youth-led committees, such as the Racial Equity Committee which gives students a forum to discuss complaints.

### **Youth Learn from Youth**

Through this study Youth articulated the dynamic of learning from other Youth through Youth-led educational initiatives. Youth emphasized the richness of learning from the varied lived experiences and perspectives of their peers. This presents an interesting challenge for formal school settings as Youth perceived the power structure in schools to be organized such that the teacher is the purveyor of education, largely negating an active role for students to contribute to learning and knowledge in formal education. Opening spaces for Youth-to-Youth learning and actions requires a clear commitment from adult allies to support and act on recommendations that emerge from Youth. An example of this is the RESPECT (Raising Expectations for Student Perspectives, Experiences, Consciousness, and Traditions) where



students develop project action plans that foster equity in their schools (PPSD, 2023) in partnership with adult allies in the school system.

### **Adults Learn from Youth**

I have worked in international public education design and implementation throughout Latin America and in India at the nexus of public education and the inclusion of marginalized populations. In my experience, Youth perspective on the factors of exclusion was critical to the design of policy; for example, introducing teacher training modules on the relationship with students to address student's fear of going to school. Increasing Youth voice and dialogue within school spaces in the U.S. and international settings can contribute to broadening the perspectives of adults as they partner with Youth to jointly build skills to address social justice.

### **Areas for Further Research**

#### **Youth Research**

Researching and applying that research about the issues Youth care about emerged as an important dynamic within the context of rapidly changing complex social justice issues.

Analyzing the types of non-formal and freedom-seeking education that marginalized Youth of Color prioritized indicates content gaps in the current curriculum and approaches through which education vital to the identity of Youth of Color and broader concerns for social justice might be supported.

This study indicated the need for further exploration of the processes Youth utilize in their research (including sources), the issues they explore, and how their research results in action (Appadurai, 2006). It is particularly important to explore Youth research initiatives in the context of increased access to information and the relevance of school-based education to their lived experiences to better understand the gaps they seek to fill in their learning.

### **Diversify Participant Representation**

This study focused on five young high school women who identified as transnational and Black. Expanding this study to include perspectives of young men and women from additional ethnic and racial groups, Youth that have not accessed Youth-led groups, and Youth leaders from other areas, particularly other countries, would offer additional comparative insight. Involving Youth in Participatory Action Research around their actions would serve to highlight how Youth identify, design, and implement emancipatory educational initiatives and build Youth skills and engagement with public actors.

### **Adult Allies and Youth Organizations**

Though a few of the Youth touched on the support of adult allies, this was not a predominant theme across interviews. Further research around the role that adult allies play to effectively support Youth agency would shed light on the relationships and roles of adults working with Youth. This study drew from Youth-led organizations in which Youth held decision-making roles, and comparison with organizations that serve Youth but are not led by them may contribute to learning about the impact of organizations that serve and engage Youth. For example, in this study, employment of Youth in leadership positions emerged as significant in the development of Youth's individual agency.

### **Witnessing Alchemy**

*Alchemy: a power or process that changes or transforms something in a mysterious or impressive way. (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2023)*

In the context of failing schools and social disruption, I was impressed by Youths' insistence on learning what they felt was relevant to them. Youth have access to a breadth of resources through the internet and social media, and also sought forums where they could discuss

key issues of decolonization and other systemic issues that affect their lives. Youth vision influenced public policy as was revealed by RI Secretary of State Amore who invited Youth who had sued the State for civics education into the State capitol building to present them with a national award for the change they engendered. Alchemy.

During the interviews, I asked participants to capture their experience in emancipatory educational initiatives in one word. They chose ‘community,’ and most often, ‘joy.’ If I were to choose one word to capture the experiences participants shared through their interviews, it would be ‘alchemy.’ The energy, creativity, and new imagining of Youth expanded my conception of what is possible and reflected an almost magical process. The combination of individual journeys of learning and identity in the collective space of dreaming were powerful to witness. Youth transmuted sadness and joy into agency to change society for a more just future.

Youth is an identity we have all passed through. The experiences Youth shared of the difficulty of ‘checking the boxes’ and finding echoes of their own thoughts in Youth-led organizations resonated with my own multicultural experiences. I did not have the collective spaces Youth described to make meaning of my identity at their age. My hope is that we can allow for more spaces for Youth to explore their identities within society and change society to support their collective vision of justice, inclusion, and freedom. Freedom resonated throughout the conversations shared in this study. Youth are transforming society to enable us to be free in our own identity, experience the joy of collective spaces, and where we can all enjoy justice.

Stella described the process of this alchemy:

We're able to collaborate with each other. We're able to help each other with our goals.

We're able to motivate ourselves *through ourselves* and our fight to go through our life in our own way. To navigate to our own lens.



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## **Annex A: Research Questions**

This research will explore this through the following questions:

How do lived experiences of emancipatory education initiatives *inform and reflect* the processes through which Youth of Color make meaning of their identity and form a sense of agency?

1. How do Youth articulate the simultaneous experience of defining their own identity while also seeking to understand and contest societal systems that define and affect them?
2. How does this process, particularly when done in collaboration with their peers, contribute to Youth's sense of agency?

## **Annex B: Interview Guide**

### **Youth Emancipatory Education Initiatives: A Phenomenological Inquiry**

**Researcher: Jaya Sarkar**

**Interview Guides for the series of three semi-structured phenomenological interviews.**

The guides for the three interviews that will be conducted for each of the participants are presented in this document.

### **Phenomenological Interview #1 of 3**

**Participant:**

**Date:**

**Start Time:**

**Finish Time:**

**Interviewer:** Jaya Sarkar

#### **I. Introduction**

**1. About Me:** Hello, thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I'd like to share a little bit of background about myself. I have had a long career in social justice work focused on children and youth internationally, particularly in the Americas and India. I also have three sons who range in age from 25 to 30. This research is for my doctoral dissertation study and focuses on Youth of Color engagement in emancipatory education initiatives. By emancipatory education initiatives, I mean any activity that you take, be it to advocate for changes in education in school such as Ethnic or Civic Studies. Or campaigns that are important to your sense of well-being (or freedom) such as Counselor's Not Cops, or the CROWN (Create a

Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair). My hope is that the results of this study will be helpful to Youth themselves and adult actors and institutions that engage with youth.

**2. Your participation in the study:** Your participation in this study includes a series of three interviews with me of approximately 90 minutes in length that are scheduled over a period of three weeks. These interviews will focus on your participation in emancipatory education initiatives over this series of conversations. The first conversation will ask *How did you come to be involved in this emancipatory education initiative?* touching on your life history. The second interview will ask *What is it like for you to be involved in the emancipatory education initiative?* and we will talk about the details of your involvement. In the third interview, I will present back some themes that emerged from the first two conversations to discuss *What does it mean for you to be involved in emancipatory education initiatives?* and this will be an opportunity for you to reflect on the meaning of your experience.

**3. Consent to record, and voluntary participation:** To ensure that I have an accurate representation of this conversation, I ask your permission to record the interview. This recording will be transcribed, and the original recording will be stored in a password protected file. In the case of video recording, I will view the recording to annotate the transcription with non-verbal communications and then delete the video recording.

Your parent or guardian has already consented to your participation in this study. Your privacy and confidentiality will be protected through the use of a pseudonym (you can choose the name I use for your responses in this study). I understand that speaking about the issues you work on may be difficult or potentially upset you so please take your time and share only what you feel comfortable sharing. You can ask me to pause the recording at any time, and you

can even withdraw from this process at any time with no repercussions. Your participation is voluntary. If you are upset in reflecting on the content of this interview, I encourage you to talk to someone and don't isolate yourself. There are references for organizations you might reach out to included in the assent form. Do you have any questions?

Do I have your permission to record the interview?

**4. About you:** I'd like to ask you a few demographic questions if I may.

- a. Which emancipatory education initiatives have you been involved in?
- b. What ethnicity do you identify with?
- c. What race do you identify with?
- d. What gender do you identify with?
- e. How old are you?
- f. Which Youth organizations or coalitions are you associated with?

**5. Main interview area:** You've shared that you are involved in emancipatory education initiative(s) in the Providence area. We will use your engagement in that initiative as the destination for this interview. Please describe to me how you came to be part of the emancipatory education initiative.

- a. How did you first hear about the emancipatory education initiative? What made you decide to participate?
- b. Had you ever done anything like that before? How does this experience compare to what you had done before?

c. Are there aspects of who you are or how you grew up that contributed to your interest in participating in the educational initiative?

d. In your life story, what were the relevant aspects that led you to participate in this event?

*[Prompts will explore contextual elements of the participant's life history that led them to be part of the emancipatory education initiative.]*

**6. Follow Up:** I am happy to share the transcribed interview with you and would like to know if I can reach out to you if I need some clarification as I'm transcribing the interview. I look forward to meeting with you on [XX date] for our second interview.

**Thank you!** I have learned a lot from listening to your perspective on this and appreciate your time.

### **Phenomenological Interview #2 of 3**

**Participant:**

**Date:**

**Start Time:**

**Finish Time:**

**Interviewer:** Jaya Sarkar

**1. Quick review of your participation in the study:** As you remember, your participation in this study includes a series of three interviews with me of approximately 90 minutes in length that are schedule over a period of three weeks. Last week we had our first conversation around *How did you come to be involved in this emancipatory education initiative?* touching on your life history. This interview will focus on *What is it like for you to be in volved in the emancipatory*



*education initiative?* and we will talk about the details of your involvement. In the third interview, I will present back some themes that emerged from the first two conversations to discuss *What does it mean for you to be involved in emancipatory education initiatives?* and this will be an opportunity for you to reflect on the meaning of your experience.

**2. Consent to record, and voluntary participation:** To ensure that I have an accurate representation of this conversation, I ask your permission to record the interview. As I mentioned last time, this recording will be transcribed, and the original recording will be stored in a password protected file. In the case of video recording, I will view the recording to annotate the transcription with non-verbal communications and then delete the video recording.

Your parent or guardian has already consented to your participation in this study. Your privacy and confidentiality will be protected through the use of a pseudonym (you can choose the name I use for your responses in this study). I understand that speaking about the issues you work on may be difficult or potentially upset you so please take your time and share only what you feel comfortable sharing. You can ask me to pause the recording at any time, and you can even withdraw from this process at any time. Your participation is voluntary. If you are upset in reflecting on the content of this interview, I encourage you to talk to someone and don't isolate yourself. There are references for organizations you might reach out to included in the assent form. Do you have any questions?

Do I have your permission to record the interview? Thank you.

**3. Main interview area:** This interview will focus on what it is like to be involved in the emancipatory education initiative.

- a. Take a moment to think about your involvement in [the xx emancipatory education initiative]. Talk to me about how it felt – tapping into the five senses what do you see, hear, smell, feel as you are engaged in this activity?
- b. What were the activities you did for this? Who else was involved? How did you relate to the other people?
- c. How did it feel to be involved in this – emotionally? Intellectually? Physically? If you could describe this experience in one word or phrase, what would that be?

[Prompts will explore contextual details of the experience including the feelings of being involved.

**4. Follow Up:** I am happy to share the transcribed interview with you and would like to know if I can reach out to you if I need some clarification as I'm transcribing the interview. I look forward to meeting with you on [XX date] for our final interview.

**Thank you!** I have learned a lot from listening to your perspective on this and appreciate your time.

### Phenomenological Interview #3 of 3

**Participant:**

**Date:**

**Start Time:**

**Finish Time:**

**Interviewer:** Jaya Sarkar

**1. Quick review of your participation in the study:** As you remember, your participation in this study includes a series of three interviews with me of approximately 90 minutes in length that are schedule over a period of three weeks. Last week we had our second conversation around *What is it like for you to be involved in the emancipatory education initiative?* and you shared details of your involvement. In this final interview, I will present back some themes that emerged from the first two conversations to discuss *What does it mean for you to be involved in emancipatory education initiatives?* and this will be an opportunity for you to reflect on the meaning of your experience.

**2. Consent to record, and voluntary participation:** To ensure that I have an accurate representation of this conversation, I ask your permission to record the interview. As I mentioned last time, this recording will be transcribed, and the original recording will be stored in a password protected file. In the case of video recording, I will view the recording to annotate the transcription with non-verbal communications and then delete the video recording.

Your parent or guardian has already consented to your participation in this study. Your privacy and confidentiality will be protected through the use of a pseudonym (you can choose the name I use for your responses in this study). I understand that speaking about the issues you work on may be difficult or potentially upset you so please take your time and share only what you feel comfortable sharing. You can ask me to pause the recording at any time, and you can even withdraw from this process at any time without repercussions. Your participation is voluntary. If you are upset in reflecting on the content of this interview, I encourage you to talk

to someone and don't isolate yourself. There are references for organizations you might reach out to included in the assent form. Do you have any questions?

Do I have your permission to record the interview? Thank you.

**4. Emerging themes from your previous interviews:** I'd like to take the next ten minutes or so to share back with you themes that I heard emerge from the earlier two interviews and experiences you've shared that relate to my research questions around how your involvement in emancipatory education initiatives affects your sense of identity, agency, and what theories (like culturally sustaining pedagogies) are useful to your work. I present my reflections as a take-off point for your further reflection on the meaning you take from your experiences with emancipatory education.

[Note: Prior to the third interview, I will review the transcripts of the first two interviews with the participant both inductively (to identify themes that emerged) and deductively (to draw connections to my research questions). This will be presented to the participant for discussion and as a prompt for further discussion. This synopsis will take 10-15 minutes.]

**3. Main interview area:** *What does it mean for you to be involved in emancipatory education initiatives?*

In addition to the main question above, potential follow up questions might include:

a. In reviewing the transcript of our last interviews you touched on [theme x] several times, could you please share what that meaning you've taken forward from that?

b. In reviewing transcripts of our last interviews you mentioned [event y, moment z], thinking back on that, could you please share what meaning you've taken forward from that?

[Prompts will encourage reflection and support the process of meaning-making.]

**4. Follow Up:** I am happy to share the transcribed interview with you and would like to know if I can reach out to you if I need some clarification as I'm transcribing the interview.

**Thank you!** That completes our series of three interviews! I have learned a lot from listening to your perspective on this and appreciate your time. If you have further thoughts or materials you would like to share, you can always be in touch with me. I will send you your compensation via [TBD].

Once I have completed my interviews, I will share back themes that emerge across the interviews and would love any comments you might have on that. I'll send you an email as that date approaches. Thank you once again! It has been a great privilege and pleasure to have these conversations with you.