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\*Our thanks to the cadre of scholars who serve as reviewers without whose services the journal could not exist.



## *Critical Questions in Education: Volume 15, Issue 3*

October 15, 2024

Readers of *CQIE*,

Welcome to Volume 15, Issue 3 of *CQIE*.

Here we are, again, on the eve of a great Academy Symposium in beautiful New Orleans and yet another historic presidential election. And, again, I think you will find this issue of *CQIE* intriguing, to say the least. Our first manuscript, penned by Mila Zhu and colleagues, presents the findings of a case study examining the impact that fine arts might have on adolescents in a juvenile detention facility. In the next piece, Christopher Hu juxtaposes this with a report on parent perceptions of standardized testing in highly selective magnet schools.

In our third manuscript of this issue, Raquel Wright-Mair, Saran Stewart, & Shani Roper share their “counternarratives” as Jamaican academics. Following Wright-Mair, Stewart, and Roper’s narrative insights, Eric Landers, Catherine S. Howerter, & Kymberly Harris provide an insightful analysis of Teachers’ Reports of Bullying Incidents. And, Volume 15, Issue 3 closes with Marliese R. Peltier and friends’ report on a communities of practice as a means to support the development of teacher educators.

I hope those of you heading to the “Big Easy” have a great time and that this upcoming election goes...differently than eight years ago ☺.

As always, Happy Reading!

PAX,

Eric C. Sheffield, Editor  
*Critical Questions in Education*

# ***Critical Questions in Education***

Eric C. Sheffield, Founding Editor

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# *From Detention to Expression: A Case Study on Fostering Adolescents' Artistic Liberation*

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Mila Zhu, Sarah Morrison, Chaehyun Lee, Kalyn McAlester,  
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## **Abstract**

*This paper investigates the impact of fine arts on literacy development, personal growth, and social integration among adolescents in a juvenile detention facility. Through a qualitative case study involving two participants, "Strummer" and "Fretwell," we explored how engagement in a guitar club could reshape their perceptions of literacy and influence their social identities. Our findings highlight significant transformations in the students' confidence, resilience, and educational engagement, underscoring the pivotal role of music in fostering a dynamic understanding of literacy and enhancing personal and social growth. The integration of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Third Space theories into our methodological approach provided a novel perspective on the potential of arts-integrated educational strategies. The implications of our research advocate for personalized, arts-integrated educational approaches, particularly in settings that cater to at-risk youth, emphasizing the holistic benefits of integrating fine arts into traditional curricula.*

**Keywords:** *juvenile detention education, fine arts, adolescent literacy development, social identity, resilience and self-efficacy*

## **Introduction**

### **Background: From Behavioral Issues to Artistic Engagement**

Building on the extant literature on the relationship between fine art activities, literacy development, and communicative skill enhancement, particularly for adolescents with behavioral challenges, this study sought to further explore the potential benefits of innovative fine art practices. Previous research has emphasized the therapeutic and educational virtues of fine art in fostering better attention, emotional regulation, and interpersonal skills (Coholic & Eyes, 2016.) There is, however, a noticeable gap in studies explicitly investigating how these art activities might directly influence the intrinsic motivation to develop literacy and communicative abilities in this demographic.

Given this background, this study is rooted in the following hypothesis: Through hands-on fine art activities and education, adolescents with behavioral issues at the juvenile facility may demonstrate more willingness to engage in social interactions that revitalize their personal motivations in developing literacy skills and other communicative skills.

This hypothesis underscores the potential dual role of fine art activities: firstly, as a mediator in improving interpersonal interactions, and secondly, as a catalyst in fostering an environment where the intrinsic motivation for literacy and communicative skill development is nurtured.

### **The Role of Arts in Correctional Education**

The integration of arts in correctional education has been increasingly recognized for its potential to facilitate rehabilitation and foster personal growth among incarcerated youth. Studies have shown that engagement in artistic activities, including visual arts, music, and drama, can significantly improve inmates' mental health, emotional expression, and social skills, contributing to a reduction in recidivism rates (Halperin, Kessler, & Braunschweiler, 2012). Furthermore, arts programs within correctional facilities have been linked to enhanced self-esteem, better coping mechanisms, and increased educational motivation, suggesting that the arts play a crucial role in not only personal development but also in preparing individuals for successful reintegration into society (Donovan, 2022).

### **Art Participation and Literacy Development**

The relationship between arts participation and literacy development is increasingly acknowledged in educational research. Engaging in arts activities—such as reading, writing, and storytelling in conjunction with visual and performing arts—has been shown to enhance literacy skills in children and adolescents. These practices foster a deeper engagement with text, enrich vocabulary, and improve comprehension by integrating creative expression with traditional literacy learning (Eisner, 2002). Participation in music and arts activities has been linked to increased self-esteem, improved emotional expression, and enhanced resilience against stress and anxiety. These benefits are particularly notable in educational settings, where arts integration supports social-emotional learning, fostering empathy, collaboration, and a sense of belonging among students. The therapeutic aspects of arts education also promote mindfulness and emotional regulation, offering a creative outlet for expressing complex feelings and thoughts (Hallam, 2010).

### **Social Identity Formation and Art-integrated Pedagogy**

Social identity formation in educational settings is deeply influenced by peer interactions, which play a crucial role in shaping students' sense of belonging and self-esteem. Positive peer relationships significantly enhance academic motivation and engagement, acting as catalysts for social and emotional development (Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014). These interactions help students navigate the complexities of social identity, encouraging the exploration and affirmation of personal and group identities within a supportive community context. Furthermore, recent research highlights the resilience fostered through such supportive peer networks, particularly in inclusive educational settings that adapt to diverse socio-cultural dynamics (Nguyen, 2021).

Arts-integrated pedagogy, which blends artistic disciplines with traditional academic subjects, significantly engages diverse learners, including those with various cultural backgrounds, learning styles, and abilities (Marshall, 2014). This approach not only enhances creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills but also fosters an inclusive learning environment that respects and leverages diversity. Recent studies have confirmed that arts integration leads to im-

proved academic outcomes, increased student motivation, and higher levels of engagement, especially among students who might be disengaged or marginalized in traditional educational settings (Smith & Kosslyn, 2020; Chemi, 2014; Radhakrishnan, 2017). Notably, Smith and Kosslyn (2020) demonstrate that engaging with the arts can significantly reduce educational disparities by fostering a more equitable and responsive learning environment.

### **Advances in Juvenile Youth Education**

Recent research underscores the critical need for innovative approaches in the education of youth in juvenile detention centers. Holistic educational models that integrate emotional and social learning are increasingly recognized for their effectiveness in fostering significant behavioral improvements and reducing recidivism (Thompson et al., 2023). These models often include arts-based components, highlighting the multifaceted benefits of incorporating creative disciplines into educational curricula.

Art therapy, in particular, has been identified as a potent tool for emotional rehabilitation. Jenkins (2024) provides compelling evidence that art therapy programs in detention settings significantly improve mental health outcomes, offering adolescents constructive outlets for expression and emotional coping.

Additionally, the integration of educational technology has shown promise in enhancing engagement and learning outcomes. Patel and Singh (2022) report that interactive and digital tools not only captivate young learners but also lead to superior gains in literacy and numeracy compared to traditional educational methods.

Peer-led educational initiatives have also emerged as effective strategies for empowering youth within juvenile systems. Marino (2023) discusses how peer mentoring programs, where older inmates tutor younger ones, not only boost the educational experience of the mentees but also provide significant leadership and social benefits to the mentors.

These studies collectively advocate for a reformed approach to juvenile education that is responsive to the complex needs of detained youth. By integrating arts, technology, and peer mentoring, these innovative strategies align with broader educational goals to rehabilitate and prepare juveniles for successful societal reintegration.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Third Space Theory, introduced by postcolonial sociolinguist Homi Bhabha (1994, 1996), serves as a foundational concept in this study, helping to explore the construction of identity and culture amid conditions of social inequity. Bhabha describes Third Spaces as “innovative sites of collaboration and contestation” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1), emphasizing their role in promoting inclusion, negotiation, and dynamic cultural exchange over exclusion and segregation. This theoretical framework highlights the fluid, hybrid nature of cultural identity—constantly evolving rather than fixed, facilitating the negotiation of cultural differences and fostering counterhegemonic practices (Bhabha, 1994, 2002; Soja, 1996).

Expanding on this concept, Gutiérrez (2008) argues for the transformative potential of Third Spaces in education, where these spaces become arenas for creating new knowledge and fostering individual and collective agency. The incorporation of fine arts into the educational process, as explored in this study, exemplifies how Third Spaces can facilitate not only the academic and social development of youth but also their critical engagement with their own identities and

the world around them. Further research by scholars like Watson and Singh (2019) builds on Bhabha's ideas, examining how Third Spaces in multicultural classrooms can bridge traditional and contemporary educational practices, enhancing learners' engagement and inclusion.

Building on Gutiérrez et al.'s (1999) conceptualization, Third Space is seen as a hybrid environment where diverse learning elements converge, promoting dynamic educational experiences. Gutiérrez characterizes these spaces as centers of "hybridity and diversity," which are fundamental in fostering innovative learning practices (Gutiérrez et al., 1999b, p. 287). Hybrid literacy practices within Third Spaces facilitate collaboration, which catalyzes social and cognitive development, breaking traditional educational norms to encourage more inclusive and engaging learning environments (Gutiérrez et al., 1999a, p. 92).

Further developing these ideas, Gutiérrez (2008) introduces a sociocritical literacy perspective within Third Spaces, emphasizing that these settings integrate students' sociohistorical contexts, enhancing the relevance and depth of educational interactions. This approach argues for educational experiences that are deeply transformative, providing expanded opportunities for learners to engage with and transcend sociopolitical and cultural boundaries. Pane (2007) extends this notion by defining Third Space as a *zone of transformation* where everyday and academic discourses merge, creating new potentials for learning and interaction.

Incorporating these frameworks, our study leverages fine arts as a medium to create a transformative Third Space in the classroom. Here, arts-integrated pedagogy not only enhances cognitive and socio-emotional development but also empowers students to negotiate and reshape their identities. By utilizing students' funds of knowledge (Moje et al., 2004; Cuero, 2010), the educational setting becomes a crucible for significant personal and communal transformation, anticipated to foster multifaceted identity development and a deeper understanding of the world.

## Methodology

This case study investigates the interplay between fine art engagement and literacy development among adolescents contending with behavioral challenges. Our methodology is thus designed to capture the nuanced experiences and transformative journeys of the participants. By delving into the lives of two adolescents engaged in a guitar club at a juvenile detention center, this study aims to unravel the layers of how artistic activities influence literacy skills development. The methodological approach provides a comprehensive exploration that begins with a detailed examination of the participants' backgrounds and the unique educational context of their artistic engagements.

## Participants

The study centers on two adolescent students at a juvenile facility—codenamed "Strummer" and "Fretwell"—both of whom navigate distinct behavioral challenges within their educational environments. They are integral members of a five-person guitar club. Our research methodology involved conducting in-depth interviews with these students both before and after their participation in fine art interventions, aiming to evaluate shifts in their literacy motivation and overall developmental trajectory. Complementing these interviews, observational field notes were meticulously recorded during the guitar club sessions. These notes provide qualitative insights into the participants' interactions, behaviors, and non-verbal communications, offering a rich narrative



that highlights how engagement with fine arts may catalyze changes in literacy motivation and social behavior.

Both students were invited as participants for their representation of a spectrum of behavioral challenges—Fretwell’s being more externalized, and Strummer’s internalized. The objective is to discern whether and how innovative art-based activities can address their unique challenges and stimulate a rejuvenated engagement with literacy and communication.

### ***Strummer***

A 15-year-old with a history of social isolation, Strummer exhibits a preference for solitary activities, seldom participating in group discussions or activities. Raised in a single-parent household struggling with financial instability, Strummer finds solace in his art—drawing and sketching with a detail that speaks to his profound observational skills and depth of expression. His challenges are predominantly internal, characterized by withdrawal and reticence. This study examines whether structured fine art interventions can serve as a conduit for enhancing his literacy development and fostering meaningful social connections.

### ***Fretwell***

At 14, Fretwell confronts academic and behavioral challenges, often displaying a detached attitude toward traditional literacy tasks. Emerging from a socio-economically disadvantaged background, he has openly expressed dissatisfaction with the structured nature of educational systems. Notably, Fretwell shows a latent interest in the arts, often doodling or engaging rhythmically with music during classes. His involvement in the study is predicated on the hypothesis that fine art activities, particularly those involving music, could rekindle his interest in learning and strengthen his communicative abilities.

### **Procedure**

Our research methodology was structured into five phases—Recruitment, Pre-interview, Fine Art Interventions, Field Observations, and Post-interview—to thoroughly investigate how fine arts influence literacy development and communicative abilities in adolescents. This multi-stage approach was crafted to provide a holistic view of the participants’ experiences and the shifts in their perspectives and skills throughout the intervention.

Recruitment commenced with selecting participants from the Guitar Club, which consisted of five students. Prior to the guided lessons, pre-interviews with Strummer and Fretwell assessed their existing relationships with literacy and their attitudes towards fine arts. This initial phase set the baseline for tailoring the subsequent art activities to their unique interests and needs.

Over the course of a semester, the students engaged in organized fine art activities. Strummer participated in art sessions that incorporated literacy elements, enhancing his engagement through drawing and sketching. Fretwell was involved in structured musical exercises that aligned with his rhythmic inclinations, fostering a deeper connection to the learning material. Throughout the study, extensive field notes were recorded, capturing the immediate and evolving engagement of the students with the fine arts activities. These observations were crucial for noting changes in behavior, interaction levels, and engagement in literacy practices within the context of the Guitar Club.

The study concluded with a second set of interviews, which aimed to capture the students' reflective insights on their experiences. These discussions were instrumental in understanding the impact of the fine arts interventions on their literacy perceptions and communicative skills.

## **Data Collection**

### ***Interview Process***

The interviews in this study were semi-structured to allow a balance between directed questions and free-flowing dialogue, ensuring that participants could comfortably express their genuine thoughts and feelings. Each session, both before and after the intervention, was designed to last between 45 minutes to an hour—a duration chosen to encourage thorough discussion without overwhelming the students. To further ease the participants, interviews were conducted in tranquil and familiar settings within the facility, such as a quiet corner or a dedicated counseling room.

### ***Thematic Areas of Inquiry***

**Initial Motivations and Perceptions.** At the outset, we explored participants' pre-existing relationships with literacy and the arts to understand their personal connections and emotional investments. Questions were designed to probe into how the students felt about their engagement with reading and art, such as asking them to describe their emotional responses to these activities or to articulate the personal significance that art holds in their lives. We also inquired about their perceptions of the interplay between musical rhythm and life narratives, helping us to gauge how they integrate their experiences with artistic expression.

**Experiences with Behavioral Challenges.** Our inquiries here were sensitive to the complexities of the students' behavioral challenges, aiming to uncover how these issues influenced their educational experiences. We encouraged the participants to reflect on the learning environments that posed the greatest challenges for them and to identify specific classroom elements that impacted their ability to engage with the learning process.

**Post-Activity Reflections.** Following the intervention, we focused on the students' reflective experiences to capture any shifts in perspective or new skills developed. This phase of questioning aimed to understand changes in how the students viewed reading and art as a result of the activities and to elicit discussions on any new insights or competencies they felt they had gained.

This structured yet adaptable approach to interviews allowed for an in-depth understanding of the transformative effects of fine art interventions on literacy and communication, particularly for adolescents navigating complex behavioral challenges.

### ***Field Notes Compilation***

**Candid Observations.** During the fine art sessions, our researchers meticulously documented their observations, focusing on several key aspects of the educational interaction. This included the levels of student engagement during teaching-learning activities, peer interactions, and the frequency and intensity of participants' interest in different activities. This method aligns with the approaches suggested by Angrosino (2007), who emphasizes the importance of observing both structured activities and spontaneous interactions to gain a holistic view of educational impacts.

**Contextual Insights.** Our observational scope also extended to the contextual nuances present within the Guitar Club. Researchers captured ambient group dynamics and any incidental literacy or communicative behaviors that occurred. This broader evaluative scope takes into consideration the environment's influence on the participants' experiences, resonating with the ethnographic methods described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011), who advocate for a deep immersion in the setting to understand the cultural and social dynamics at play.

**Iterative Documentation.** Field notes were not merely static records; they were iteratively refined with each session to ensure data integrity and relevance. This practice was crucial for identifying progressive behavioral trends and pivotal experiences, ensuring a dynamic and responsive data collection process. Such an approach is supported by O'Reilly (2012), who notes that iterative analysis of field notes can lead to a more nuanced understanding of observed phenomena and better adaptation of research methods to emerging findings.

### **Integrating SEL Theories and Third Space in Methodology**

Our methodology is deeply informed by the theories of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Third Space, which guide the educational interventions and research approaches utilized in this study. SEL theories provide a foundation for understanding how arts-based education can enhance interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, while Third Space theory offers a lens through which to view the creation of new, inclusive educational environments that transcend traditional learning models. SEL frameworks emphasize the development of critical emotional and social competencies, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Our methodological approach engages these theories by incorporating fine arts activities that are specifically designed to foster an environment where these competencies can flourish. For example, through collaborative art projects and music sessions, participants are encouraged to explore their emotions, manage stress, and build relationships with peers, thereby operationalizing the SEL concepts in a practical, impactful manner.

### **Fostering a Transformative Third Space**

Third Space theory posits that new spaces of interaction can emerge that blend home and school cultures, creating environments where academic and personal growth can coexist and enrich each other. This study utilizes arts integration to create such transformative spaces, where traditional boundaries of literacy and communication are expanded to include artistic expression. This not only aligns with Third Space theory by promoting cultural hybridity and identity negotiation but also empowers students to bring their unique backgrounds into the learning process, thus fostering a richer educational experience.

### **Methodological Engagement with Theories**

By selecting participants from diverse backgrounds and with varied behavioral challenges, the study intentionally creates a Third Space where different life experiences and perspectives meet. This diversity is crucial for the rich, hybrid interactions that Third Space theory advocates. Each art activity is designed not only to engage students in creative expression but also to challenge them to apply SEL skills in real-world scenarios. For instance, group discussions about art projects facilitate social awareness and relationship skills, core components of SEL.

Consistent with Third Space theory's emphasis on evolving and dynamic learning environments, our data collection methods are iterative. We adapt our observational strategies and interview questions based on ongoing assessments of participant engagement and interaction, ensuring that our methods remain responsive to the developing educational environment.

These interviews are structured to prompt reflections that draw upon SEL competencies, asking participants to evaluate their emotional growth and social interactions throughout the study. This not only reinforces the learning objectives but also provides data on the efficacy of the fine arts interventions in a Third Space setting.

## Findings

### Pre-interview Insights: Strummer's Initial Look

In the initial stages of the study, the pre-interview with Strummer offered valuable insights into their perceptions and experiences. When discussing his views on literacy, Strummer candidly remarked, "Reading and writing just feel like chores to me. It's not that I hate them; they just don't excite me." This sentiment indicated a neutral stance towards traditional literacy practices, with neither a strong aversion nor a marked enthusiasm.

Regarding engagement with fine arts, Strummer shared, "I've always been curious about music, especially guitars. But never really got a chance to try." This revealed an existing interest in the realm of fine arts, albeit one that had remained largely unexplored due to various constraints based on personal motivations.

On interpersonal dynamics, Strummer's reflections were telling. "I usually just blend in, you know? Don't want to stand out or be the odd one out," he commented with a sense of doubtfulness about his abilities and comprehensive understanding of his own vulnerability. Such a statement shed light on a possible inclination to avoid drawing attention, suggesting a level of comfort in staying within the boundaries of his comfort zone as a coping strategy.

The pre-interview with Strummer, thus, painted a picture of a teenager with latent interests in fine arts, a somewhat neutral view on traditional literacy, and a tendency to maintain a low profile in social settings as a preview of their developing identity.

### Post-interview Reflections: Strummer's Transformative Journey

Upon the conclusion of the intervention, the post-interview with Strummer revealed significant shifts in his perceptions and experiences. As we delved into his evolved relationship with literacy, Strummer expressed, "After blending music with stories, I see reading in a different light. It's not just words on a page anymore; it's like they have a rhythm of their own." This sentiment marked a departure from his earlier stance, suggesting that the fusion of music with narratives had instilled a newfound appreciation for literary activities and his hopeful curiosity for the future.

When discussing his renewed engagement with fine arts, Strummer enthused, "Playing the guitar, it's like discovering a part of me I didn't know existed. Every time I strike a chord, it's like telling a story without words." Such a statement underscored the profound impact that hands-on musical experience had on his personal expression and connection to stories.

Touching upon the transformation in his interpersonal dynamics, Strummer reflected, "Being in the guitar club...it's changed me. I used to prefer staying in the background, but now, I look

forward to every session, every performance. It's like I've found my tribe." This observation highlighted the positive influence of collaborative sessions and group activities in bolstering Strummer's confidence and sense of belonging.

### **The Evolving Narrative of Strummer**

As the study progressed, our field notes captured moments that shed light on Strummer's journey through the guitar club activities. During one of the sessions, an observer noted, "(Strummer) initially hesitant to share his musical pieces, gradually began to take initiative, suggesting new song choices and actively participating in discussions." This shift from a passive to an active role underscored his growing confidence and engagement with the club's activities.

In another observation, the field notes highlighted the deepening bond between Strummer and his peers: "During a collaborative session, Strummer was overheard saying, 'This feels like a safe space, where I can be myself without any judgment.' Their peers nodded in agreement, creating a palpable sense of camaraderie in the room." This quote accentuates the supportive environment of the guitar club and how it played a crucial role in fostering positive social interactions for Strummer.

Furthermore, the field notes chronicled moments of introspection and self-discovery. In one particular instance, an observer documented, "After a session, Strummer sat alone, strumming the guitar thoughtfully. When asked about his thoughts, he responded, 'Each chord, each note, it's like a reflection of my emotions, my stories.'" This depiction of trust in the social environment is a testament to fine arts and how it brings cohesive unity.

The collective evidence from Strummer's interviews and the consistent observations from field notes indicate a deep transformation. This journey from a disengaged stance towards literacy to one where reading is seen as a rhythmic adventure illustrates the powerful alchemy of integrating arts into education. Strummer's evolution from a background presence to an active, enthusiastic participant exemplifies the study's core finding: fine arts serve not just as an educational tool, but as a catalyst for personal growth and social integration. His newfound sense of belonging and identity within the guitar club milieu signifies a broader implication for educational practices, advocating for the inclusion of arts as a means to engage and uplift students who may otherwise remain on the periphery of academic life and social involvement. Strummer's case reaffirms the transformative power of the arts in cultivating not only academic skills but also in fostering a supportive community that embraces each member's unique contributions.

### **Pre-interview Insights: Fretwell's Initial Look**

Before the artistic intervention, Fretwell shared candid thoughts on various aspects. On the topic of literacy, Fretwell remarked, "Reading mostly feels like something I have to do for school." This sentiment signaled an inclination to view reading as a compulsory activity predominantly linked to academic demands. Yet, there was a glimmer of appreciation for the world of words. "I do like some stories, especially if they're about things I've been through," Fretwell added, hinting at a latent connection to narratives mirroring personal experiences.

When discussing fine arts, especially music, Fretwell's initial take was one of curiosity laced with uncertainty: "I haven't really played any musical instruments before, but they seem interesting." However, a subtle undertone of hesitation echoed in the statement, "I'm not sure if

I'd be any good or what others might think," shedding light on potential apprehensions about mastery and peer perceptions.

Delving into social dynamics, Fretwell's introspective comment encapsulated a preference for more intimate interactions: "I'm more comfortable talking to someone one-on-one or maybe in a small group." The statement, "I get a bit nervous in big groups or if I feel like everyone's looking at me," provided further insight into a potential reluctance to be in the limelight during larger gatherings. These initial reflections set the stage for understanding the depth and nuances of Fretwell's journey through the intervention.

Initially, Fretwell showed his tension and anxiety by honestly sharing that he was often in trouble. However, he gradually showed his interest in music. He often stated, "I'm a rapper." "I'm good at music." Fretwell additionally shared his coping strategy by stating that "music is what helps me cope. Music really helped me with my problems." He also felt proud of himself as he identified that he was good at remembering and recalling materials he was exposed to, which appears to assist him in believing that he had musical talent/ability. He self-identified that he was better at remembering songs he had heard before. Fretwell addressed: "I would hear a song for once and I'd already know the whole thing."

Throughout the interviews, Fretwell showed self-motivation to be a musician. His responses indicate that he had the intrinsic motivation to extend and exercise his capacity and explore his musical talent. He also expressed his interest in studying music in college when the researchers asked him about his plans for the future.

However, despite the fact that Fretwell showed his interest in music and his potential to be a musician, he sometimes appeared to be unsure and uncertain about what he hoped to be in the future. During the pre-interview sessions, Fretwell revealed his vulnerability and doubtfulness. "I'm just gonna stop if I don't get big."

As he shared that he made and wrote the lyrics for his music and rap, the researcher indicated that he might have been a decent writer. Fretwell responded that he was good at writing, but at the same time, he admitted that he was not good at writing mechanics (e.g., punctuation). His response suggests that he was self-aware of his strengths and weaknesses. A similar pattern was observed when the researcher complimented his (musical ear) ability to hear music quickly. He agreed with the researcher's comment by stating "I know the chords by heart," but at the same time, he addressed his weakness of not transforming/ switching the chords quickly. However, he acknowledged that he needed practice and he had practiced continuously. His reactions and responses indicate his resilience and tenacity.

When it comes to literacy discussions, Fretwell shared about his reading and writing practices while working on his music performance, such as writing down lyrics in his journal and reading the dictionary to learn more words for his lyrics.

In short, Fretwell's pre-interview reflections reveal a young individual at the cusp of self-discovery, grappling with the duality of his existing skills and unexplored potential. His affinity for music and lyrical expression serves as a testament to his intrinsic artistic inclinations, despite his hesitations and self-doubt. The interviews sketch a portrait of Fretwell not just as a student with educational and behavioral challenges, but as a burgeoning artist with a resilient spirit and a willingness to engage deeply with his musical passions. His honest acknowledgment of his strengths and areas for growth exemplifies a maturity that belies his years and sets a hopeful tone for his future aspirations.

### **Post-interview Reflections: Fretwell's Transformative Journey**

Following the artistic endeavors and guitar sessions of the study, Fretwell's perspective underwent significant transformations.

When revisiting the subject of literacy after the intervention, Fretwell revealed a newfound appreciation: "After playing the guitar and seeing how music can tell stories, reading feels different now. It's more personal." This evolution from the earlier stance suggested a deeper connection to the act of reading. Expanding on this, Fretwell expressed, "Now, I don't just read because I have to. It's like I can hear the stories in my head, almost like a song."

Reflecting on the experience with fine arts and particularly music, Fretwell's enthusiasm was apparent: "I never thought I'd be this into playing the guitar. It's amazing how learning a few chords can make you feel so accomplished." Further, he confided that playing music and blending it with stories has "become a way for me to share what I feel, without actually saying it out loud."

The most remarkable shift, however, was evident in Fretwell's approach to interpersonal relationships. "Being in the guitar club changed how I see group activities. Everyone's so supportive," he remarked. Elaborating on this growth, Fretwell stated, "I used to avoid big group sessions, but now, it feels good to play together, to share the stage. I think I've become more confident in my own skin."

These post-interview reflections encapsulate the profound impact of intertwining fine arts with literacy, especially in fostering personal and social development. Through the guitar lesson sessions, his perspectives and perceptions shifted. He shared several skills he had picked up from learning the guitar - he was able to pay attention and focus on details. Fretwell's responses imply that he had an internal drive that has led him to act toward his goal as a prospective rapper/musician. He became a positive, hopeful, and confident learner.

Additionally, Fretwell mentioned that his views about reading and literacy had changed after participating in the Guitar Club. He reported that the students in the Guitar Club learned about how to use words that describe their emotions, and as he learned those words through the guitar lessons, he believed that participating in the Guitar Club had helped him develop reading and literacy skills. Fretwell also shared that he saw "similarities between reading guitar chords and reading words and books." When he was writing lyrics for songs, he tried to find perfect rhythms with appropriate word choices; thus, learning about different words from guitar lessons by the teacher assisted him in making songs.

Moreover, Fretwell appears to construct his new identity. He addressed that his taste in reading books had changed after joining the Guitar Club. Unlike his past, he reported that he tried to read books about teenagers and more chapter books. He further shared that he would see himself reading more books in his daily life.

In conclusion, Fretwell's post interview showcased his behavioral changes and perspective shifts in his relationship with literacy (i.e., his motivations for literacy learning) and fine arts activities, which had positively affected his personal growth, prosocial behavior/attitudes, cognitive development, and sociocultural transformations.

### **The Evolving Narrative of Fretwell**

During the observation of the guitar club activities, field notes highlighted several aspects of Fretwell's participation and engagement. In one of the sessions, an instructor commented on Fretwell's dedication: "It's impressive to see how quickly Fretwell picks up on the techniques."

There's a certain eagerness to learn." This keen interest was evident in the way Fretwell would diligently practice chords, often repeating sequences to achieve perfection.

Furthermore, interactions with peers suggested a growing sense of camaraderie. One of the fellow students mentioned, "Fretwell has a unique style, and it's great to see how they add their own touch to the songs we play." This showcased not only the appreciation from peers but also the uniqueness Fretwell brought to the group.

Moreover, during a group collaboration, when the students were brainstorming ideas for a performance, Fretwell actively contributed, suggesting, "Why don't we try blending two different songs? It might sound fresh." This active involvement indicated a boost in confidence and a willingness to experiment.

In essence, the field notes captured Fretwell's journey from being a tentative participant to a confident and integral member of the guitar club, reflecting the transformative power of fine art activities. The culmination of Fretwell's interviews and subsequent sessions outlines a narrative of personal evolution and resilience. The insights gleaned from his initial introspections to his later reflections offer a compelling chronicle of change—one that transcends mere participation in fine arts to embody a holistic transformation. As Fretwell embraced the guitar club's activities, he navigated beyond his initial trepidations to a place of self-assurance and creative assertion. The consistent practice, the exploration of new literacy forms, and the supportive peer environment seem to have coalesced, fostering not only Fretwell's musicality but also his academic and social growth. This analysis underscores the integral role that artistic endeavors play in personal development, suggesting that such engagements can serve as significant turning points in the lives of adolescents navigating the complexities of identity and capability.

### **Comparative Analysis**

Upon a thorough examination of the experiences of both Strummer and Fretwell, certain patterns and distinct differences emerge. Both students embarked on this journey with reservations and uncertainties regarding their engagement with fine arts and their perceptions of literacy. Through the course of the study, both exhibited a renewed appreciation for the intertwined nature of music and narratives, a testament to the efficacy of hands-on fine art activities in reshaping literacy attitudes.

While Fretwell's transformation was primarily marked by a newfound enthusiasm for self-expression through music and literature, Strummer's journey took on a more introspective path. Strummer's engagement with the guitar club evolved into a medium for self-reflection and therapeutic self-expression. This nuanced difference underscores the individualized impact of art, reaffirming its potential to cater to varied personal needs and developmental trajectories.

Socially, both students experienced enhanced interpersonal dynamics, but their trajectories differed. Fretwell transitioned from being reserved to being more confident and open in group settings, whereas Strummer, who began with hesitations, found solace in the guitar club, describing it as a "safe space" for genuine self-expression.

### **Linking Findings to Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

The findings from this study significantly reflect the theoretical underpinnings of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Third Space (Soja, 1996), as they manifest in the transformative experiences of the participants. Our methodological design, centered on these theories, aimed to



create an environment that not only facilitated literacy development but also promoted personal growth and social interaction among adolescents facing behavioral challenges (Durlak et al., 2011).

The qualitative changes observed in the participants' attitudes toward literacy and fine arts can be directly attributed to our methodological emphasis on SEL and the creation of a Third Space (Gutiérrez, 2008). The study's structured art interventions provided an innovative platform for students to engage in creative expression while developing essential SEL competencies such as self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship management.

### ***Enhanced Literacy through Music***

The integration of music and storytelling, as observed in the participants' shift from seeing literacy as a chore to recognizing it as an engaging, rhythm-infused activity, underscores the effectiveness of combining SEL principles with artistic practices (Elias, 2020). This methodological approach not only enhanced literacy skills but also enriched the students' emotional and cognitive engagement with texts, resonating with Third Space theory by transforming the traditional literacy setting into one that is dynamic and culturally responsive.

### ***Social Dynamics and Identity Formation***

Both participants exhibited significant growth in their interpersonal relationships and self-concept, a core aim of fostering a transformative Third Space. For instance, Strummer's journey from a passive to an active community member highlights how the guitar club served as a Third Space, where he could renegotiate his social identity and enhance his sense of belonging. This aligns with the SEL focus on improving relationship skills and social awareness, facilitated through collaborative and interactive art sessions (Yin, 2018).

### ***Iterative and Responsive Methodology***

The iterative nature of data collection and the responsive adjustments made throughout the art interventions exemplify the practical application of Third Space theory. This approach allowed for continuous adaptation of the interventions to better suit the evolving needs of the participants (Zins et al., 2007), thereby maximizing the impact of the educational experience and ensuring that the interventions remained relevant and effective.

## **Discussion**

Transitioning into the thematic analysis of our findings, we reflect on the experiences Strummer and Fretwell shared with us. The journey they embarked upon, illuminated by their engagement with fine arts within the guitar club, offers a narrative of personal growth, literacy re-engagement, and social interconnectedness. The following analysis seeks to delve into the six thematic resonances that emerged from Strummer and Fretwell's experiences.

## Theme 1: Transformation Through Artistic Engagement

From the documented conversations, it's evident that Strummer and Fretwell experienced a shift from initial uncertainty to comfort and enjoyment in their guitar play, reflecting a broader transformation in his self-perception and capabilities. The direct association they make between reading music and reading words suggests that the musical experience provided them a new framework to understand and appreciate literacy, bridging their interests in a way that traditional reading could not. This transformation extends beyond the acquisition of a new skill to encompass a more profound impact on their academic motivation, wherein they start to perceive learning through a lens that is more aligned with their interests and personal identity.

### *Strummer's Transformation*

Individually, several subthemes emerge in Strummer's case:

**Increased Confidence and Comfort.** Strummer expressed feeling more comfortable and confident in playing the guitar, indicating a sense of mastery and self-assurance gained through the art form.

**Reading as a Multifaceted Experience.** He began to perceive reading music and books as more than just words on a page, suggesting a more rhythmic understanding of text.

**Artistic Expression as Therapeutic.** The guitar became a tool for emotional regulation and self-expression, with Strummer mentioning playing music to calm down, showcasing the therapeutic aspects of artistic engagement.

### *Fretwell's Transformation*

**Emotional and Cognitive Growth.** Fretwell discussed how playing the guitar provided a calming effect and a new medium for self-expression, illustrating how engagement with music can influence emotional well-being and cognitive development.

**Enhanced Literacy and Vocabulary.** His experience in the Guitar Club improved his vocabulary and changed his approach to reading, indicating a direct impact of music on literacy skills.

**Social Integration and Peer Relationships.** Fretwell noted an improvement in friendships and social interactions within the club, highlighting the role of artistic engagement in fostering social cohesion and a sense of belonging.

**Increased Focus and Observational Skills.** Learning the guitar enhanced his ability to focus and observe details, suggesting that musical training can enhance broader cognitive abilities relevant to academic and personal success.

## Theme 2: Personal and Social Identity Development

Participation in fine arts activities helped both students develop a stronger sense of self and community belonging, highlighting the role of the arts in personal and social identity formation. Both Strummer's and Fretwell's experiences illustrate how engagement with fine arts facilitated their journey towards self-discovery and social integration. Strummer found a "tribe" within the

guitar club, transforming his social identity from an observer to an active participant, which significantly boosted his confidence and sense of belonging. Similarly, Fretwell's involvement in music not only allowed him to express his emotions and thoughts more freely but also helped him form deeper connections with peers, fostering a supportive community. These narratives underscore the fine arts' capacity to act as a conduit for personal growth and the development of a more cohesive social identity, emphasizing the arts' critical role in nurturing individual self-awareness and community engagement.

### ***Strummer's Personal and Social Growth***

**From Observing to Engaging.** Initially hesitant, Strummer moved from the periphery to actively contributing in the guitar club, reflecting a shift in self-perception from passive to active participant.

**Artistic Self-Discovery.** Through music, Strummer discovered new facets of his identity, seeing himself as a creator and storyteller, which enriched his sense of self.

**Finding Community.** The guitar club provided a *tribe*, offering Strummer a sense of belonging and acceptance, crucial for social identity formation.

**Collaborative Expression.** Engaging in group performances and discussions within the club reinforced his social bonds and fostered a shared identity among members.

### ***Fretwell's Emotional and Social Expression***

**Music as a Coping Mechanism.** Fretwell utilized music to articulate his emotions and experiences, enhancing his emotional intelligence and self-awareness.

**Lyricism and Identity.** Writing lyrics became a medium for Fretwell to explore and affirm his personal narratives, contributing to a more defined individual identity.

**Peer Acceptance and Support.** Participation in the guitar club helped Fretwell overcome social anxieties, leading to stronger relationships with peers based on mutual respect and understanding.

**Leadership and Collaboration.** His growing confidence and musical skills enabled Fretwell to take on a more prominent role in group activities, illustrating the development of social leadership and collaborative skills.

## **Theme 3: Literacy as a Dynamic Concept**

Both Strummer and Fretwell's experiences underscore how their engagement with music transformed their understanding of literacy from a mere academic requirement to a vibrant, living practice deeply connected to personal expression and creativity. For Strummer, literacy evolved through the rhythm and storytelling of music, enriching his reading experience by infusing it with musicality and emotion. Fretwell saw direct parallels between musical composition and narrative construction, appreciating literacy's creative potential. Their journeys highlight literacy's expansion beyond traditional boundaries, encompassing artistic expression and personal growth, thereby illustrating its dynamic nature.

### *Strummer's Integration of Music and Literacy*

**Rhythmic Reading.** Strummer's insight that reading can have its own rhythm illustrates the merger of musical and literary comprehension, showing literacy as a multisensory experience.

**Narratives in Music.** His realization that music tells stories in a similar way to literature highlights the interconnectedness of different forms of expression, broadening his literacy understanding.

### *Fretwell's Creative Exploration through Literacy*

**Lyricism as Literacy.** Fretwell's engagement in writing lyrics demonstrates literacy's creative aspect, emphasizing that understanding and creating texts (lyrics) are vital literacy skills.

**Expanding Vocabulary through Music.** His approach to learning new words for his lyrics shows an active, purpose-driven engagement with language, reinforcing the idea that literacy development can stem from personal interests and creative endeavors.

These subthemes underscore how both students moved beyond traditional views of literacy, recognizing it as a fluid concept that encompasses and is enriched by musical engagement and personal expression.

## **Theme 4: Confidence and Agency**

Under this theme, the growth seen in Strummer and Fretwell showcases their journey from tentative participants to engaged and proactive members of the guitar club. Strummer's newfound willingness to share his musical ideas and Fretwell's eagerness to learn and contribute creatively illustrate their increased confidence. Both participants' active involvement in music not only enhanced their self-assurance but also encouraged them to take initiative and assume leadership roles, demonstrating the empowering effect of engaging in fine arts on individuals' self-perception and their ability to influence their environment.

### *Strummer's Evolving Self-Assurance*

**Public Expression and Participation.** Initially reserved, Strummer gradually began to share his music and ideas, showing increased self-confidence in his abilities and a willingness to engage with peers openly.

**Leadership in Collaboration.** Strummer's active participation in choosing songs and leading discussions within the guitar club reflects his growing sense of agency and leadership, influencing the group's direction.

### *Fretwell's Development of Personal Initiative*

**Self-Expression Through Music.** Fretwell's journey from hesitance to openly playing the guitar and writing lyrics illustrates his growing confidence in his musical talents and personal voice.

**Proactive Learning and Creativity.** His eagerness to learn guitar techniques and contribute to the club's performances demonstrates an enhanced agency, taking charge of his learning and creative outputs.

## Theme 5: Resilience and Self-Efficacy

Strummer's and Fretwell's active engagement and willingness to learn and improve, despite uncertainties, exemplify self-efficacy. Strummer found solace in music as a medium for emotional expression, while Fretwell leveraged his musical talents as a coping mechanism and a source of pride. Their journeys highlight how artistic engagement can bolster individuals' belief in their capabilities and foster a resilient attitude towards personal growth and learning.

### *Strummer's Resilience Through Music*

**Emotional Regulation and Growth.** Strummer utilized music as a means to navigate and express complex emotions, demonstrating resilience in facing personal challenges.

**Adapting to New Challenges.** His journey from initial reluctance to active participation in the guitar club showcases his adaptability and growing belief in his capacity to learn and contribute.

### *Fretwell's Self-Efficacy in Artistic Expression*

**Overcoming Doubts with Creativity.** Fretwell's progress in music, despite initial self-doubt, reflects his resilience and developing self-efficacy, as he embraces his identity as a musician and lyricist.

**Persistence in Skill Development.** His continuous practice and willingness to improve, even in areas of weakness, highlight a resilient mindset and a belief in his ability to achieve his goals through perseverance.

## Theme 6: Diverse Learning Trajectories

This theme underlines the uniqueness of Strummer's and Fretwell's growth through their involvement in music, advocating for education that is adaptable to individual needs. Strummer's transformation highlights an introspective journey where music became a means of self-expression and emotional exploration. In contrast, Fretwell's experience emphasizes the role of music in building self-confidence, mastering new skills, and envisioning a future in music. Their distinct paths underscore the importance of recognizing and supporting diverse learning styles and interests, suggesting that personalized educational approaches can more effectively foster student development and engagement.

### *Strummer's Journey of Self-Exploration*

**Personalized Emotional Expression.** Strummer's path reveals how music facilitated his emotional expression and coping, highlighting the need for education to adapt to individual emotional and expressive needs.

**Self-paced Learning.** His gradual embrace of music reflects the importance of allowing students to learn at their own pace, tailoring educational experiences to match personal growth timelines.

### ***Fretwell's Path to Confidence and Skill Mastery***

**Adaptation to Individual Interests.** Fretwell's growth underscores the significance of aligning educational opportunities with students' interests, particularly in how music engagement led to increased literacy and social skills.

**Incremental Achievement and Self-Belief.** His story illustrates the value of recognizing small victories and progress in learning, reinforcing the need for educational frameworks that celebrate incremental achievements to bolster self-efficacy and resilience.

### **Conclusion**

Our study reveals the potential of integrating fine arts into literacy programs, particularly within challenging environments such as juvenile detention centers. The transformative experiences of Strummer and Fretwell highlight how innovative art activities can revitalize engagement and enhance literacy development. This study supports the integration of fine arts with traditional curricula, suggesting that such an approach not only improves literacy outcomes but also enriches social interactions and emotional expression among adolescents facing behavioral challenges (Eisner, 2002). Educators and curriculum developers should consider incorporating music, visual arts, and performance into their pedagogical strategies to foster a more engaging and inclusive educational environment.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The qualitative nature of our research and the small, specific sample limit the generalizability of the results. Future studies might expand on this work by involving a larger and more diverse group of participants, which could enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings across different settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Furthermore, the methodology employed, particularly the reliance on observational data and participant self-reporting, may introduce biases and subjective interpretations. Future research could incorporate more objective measures of engagement and literacy development, or use mixed methods to triangulate findings (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010) and provide a more comprehensive view of the impact of arts integration.

Moreover, given the positive predisposition towards the arts noted in our participants, further research could explore the effects of fine arts integration in populations with varying levels of initial interest in the arts, potentially offering insights into how to effectively engage students who may not initially be inclined towards artistic expression.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study challenges traditional educational approaches, advocating for a holistic, multi-sensory educational experience that aligns with contemporary educational psychology and pedagogical theories. The integration of fine arts in educational settings not only caters to cognitive development but also addresses emotional and social needs, creating a more balanced and effective approach to education for at-risk youth (Gardner, 2011).

In conclusion, the integration of fine arts into literacy education represents a promising avenue for enhancing educational outcomes in traditionally underserved populations. By fostering

an environment that promotes creativity, emotional expression, and social skills, educators can significantly impact the lives of students in a meaningful and lasting way.

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## ***Examining Parental Perspectives on Standardized Testing, Selection, and Meritocracy: An Exploratory Study of Highly Selective Public Magnet Schools***

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### ***Abstract***

*This interview-based qualitative study examines the ways that parents of high-achieving students who attended prestigious and selective public magnet high schools understand notions of academic merit, fairness, and selection. Using thematic analysis, I identified four emergent themes, which are that parents placed confidence in objective testing for selection, extrapolated the meaning of test scores, preferred a like-minded educational environment, and accepted segregation by ability as a desirable future. After presenting these emergent themes, I conclude by offering a set of critical guiding questions that can inform future educational research on selection practices and their justifying ideologies.*

**Keywords:** *meritocracy, standardized testing, selection, segregation, magnet schools*

In *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033*, the British sociologist Michael Young (1958) satirically described a futuristic society in which the significant advancements of psychology made it possible “to predict with some degree of accuracy the ultimate level of a child’s intellectual powers” (p. 58). As the “reliable age” of determining a child’s ultimate educability through intelligence quotient testing steadily plummeted over time, the educational system in this fictional world was consequently re-structured:

The test-ages at which highly reliable predictions could be made have become steadily lower. In 2000, the reliable age was 9; in 2015, the reliable age was 4; in 2020, it was 3...the real justification for a common education in primary schools for everyone up to 11 was that no one could be quite sure of the ultimate value of any young boy or girl...but when ability could once be tested and identified at the age of 3, there was really no point at all in the bright children going to the same co-intellectual school as others who would almost inevitably retard their development. (Young, 1958, p. 143)

In such a society that Young (1958) described, the intelligent did not have to be schooled alongside the un-intelligent, and public educational resources did not have to be wasted on those with inferior intellectual capabilities. The few no longer had to be sacrificed for the many in the “name of equality” (Young, 1958, p. 36), and thus an unparalleled degree of social efficiency was purportedly actualized.

At the time, Young (1958) was critiquing the newly enacted Education Act of 1944, which established and separated children into “three main ‘streams’ or categories of schooling—grammar, secondary modern, and technical...on the basis of an examination at the age of 11” (UK Parliament, n.d.). Although this tripartite system was supposedly designed to ameliorate inequalities in British secondary education, Young (1958) argued that selection into a particular educational track according to “merit” (determined by an examination) would merely establish a new structure of social stratification. This educational reform would not truly redress existing inequalities but rather cloak the status quo under a new guise (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2008; McKenzie & Phillips, 2016), and further, a system built around “objective” high-stakes testing would eventually lead to a dystopian society in which a person’s educational and career track is ultimately assigned at birth.

Standardized testing and other forms of selection remain fundamental features of the U.S. educational system, and in this interview-based exploratory qualitative study involving parents of high-achieving students who attend prestigious and selective public magnet high schools (n=12), I explore the ways that a group of parents understands notions of academic merit, fairness, processes of selection, the distribution of scarce resources, and (in)equality. This study highlights the perspectives and voices of parents whose views remain under-represented in educational research. Parents are an important population to examine because they make critical decisions concerning their children’s education and have a relative degree of power to enact change and/or resist institutional authorities in concrete ways within their local contexts (e.g., Lareau et al., 2018; Lareau & Muñoz, 2012). Based on the emergent themes of my analysis, I ultimately offer a set of exploratory theoretical questions that I argue can be a useful starting point when examining a variety of educational practices.

### **Theoretical Perspective: The Meritocratic Achievement Ideology**

A meritocracy—a term first coined by Young (1958)—is a theoretical social system in which an individual’s social position is determined by achievement rather than ascriptive characteristics (e.g., caste, phenotype, sex, birth order). Although the degree to which meritocratic principles are realized in modern institutions and societies is debated, the concept of a meritocracy is generally perceived as a desirable and ideal structure that provides equality of opportunity (Kim & Choi, 2017; Lipsey, 2014). Concerning the distribution of social goods, Grusky and Weisshaar (2014) argue that the average person is typically willing to accept inequalities in outcomes and resources on the condition that the opportunities for attaining these social goods are strictly distributed based on merit. However, the concept of merit itself (i.e., the quality of “being good” or “being worthy”) lacks an absolute or universal definition; rather, merit can and has been defined in varying ways depending on particular social, historical, and cultural contexts (Guinier, 2015; Lewis & Doyno, 1983; Karabel, 2005; Kim & Choi, 2017; Noh, 2020; Sandel, 2020; Tagg, 2022). Noting the pluralistic possibilities of alternative views regarding what constitutes merit, Sen (1999) argues that “there is no escape from the contingent nature of its content, related to the characterization of a good—or an acceptable—society and the criteria in terms of which assessments are to be made” (pp. 9-10). For example, in some cultural contexts, intelligence and merit are judged by the quickness with which students complete tasks, while in other societies, slow deliberation is a more positive and desirable characteristic (Anderson-Levitt, 2005; Booth 2002; Wober, 1974).

The meritocratic ideal is closely tied to education, arguably due to the substantial influence of Blau and Duncan’s (1967) status attainment model. To briefly summarize, Blau and Duncan

(1967) argue that education has an independent and causal effect in inducing variation in eventual occupational status, independent of initial family position. In other words, the expansion of education in the U.S. has effectively promoted the importance of achievement over ascription in determining one's social position. The meritocratic achievement ideology rests on the assumptions that academic success is solely a consequence of individual effort, ability, and competence (Batruch et al., 2022; Calarco et al., 2022; McKenzie & Phillips, 2016; Oakes & Rogers, 2007; Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014) and that academic performance is the causal link to occupational and economic success (MacLeod, 2009). Within the context of educational institutions, the meritocratic achievement ideology also asserts that each individual is equally positioned for success (independent of an unequal social structure) and that the educational system is a mechanism that objectively discerns individual ability and effort and therefore fairly distributes its rewards.

While it may be the dominant paradigm in mainstream public discourse surrounding education, the meritocratic achievement ideology has been strongly critiqued as deceptive, illusionary, and responsible for perpetuating deficit perspectives and reproducing educational and social inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; MacLeod, 2009). Much research has been devoted to mythicizing meritocratic beliefs, narratives, and practices (Au, 2016; Calarco et al., 2022; Clycq et al., 2014; Cobb & Russell, 2015; Park & Liu, 2014; Talib & Fitzgerald, 2015; Warikoo & Fuhr, 2014). For instance, Au (2016) argues that the neoliberal educational project, which structures education as a competition for resources, is a modern-day racial project in which one of its most prominent forms, high-stakes testing, is used to “justify an ideology of meritocracy, built on the presumed objective measurement of human intelligence” (p. 43). Thus, as Au (2016) argues, high-stakes testing is a form or structure built to legitimize the meritocratic achievement ideology, and it does so by functioning as a mechanism for selection, separation, and social efficiency—all under the deceptive guise of objectivity.

However, while the notion of an educational meritocracy has been systematically mythicized in the academy, the ways that teachers, school leaders, and other educational stakeholders, such as local community members, citizens, and parents, understand academic merit, measures of ability, and selection have not been adequately examined. These perspectives, viewpoints, and beliefs must also be included in educational research. This study focuses specifically on the voices of parents, a group with a long history of resisting and challenging educational policies (Lareau et al., 2018; Lareau & Muñoz, 2012; Roda & Wells, 2013; Sikkink & Emerson, 2008). In an effort to understand the parental perspective, I examine a particular subset of parents—parents of children who have successfully tested into a highly selective and prestigious magnet high school. The two overarching research questions that guide my inquiry are as follows:

- (1) In what ways do parents of high-achieving students at selective magnet schools conceptualize academic merit, measures of ability, and selection?
- (2) What visions of education policy are perceived as most desirable and optimal?

## **Method**

I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with parents ( $n=12$ ) whose children attended a nationally ranked and test-dependent public magnet high school (during the data collection period in 2022). Magnet high schools generally offer a specialized curriculum (e.g., health professions, science and technology, engineering, etc.) and draw applicants across traditional district boundary lines. The seven public magnet high schools included in this study are located in the northeast of the U.S., and according to the U.S. News & World Report rankings, each of the

high schools is consistently ranked within the top 150 high schools in the country and top 10 within their respective states. Due to a prestigious reputation for academic excellence and elite college preparation, these public magnet high schools have limited space and therefore use an admissions process that relies heavily upon standardized testing to allocate its acceptances. Earning acceptance into one of these public magnet high schools is a highly competitive and desirable but scarce resource.

For this study, I recruited participants via e-mail using publicly available information on school websites. As a result, each of the parents in this study also served on the school's parent-teacher association or parent support organization. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes. The three guiding questions that I asked all participants are as follows: (1) Why do parents want to send their kids to this school? (2) What is the admissions process like? (3) What do you feel like your child has gained as result of attending this school? I provided space for the participants to freely discuss and share their perspectives about any relevant topics, and then I asked probing questions related to the research questions.

After completing each interview, I transcribed the audio recording using an online transcription service and then edited the transcript for accuracy. I specifically followed the six-phase progression of thematic analysis as detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing of themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing and producing the report. In addition, I approached the thematic analysis from an inductive data-driven perspective, rather than a theoretical thematic analysis. During initial open-coding of the interview transcripts (Bhattacharya, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I coded using an in-vivo coding approach in order to maintain and preserve the authenticity of parental speech in the analysis (Saldaña, 2014). After the initial open-coding process, I then reviewed the in-vivo codes in search for common themes and grouped the codes into broader emergent categories (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Given the limited number of participants interviewed, this small-scale study is intended to be exploratory. My goal is not to synthesize broad findings that can be universally applied to all parents but rather to offer a set of emerging themes that can be productively used in future research. Interestingly, Guest et al. (2006) argue that, for thematic analyses, saturation or the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data can be reached within the first 12 interviews of a study. I raise this point not to suggest that no benefits can be gained by increasing the number of participants interviewed but to argue that key themes can be identified even with 12 interviews. An additional caveat is that I only interviewed actively involved parents with children who successfully earned admission into a selective high school and therefore I was not able to capture the full range or variation of parental perspectives.

Of the parents interviewed (n=12), 5 self-identified as White, 5 as Asian, 1 as Latinx, and 1 as Black. 8 of the participants were mothers, while 4 were fathers. The averaged racial composition of the 7 high schools represented in the study, based on publicly available data from 2021, is as follows: 25.9% White, 6.6% Black, 12.3% Latinx, and 50.3% Asian (I choose to present the averaged racial composition to protect the anonymity of the schools). In other words, the schools in this study are predominantly white and Asian American. In this present analysis and discussion, I do not examine or discuss the discourse surrounding the racial representation of the student population at these schools. When incorporating parent quotes into the findings, I opt not to specify the racial identification of the parent. The themes and findings regarding the ways that parents actively avoid racial discourse yet at the same time contribute to Asian American racialization are presented in a critical discourse analysis elsewhere (Hu, 2023).

## **Emergent Themes**

In this section, I present the findings from the thematic analysis of the interview transcript data. I call these “emergent themes” to highlight the need to further develop and corroborate these initial findings in future work. The emergent themes are (1) placing confidence in objective testing for selection, (2) extrapolating the meaning of test scores, (3) preferring a “like-minded” educational environment, and (4) accepting segregation by ability as a desirable future. Each of these themes is evident to varying extents in the majority but not all of the interviews. Finally, I have ordered the emergent themes based on a logical thematic sequence. The first and third themes appear most frequently in the transcript data, followed by the second and fourth themes.

### **Emergent Theme #1: Placing Confidence in Objective Testing for Selection**

Prospective students are required to take a standardized admissions examination when applying to these elite and selective magnet high schools. Although the actual items and the format of the test differ by district and state, the parents in this study consistently mentioned both the high level of difficulty of the admissions test and the high-stakes nature of the test results. To explain the admissions process, many parents compared the test to the SAT but often qualified this comparison by stating that the high school examination is significantly more difficult. In fact, an entire test-preparation industry has flourished as a result of parental demand. Many parents pay significant amounts of money to send their children to test preparation services, “cram” schools, and/or after-school tutoring, specifically in preparation to take this high school admissions examination. Some parents expressed that the situation has become so severely competitive that some families have started preparing their children for the test as early as elementary school. However, the general perception is that parents are still willing to invest the time and resources into deliberate preparation because of the rewards associated with a high test score. Although the exact formulas and algorithms that specific school districts use to determine their acceptances are not publicly available, the parents I interviewed were aware that the student’s score on the standardized examination carries the greatest weighting in the admissions process. Without a high score on the test, earning an acceptance into the high school is not possible.

As colleges and universities are increasingly moving towards test-optional admissions policies, it is particularly notable that standardizing testing remains such a significant component in magnet high school admissions and that some parents have not demanded a similar policy change. On the contrary, many of the parents I interviewed expressed a high degree of trust and belief in the objectivity of the standardized admissions test. From their perspective, the test is unquestionably fair and objective. For example, when I asked a parent about the final score that the test produces, the parent responded, “It’s totally objective. It’s that number.” This parent explained that the school does not take into account subjective measures such as “personality,” intended area of study, and non-cognitive characteristics, and because there’s “zero consideration for any of that,” the test score or “that number” determines the bulk of the applicant’s admission probability. Similarly, another parent described the admissions test in this way, “It’s really black and white. There’s no personality. There’s none of that...they take all of the subjectivity out of it.” Thus, many parents in this study tended to view the admissions process through a dichotomous lens: personality is a vague, unreliable, and subjective measure, while the standardized test score is the clear, objective, and ultimately preferable measure.

In addition, the parents I interviewed expressed great confidence that the admissions test serves as an equalizer of opportunity and that each student taking the test has an equal chance of being selected. Such a view aligns with the meritocratic achievement ideology, but while the meritocratic myth can often remain an abstract belief about schooling in general, the existence of a singular standardized admissions test further makes visible or embodies the meritocratic ideology. One parent commented that “you have to use some objective means of gauging a student’s ability...you have to have something that puts people on a level playing field, and that I guess is the test.” Another parent similarly expressed confidence in the equalizing effect of the test, arguing that “[the test] is the most equitable criteria for admissions. Of course, a lot of people still feel that privilege goes into, but I don’t think so.” There is certainly variation in perspective regarding the degree to which the admissions test is desirable or optimal, especially when considering available alternatives. On one hand, the former parent stated that the test is a reasonable objective selector of student ability specifically “compared to what the alternatives might be.” This parent suggested that the test is neither perfect nor ideal but “it’s better than nothing.” It seems that, to this parent, there are no other legitimate and/or just criteria by which to select students. On the other hand, the latter parent acknowledged that admissions testing has been controversial, but to this parent, the test is undeniably the “most equitable” and fairest criterion for admissions.

The majority of the parents I interviewed preferred a testing-based system over a college admissions system that uses subjective measures such as transcripts, letters of recommendations, personal statements, etc. For instance, a parent explained that, at the high school information sessions, the school openly explains the admissions criteria and that “they’re pretty transparent” about the fact that they examine both middle school grades and standardized test scores. A parent at another school expressed similar sentiments, “The school is really transparent on that...they pretty much weigh a student’s grades and then the results of the written test. There’s no interview. They don’t look at other things.” This same parent, at a later point, compares the high school admissions process with the college admissions process, explaining that “the college admissions process is much less transparent. You don’t have any idea of what your chances are.” This parent used anecdotal evidence of various high-achieving students with exceptional grades and test scores who did not earn admission into elite universities to critique the unreliable nature of university admissions. Thus, in direct comparison to a subjective system of holistic review, standardized testing offers an objective, fair, and transparent measure.

## **Emergent Theme #2: Extrapolating the Meaning of Test Scores**

A second emergent and more tacit theme that extends from confidence in the objectivity of standardized testing is that some of the parents I interviewed presented the admissions test as not only the best available selection criterion but also a predictor of future ability and potential. To some of them, the test serves a dual purpose: it is not only a measure of current ability or knowledge but also a predictor of future life success. School districts may use these standardized tests for a specific intended purpose (i.e., offering admission), but parents (and others) interpreted and constructed their own meaning from these scores. In other words, because test scores do not have a singular universal meaning, interpreting and assigning meaning to the test scores are contested social processes.

Several parents added their own interpretation and extrapolated the meaning of the standardized test scores to be an indicator of ability and future life success. For instance, in contrast to those that doubt the test, a parent asserted, “I think that the test is a very good predictor of ability.

I do. I do.” It is unclear what “ability” means in this context; this parent might be suggesting that the test is an accurate predictor of future high school achievement or perhaps college achievement. Again, the meaning of the test results is subject to interpretation. However, to demonstrate this point further, a second parent offered his own interpretation of the test scores: “8<sup>th</sup> grade test scores are somewhat predictive of future life success...you can give people tests of cognitive ability and they are decently predictive on a statistical level.” To this parent then, the high school admissions process is not only selecting students to enter its incoming class, but it is also selecting students who are most likely to succeed in the future and therefore those who are worthy of receiving educational resources. The other parents I interviewed were seldomly this explicit about their interpretations of the test scores, but this underlying theme raises critical questions about the intended uses and meanings of testing (and other forms of assessment). In this case, there was a discrepancy between official school district policy concerning the purpose of the standardized test and parental interpretation about what the test scores mean, the contested questions being: what are the intended uses of the test? What do they measure and what do they tell us?

### **Emergent Theme #3: Preferring a “Like-Minded” Educational Environment**

The most frequent term that the parents in this study used to describe the student population of their child’s school was “like-minded.” For example, a parent praised the student body by explaining to me that “all the kids are super motivated...I think it’s so nice that they’re like-minded.” Some parents suggested that it was their children themselves that wanted to be in this “like-minded” environment. For instance, a parent explained that “[my daughter] wanted to be challenged. She wanted to be around those who are like-minded.” Other parents, on the other hand, explicitly noted that they themselves wanted to send their children to the school for this specific reason. Describing it more so as a general parental perspective, a parent explained that the school “connects kids with more like-minded kids and I think that’s also part of the bigger picture as to why people want to send their kids there.” Other parents were more personal; for instance, a parent admitted that “the reason I wanted my daughter to go to this particular school is because at least she’ll be with like-minded kids.”

The third emergent theme from my analysis is that parents preferred a “like-minded” educational environment for their children. As I will demonstrate in what follows, the notion of “like-mindedness” was used in a euphemistic manner to denote cognitive intelligence. When I sought clarification on what “like-minded” means, the parents I interviewed were willing to be more explicit with its meaning to varying degrees. For instance, beginning with the vaguest, a parent explained that attending the selective high school is highly desirable because “there’s an expectation that it will provide an environment in which students with a similar profile are together.” Then, another parent explained that her son was having a positive experience at the school because “he felt that he found his people because they are on a different level...with different values and ways of thinking.” The students at her son’s selective school are on a “different level” compared to the average high school student. Finally, the following parent was the most explicit regarding the meaning of like-mindedness. This parent recounted, “[my son] told me that he doesn’t want to be with normal people. He likes being with other people who tested in and are really smart...he really likes the level of intelligence at [the school].” My analysis suggests that what these parents and their high-achieving students wanted—described in plain terms—was to attend a school with smart and intelligent students who tested in, not with those of inferior cognitive intelligence.



### **Emergent Theme #4: Accepting Segregation by Ability as a Desirable Future**

Building on this euphemism of like-mindedness, the fourth emergent theme was that several parents viewed segregation by ability as a necessary and desirable education for their children. Many parents consistently lamented the hypothetical situation in which their children would attend their local district high school and be surrounded by peers of all ability levels. Instead, these parents preferred for their children to attend a different school in which all the students of “high ability” would be grouped together. In many cases, as made evident by the aforementioned examples, the parents I interviewed suggested that it was their children themselves who preferred this arrangement. While it seems that their children chose to attend these schools on their own volition, the parents themselves acknowledged that they also encouraged and pushed their children. For example, one parent admitted to me that “super-driven parents are the backbone of this whole thing. This whole machine is driven by the parents.” When I asked another parent if student achievement was driven more by the parents or by the children, she quickly and confidently responded that “it is driven by parental involvement.”

In addition, a parent explained to me that, at their local public high school, “there is no healthy competition at the school,” and the primary reason why she wanted her daughter to attend the magnet school was so that she could experience high-level competition. The implicit belief was that by segregating their children in schools of ability, their children would be motivated to participate in a degree of healthy competition, which would then produce higher expectations, aspirations, and ultimately achievements. Due to the negative connotations that the word “segregation” carries, the parents in my study were seldomly explicit about what they desired for their children’s education. However, one specific parent’s statement encapsulated this theme:

There is always going to be some sort of segregation by ability, whether within an institution or between institutions. We have segregation by ability. I personally don’t mind it. In normal high schools, they have honors classes anyways, right? There’s already tracking and segregation by ability...that’s a part of life.

In summary, many of the parents I interviewed believed that an environment in which their children are surrounded only by “like-minded” intelligent peers affords the best possible and most desirable education.

### **Discussion & Conclusion**

Based on semi-structured interviews with parents of high-achieving students who attend prestigious and selective magnet high schools, I have examined and probed underlying parental beliefs and perspectives. The parents I interviewed have confidence in the supposed objectivity of standardized testing, and thus, the selection of students becomes a defensible and meritocratic practice on the basis that the standardized test accurately measures cognitive ability. In addition, the subsequent segregation of students by ability in a “like-minded” environment is a preferred arrangement because parents assumed that such an arrangement provides the best education, filled with challenge and competition.

Importantly, this exploratory study compels us to consider the ways that many educational practices and structures are undergirded by philosophical beliefs and justifying discourses and ideologies. While this study focused specifically on magnet school admissions, the emergent themes

that I identified can be flexibly applied to a variety of educational practices because many daily practices in contemporary formal schooling involve identifying and selecting students, making predictions or judgments about students' futures, and also sorting and organizing students based on these decisions (Domina et al., 2023). Therefore, using the emergent themes as a guide, I propose a set of guiding questions for future research that can be applied to a plethora of educational contexts that involve selection. The questions are:

- How are students identified and selected? On what basis?
- How are these processes subject to contested meanings?
- How does the educational practice become defensible or legitimated? What are the underlying ideologies and beliefs?

For instance, in the context of this study, the standardized test results were only meaningful and significant to the extent that many parents interpreted the score as both a measure of current knowledge/ability and a predictive indicator of future life success. This selection process was justified by discourses of objectivity and fairness as well as meritocratic achievement ideologies.

This set of questions can be applied to a plethora of practices that involve selection. For instance, at the individual classroom level, we can examine the practices of dividing students into reading groups in the elementary school classroom (Webb-Williams, 2021), differentiating assignments by student readiness (Ziernwald et al., 2022), identifying students for pull-out “gifted and talented” programming (Roda, 2015), and other in-school segregation practices. At a broader school level, we can examine processes of selection related to tracking students into academic and vocational curriculums (Ainsworth & Roscigno, 2005), school choice systems (Singer, 2020), elite private schooling (Khan, 2011), etc. To offer a specific example as to how this set of questions can inform future research, consider the practice of constructing reading groups. A researcher might ask, how does the teacher make decisions concerning which students should be in which groups? How might students and parents themselves interpret this selection process and the meanings of the teacher's decisions? How are these meanings contested? Finally, how does this practice of grouping students by reading level become justified or legitimated in the school? What are the discourses and ideologies among parents, teachers, and/or school leaders that undergird this practice?

Returning to this study, one of the key underlying beliefs within standardized testing discourse was the existence of an inherent hierarchy of “natural” intelligence. If some individuals are more capable, more intelligent, or more talented than others, then there must be a means to objectively measure and quantify this ability. If there are systematic differences in ability, then these groups should be educated separately. Thus, one of the critical questions that this study raises concerns the nature of human ability and educability, which has been a source of philosophical inquiry and debate for many decades. For instance, in *The Fundamental Assumptions in the Report of the Committee of Ten*, Charles W. Eliot (1905) argued,

If democracy means to try to make all children equal or all men equal, it means to fight nature, and in that fight democracy is sure to be defeated. There is no such thing among men as equality of nature, of capacity for training, or of intellectual power. (p. 13)

In a more contemporary work, the late American educational philosopher Nel Noddings (2007) also argued that “children are not equal in most capacities, and surely not in interests” (p. 29), and

therefore a democratic view of equality necessarily implies both a differentiated education and an inequality in aptitude and achievement.

However, to hold a view that ability and potential are inevitably hierarchical by nature is a dangerous viewpoint because there are always other categories of difference (race, class, gender, etc.) that can be used to justify and legitimize the hierarchical nature of ability. The alternative or counter-view is to embrace the radical belief that all persons are of the same educability, capability, and potential, and this viewpoint requires a drastic re-imagining of the fundamental institutionalized practices that permeate the current system. Dismantling systems of power and oppression begins with addressing their philosophical foundations, which is precisely why educational research that uncovers and highlights these beliefs, narratives, discourses, and ideologies is critical in working towards a more socially just future. These emergent themes and the proposed set of guiding questions provide a useful starting point for future work that engages these foundations.

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## ***Comparative Reflections of Post-Colonial Jamaica: Counternarratives of Three Jamaican Women Academics at Home and Abroad***

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### ***Abstract***

*Using Walter Rodney's (1969) Groundings as a methodological framework, this manuscript centers the experiences of three Jamaican women academics navigating the post-diaspora, and examines how studying and working in the U.S. shaped their perceptions of race, class, and coloniality. These women navigated tensions associated with living and working in the homeland and the hostland. This study explores the impact of their search for home (both in the homeland and in the hostland) on their understanding of race, class, and privilege after being born and raised in Jamaica. The notion of their collective coming of age is really their own intellectual awakening and transformation of their own positionality inside and outside of Jamaica.*

***Keywords:*** *post-diaspora, post-coloniality, Jamaican women*

The push and pull factors of Caribbean migration have long been attributed to colonial economic growth (e.g., the Windrush era in the UK), serving in World Wars I and II, globalization, notions of upward social mobility, and schooling. Caribbean women are central to understanding the evolution of migration practices and scholars like Dunn and Scafe (2019) explore the multiple roles they play in shaping new homelands in the diaspora. The concept of the diaspora is troubled by anthropologist and social theorist Michael Laguerre (2017) as being both different in the homeland and subaltern in the hostland. His purposeful shift to the term *post-diaspora* is an attempt to symbolize the practice of belonging equally to both the homeland and hostland country. Our narratives trouble Laguerre's thinking as we argue that ultimately, we may find ourselves home(less) given the inequities for Black women in both the homeland and hostland.

Much of what is written about Black women academics in post-colonial Jamaica is attributed to some of the formidable Caribbean scholars like Sylvia Wynter, Elsa Goveia, Eudine Barribeau, Lucille Mathurin Mair, and Verene Shepherd, to name a few. What is not explicitly questioned is the notion of being a first-generation, Afro-Jamaican and multiracial, post-colonial academic woman. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of three Jamaican women (living in the United States and Jamaica) who previously studied, worked, and lived in the United States, and explore its impact on our understanding of race, class, and privilege after being born and raised in Jamaica. The notion of our collective coming of age is really our own intellectual

awakening and the transformation of our understanding of our own positionality inside and outside of Jamaica.

Our definition of being first-generation, post-colonial citizens derives from our parents being born within a colony that gained independence prior to our birth. We were among the first generation of children born in a newly independent nation-state. Each of us describe our collective struggle with colonial humiliation, delayed economic mobility due to gender and age discrimination, and the tensions of an evolving post-colonial context. We also explore tensions associated with professional mobility and the implications for home, hostland, mothering, and being transnational academic professionals. We find ourselves constantly asking, *do we stay?* Or *do we go?* This paper centers on our emotional labor while we wrestle with the theoretical framing of post-diaspora (Laguerre, 2017) and Caribbean post-coloniality (Puri, 2004). Our conversations are a continuation of previous historical discussions among women to challenge what it means to be a post-colonial citizen through our writing and research, and through our collective reflections and dialogue. We stand on the shoulders of *sista* scholars before us like Elsa Goveia, Lucille Mathurin Mair, Sylvia Wynter, Eudine Barriteau, and Verene Shepherd, who championed unrecognized and impactful work that we commit to continuing. We also bring our identities as mothers to the forefront, because it is typically not captured and certainly not foregrounded in the current literature.

The three participant researchers are no strangers and share a combination of relationships that include friendship and collegueship. Saran and Raquel were friends from a very young age in Jamaica and continue to be friends and colleagues now as Professors in Higher Education working at U.S. institutions. Shani and Raquel went to the same high school together, and while they were not very close friends in high school, they had a positive relationship and acquaintanceship. Shani and Saran knew of each other when both worked at a higher education institution in Jamaica, but both did not work in the same department. While working on another project, Raquel came across Shani's work years later and found out she went on to earn a Ph.D. in the U.S. and became a historian. At the time, Raquel realized much of Shani's work incorporated many of Raquel's interests. Raquel then reached out to both Shani and Saran and invited them to embark on a project exploring their individual and collective experiences as Jamaican women who are first generation, post-colonial Jamaican citizens working in and across higher education institutions both at home and abroad. This project brought us together and solidified a collective friendship and kinship built on explorations of our identities and experiences. We utilize Walter Rodney's (1969) *Groundings*, as a methodological framework, as we seek to understand what it means to work through home in a post-diaspora context. We conceptualize this piece as a collective reflection emerging from a series of interviews that took place over the course of eight months. For us, we mobilize sisterhood as a tool of resistance against colonial institutions that frame our understanding of legacies of colonialism emerging from a series of conversations around the following questions:

1. What does it mean to be a first-generation post-colonial citizen working within higher education, and living within, and outside of a Jamaican post-colonial state?
2. How do we navigate the tensions associated with being ourselves and creating "home"—within the post-diasporic condition?

In the following sections we provide an overview of our individual identities, outline the framework used, and discuss where we are located historiographically. Next, we highlight the methodological approach we engaged in, and discuss the findings from our study. Finally, we discuss moving forward and our call to future researchers interested in engaging in similar work.

## Uu Wi Bi<sup>1</sup>: Identities Constructed in the Contested Spaces of Homeland and Hostland

### Raquel

I identify as a multiracial Jamaican woman, my main identities are Black and South Asian. I am the daughter of parents still living in the homeland. I live and work as a professor within higher education in the United States. My Jamaican ethnicity is part and parcel to who I am, and the navigation of my identity in shifting contexts has evolved over time. Navigating the world as an immigrant woman brings with it several tensions. Always perceived as too foreign in the host land, and too foreign for the homeland, never quite fitting in anywhere and constantly searching for and redefining what and where home is. The experience is further complicated by being highly educated, attaining a certain level of educational privilege many do not have, while simultaneously being minoritized in a country (the U.S.) that makes it clear I am wanted on terms other than my own, and only when it is convenient. Quickly returning to my reality of producing and disseminating knowledge, teaching others (mostly different from myself) to think critically, ask questions, be unapologetic, and contribute to transforming the world all while navigating and negotiating identity, space, place, and the notion of home. Wrestling with tensions is not something new for me, in fact arguably I have done this my entire life both inside and outside of Jamaica.

Feelings of isolation presented itself even when I lived in Jamaica, but has been further complicated and amplified since moving to the United States and navigating new citizenship in a host land that still feels so far removed from my own. My earliest memories in Jamaica include both memories that bring me warmth, and those that make me cringe in shame. Unfortunately, those memories are tied mostly to shaming within education systems, where discipline was used as a tool to control and “put yuh in yuh place,” as opposed to one focused on growth, development of unique learning styles, and support for trajectories outside of what is deemed to be the norm. Becoming an academic has allowed me in many ways to heal and make sense of the academic wounds I endured in my younger years in Jamaica. It has allowed me to be to others what I did not have, and chart my own identity as an agent of change to those wounded by systems intended to harm and/or discipline.

Working in community with, and experiencing kinships with, friends and colleagues like Saran and Shani has affirmed that I am not alone, and has also allowed me to understand the connection with our individual and collective experiences to theories of post-colonialism. Working within higher education in the U.S. has been both a place of comfort and contention. I continue to grapple with citizenship, and the meaning of home...while understanding the fluidity of identity and location, and recognizing that home does not necessarily mean physically returning to my homeland, which is ever changing/unrecognizable and mostly unsupportive of the new me. However, the deep nostalgia and longing for returning somehow still lingers.

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1. Throughout this manuscript we use Jamaican creole (Patois) in some of our headings. See the table in the appendix that highlights the English translations for the phrases we used as headings throughout.



**Saran<sup>2</sup>**

I enter this space as a first-generation, post-colonial citizen, born to parents of a colony who currently reside within that former colony, Jamaica. I am an Afro-Jamaican, cis-gendered woman who was raised, educated, and later worked in higher education and paid taxes in Jamaica. I am a mother first and a scholar thereafter that strives for the elusive dream of finding balance. Growing up in a small community in Harbour View (Jamaica) meant everyone knew everyone. The humility of sleeping on the foam sofa as your bed had no significance as the concept of wealth was elusive as a child. I never went hungry and when the light or water would turn off, it was because the community would lose access. When the hurricanes would flood our homes, bridges and schools, we worked together to rebuild. We were a community on the outskirts of the capital city and the commute was 30 minutes without traffic. I always saw the sea on my commute and never took for granted the symbolism of what water was to freedom. As a child, I knew two Jamaica's: the Jamaica that was home and utopic with its rivers, waterfalls, and Caribbean Sea as my weekly playground; and the Jamaica that held on to a legacy of abuse since the occupation of the Spaniards in the 15th century. If I employed magical realism for a moment, a literary writing style that marries elements of realism coupled with fantasy, I would envision Jamaica as a single mother. She is a mother with many scars, petite in size but mighty in her demeanor. What she has seen over time and endured has broken her spirit and left her loveless. She loves her children, provides for (when she can) and protects them, but it's a selfish-love that doesn't warm the soul; where you know she has been hurt far too many times for her to be hurt again. She is weary but strong and works hard to provide, harder than any other neighbor, but she has been beaten, raped, and taken for granted. I love the mother that Jamaica is but recognize her limitations to love me back the way I need. So instead, I mourn my Jamaica and grieve the parts of her that I needed to keep me safe as a child, and now I understand what she has gone through and therefore know she could never truly love me in return. I will forever be her proud daughter, provide for her as she ages with grace, but I cannot heal where my trauma exists. So I have decided to love her from a distance. As I grapple with being a guest in my hostland (the USA), I reconcile tensions of never belonging and the continuous search for home while feeling home(less).

**Shani**

I identify as an Afro-Jamaican woman working in the fields of museum studies and history in a higher education institution in Jamaica. A granddaughter of men whose bananas were underpriced by the United Fruit Company, farmworkers in Cuba and America, and workers in the 1960s United Kingdom. I am descended from grandmothers who single-handedly raised families through the sale of land, sewing, internal migration and domestic work, who went without so that their children could be more than their circumstances. Their realities reflect rural poverty of Jamaica during decolonization and independence. Consequently, my intellectual interests and the ways in which I define myself are informed by their sacrifices throughout the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries that sought to push and pull my family out of poverty. I, therefore, recognize that my ability throughout my academic and professional career to move back and forth between the US

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2. Adapted from Stewart, S. & Ferguson, S. (2024). Krik? Krak! Groundings, Liming, and Ole Talk: Understanding Caribbean Decolonial Research Methodologies In R. McMillian & P.A. Pasque (Eds.), *Advancing Qualitative Inquiry Toward Methodological Inclusion*, (pp. 178-194). Routledge. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462224-19>

and Jamaica before deciding to settle in Jamaica is a privilege shaped by a home life that centered education as integral to upward social and economic mobility. I pursued doctoral studies in the US and returned home after, however, being frustrated with the rigidity of the work environment, I returned to the US to pursue postdoctoral studies. Despite my time in the US, a longing for home, and an unwillingness to mould my intellectual interests to the vagaries of the US academic market ultimately shaped my return, knowing, however, that my interests and my intellectual evolution that provided a nuanced understanding of Jamaican society did not quite fit in Jamaica except that I felt that by returning I re-entered a space that I could be just me, could give back to my country and honour the sacrifices of my forefathers. That said, I live in a spiritually lukewarm space, keeping my feet planted in Jamaica but my gaze moving back and forth between Jamaica and the global community.

### **Ou wi kum fi bi: Defining Post-Coloniality as the Post-Diaspora**

This study employs a hybrid framework of post-coloniality specific to the Caribbean (Puri, 2004) and in particular to creolization (Brathwaite, 1978; Hall 2010) in Jamaica, as well as an understanding of the post-diaspora condition by Laguerre (2017). Post-coloniality within the Caribbean is understood as “the reality of a transnational (but not post-national), global set of relationships and experiences” (Dalleo, 2004, p. 355). Both the politicization and hybridization of the term post-coloniality is symbolic of inequities as well as a continued search for equality as well as its commitment to anti-colonialism. The term provides both a spatial, regional, and temporal understanding of the Caribbean in respect to colonialism, which characterizes the colonial economic exploits of the region. Creolization by Barbadian poet and Caribbean historian Kamau Brathwaite (1978) may provide a better framing to understand the present and post-modern hybrid formation of cultures within Jamaica as a result of forced cohabitation in the colonial context. Sociologists Zacharias and Mullings-Lawrence (2021) indicate that cultural theorist Stuart Hall (2010) reminds us that the “process of creolization always entails inequality, hierarchization, domination and subalternity” (p. 100). Both concepts pulled together provide an analytical lens to use Groundings as a methodology that is culturally significant to the region, to the purpose of the paper, as well as to our onto-epistemological framing of ourselves (described above). Given our immigrant and migrant journeys moving outside of Jamaica and returning to Jamaica, and leaving again in some cases, we position the concept of the post-diaspora by social anthropologist Michel Laguerre.

According to Laguerre (2017), “post-diaspora is an emancipatory move, refuting not the connection with one’s place of origin, but rather one’s unequal status vis-a-vis homelands and hostlands” (p. 22). The post-diasporic condition refutes any notion of marginality or minoritization as it posits equal membership in both the hostland and homeland. Laguerre goes on to describe four practices of post-diaspora: 1) re-annexation, “in which former diasporans have reintegrated the jurisdictional space of the national territory” (p. 23); 2) return migration, in which former diasporans return to live in their homeland; 3) redrawing of borders, in which a po(r)tion of the foreign territory becomes a part of the national territory; and 4) cosmonational membership and integration, in which a cosmonation is formed when “homeland and diaspora form a crossborder multisite nation” (p. 23). The three authors of the study have practiced both re-annexation as well as return migration as all three resided outside of their homeland and returned to live at some point in the hostland. Post-diaspora allows for a better understanding of how each author operated within the homeland and hostland. The hybridity of the Caribbean post-colonial and post-diasporic conditions provide the study a deconstructive framing in which to examine the complex post-colonial

context and legacy of colonialism rooted in the authors' experiences. This framing allows the authors to examine historical events, customs, practices, and norms, and situate them between spaces of belonging and spaces of subalternity.

### **We wi de ina ischri: Defining Post Independent Jamaica through Histories of Gender and Economic Inequality**

Our study sits at the intersection of three historiographical trajectories in Jamaican history: the study of womanhood, education, and post-independence. At the center of each historiographical analysis is the conclusion that Jamaican society, and by extension the English Caribbean, is a society grounded in the exploitation and underdevelopment of its people. While not comprehensive, we locate ourselves within a historiography that points to the inability of former colonies to shake the foundations of an economy and society steeped in sexual violence and discrimination, oppression, and trauma as the legacy of histories of enslavement continues to shape Jamaican society today (Beckles, 2013; Beckles, 2021). Consequently, we are products of socio-economic, cultural, and political context grounded in inequity and our journeys are ultimately shaped by the abilities of our forefathers and mothers to pivot in the face of insecurity.

With the violent displacement of indigenous peoples by the arrival of the Spanish (1494), the first enslaved Africans (1509) and the British (1655) (Morales, 2004; Dunn 1972), plantation slavery became the foundation of Jamaican society. Sustained by violence, racism, and greed, plantation slavery depended on the sustained free labour of forcibly enslaved Africans as well as continued access to land. The insatiable demand for enslaved labour led to the expansion of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and fueled the development of Britain (Williams, 1944/2021). Legislation further enslaved the progeny of any African born in the Caribbean through their mothers, thus creating a biological institution tied to enslaved African motherhood (Mair, 2006; Morgan, 2004).

While early demand for African labour initially targeted men, historians such as Jennifer Morgan (2004) have argued that the plantation economy in the Caribbean relied heavily on enslaved African women as they provided critical back breaking labour in the field and played an important biological role in reproducing enslaved individuals, especially after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 (Bush, 1990; Morgan, 2004; Turner, 2017). Concerns about high infant mortality and low fertility by the planter class both during slavery and after Emancipation are linked to the survival of an agricultural society as well as ongoing discourse around social control and socio-pathology of productive labour (De Barros, 2014). The continued preoccupation of the white oligarchy about access to cheap labour in the 1840s led to the development of indentureship schemes. Chinese, Indian, and liberated Africans were introduced into Caribbean societies to push down wages and create competition between newly imported populations and the existing black populations (Look Lai, 1998; Schuler 1980; Shepherd, 1994; Roopnarine, 2018). Post-Emancipation Caribbean society, therefore, was framed around the continued exploitation of labour and land for the survival of the sugar economy. Consequently, the law, education, religion, and health regulations, policies, and institutions became tools of social control in Jamaican society with the goal of restricting the movement of emancipated populations and redirecting their labour and that of their children into the survival of the Caribbean economies (Bryan, 2002; De Barros, 2014; Jemmott, 2015; Moore & Johnson, 2004). Education, therefore, played an integral role in training populations to continue to function in an exploitative economy while allowing the white oligarchy to retain its political, economic, and social power.

Education was and still is a particularly contested site. The 1833 Negro Education Grant marked the beginning of a formal education system in the Caribbean, albeit one committed to maintaining inequality in Jamaica, and by extension the region (Campbell, 1967). Funding infra-structural development, schooling was conceptualized as moral training through religion and basic access to reading, writing and arithmetic (Gordon, 1963). General opposition to education policy throughout the nineteenth century argued that book learning ‘spoiled’ the agricultural workforce, thereby making them inadequately suited for working in an agriculturally based economy (Elgin, 1845). African-Jamaican parents, however, systematically withheld their children’s labour from traditional sites of employment, such as sugar plantations, by sending them to school and including them in the family’s economic efforts (Jemmott, 2015). Scholar Shirley Gordon’s (1968) review of the regional education commissions that occurred between 1838 and 1938 revealed that regional approaches to education were piecemeal and shaped by personalities often committed to an education system that supported the regional agricultural economies. Similarly, political scientist Joseph Woolcock (1984) argues that reforms to education during the independence movement continued to replicate historic social divisions of labor in the transition from an agricultural to a manufacturing-based economy, thus continuing to perpetuate unequal access to education within the island.

Chronic underfunding of education as well as social services was an ongoing issue in British Caribbean colonies. British colonial economic policy was predicated on the basis of self-sufficiency. Colonies financed development out of earnings from exports and balanced budgets. The imperial government, therefore, provided very little assistance except in instances of emergency such as natural disasters, fires, or epidemics, or in extreme cases where colonies had significant financial hardship (Abbott, 1971; Bourdillon, 1944; Frost, 1945; Morgan 1980; Wicker, 1958). By the 1930s, colonies were unable to fund economies thus generating a global imperial crisis (Bolland, 1995; Macmillan, 1936). Colonial policy, therefore, was forced to evolve during the first and second world wars to do two things. First, to see colonial development as integral to the expansion of the British economy for the export of its industrial products; and secondly, by 1944, to see colonial development as integral to ensuring the overall well-being of Caribbean peoples, especially after the West Indian Royal Commission of 1938 (Simey, 1946; Wicker, 1958). The establishment of the Colonial Development Welfare Fund, therefore, became integral to the decolonization movement in the Caribbean. Education stood at the forefront of the transformation of the well-being of Caribbean people. One of the integral projects that emerged was the founding and funding of the University (College) of the West Indies (UWI) (Taylor, 1951).

Conceptualized as providing comprehensive access to tertiary education for the professionalization of both men and women in the Caribbean, The U(C)WI granted degrees as a department of the University of London until 1962, when it became an independent degree granting institution. Responding to social and public health demands of the region, the first 33 students entered the faculty of medicine at the Mona Campus in Jamaica, while the Extra Mural program provided important training interventions in adult education in contributing islands (Fergus et al., 2007). As the institution expanded its reach through the addition of landed campuses in Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados, one of its most important contribution is the fostering of Indigenous Caribbean (rather than West Indian, which is a colonial construct) intellectual perspectives of history, politics, and society, which responded to the wave of political change in the region (Goveia, 1969; Higman, 1999). The UWI, however, does not exist in a vacuum. Despite its existence, colonial legacies and historic socio-economic, gendered, class, and racial hierarchies continue to shape both the institution and the region. Nonetheless, decolonization, Black power movements, the Cold War, public

health crises, and gender debates, to name a few, shaped the evolution of Indigenous Caribbean intellectual thought.

These indigenous Caribbean scholars argue that political decolonization throughout the 1960s and 80s failed to dismantle the historic economic structures that tie the region to Europe. Political theorist Louis Lindsay in “Myth of Independence” (1975/2005) argues that constitutional independence is not economic independence and that politically constructed symbols of independence are important to manipulate the population to accept and legitimize the new status quo. Cultural theorist Rex Nettleford (1970) and political scientist Maziki Thame (2017) posited that this independence project elevated an idyllic Black peasantry over a militant, radical Black project to embrace Brown nationalism, which is a political project that promotes Jamaica as a mixed (hybrid/brown) conservative nation. Consequently, the implication for the rejection of Black radical traditions is that independence failed to engage in the reordering of society to allow for equitable access to resources, land, and economic freedom. This rejection of radicalism (Thame, 2011) functions as a form of intellectual violence of which tensions about race, class, and political identity formation is only one component of the legacy of trauma and colonization in Jamaica. Anthropologist Deborah Thomas (2011) posits that violence is integral to the formation of the colonial state, and by extension the postcolonial state and its continued manifestations is a result of class formations and the construction of citizenship. Consequently, literary and cultural scholar Paula Morgan (2014) argues that “historical trauma overlays...contemporary manifestations of violence and continuously shape society” (p. 10). Our understanding, therefore, of postcolonial citizenship is one that is deeply intertwined with the socio-economic, cultural, and gendered legacies of colonial oppression and the trauma that emerges from it.

The excavation of voices of Caribbean women is especially integral to our reflection on what it means to be first-generation post-colonial Caribbean citizens operating in the post-diaspora. The re-writing of Caribbean history upended and decentered imperialist understandings of Caribbean culture, history, and identity by centering the diverse experiences of regional populations (Goveia 1969; Higman, 1999; Hutton et al., 2018). Excavating women’s voices and actions is a political act that disrupts notions of hegemonic masculinity and collective memory in post-independence Caribbean scholarship. It is within this context that Elsa Goveia’s pioneering work on Caribbean history in the 1960s, as the first Caribbean historian appointed to the U(C)WI, yielded scholars such as Mathurin Mair (supervised by Goveia), Verene Shepherd, and Bridgette Brereton, all of whom are part of a genealogy of scholars and scholarship that have given voice to African-Jamaican women’s political activism which dismantled slavery, resisted oppression, led Black power movements, maintained Afro-Caribbean cultural practices, and transformed Caribbean societies long before Adult suffrage in 1944. Verene Shepherd’s lecture in 2014 *The Politics of Memory: Historicizing Caribbean Women’s Political Activism* calls for us to recognize that agency and activism must be a key part of any discussion about women’s political practices. Caribbean women have been at the forefront of social and political change since European occupation of the region (Shepherd, 2019). Citing Goveia, Shepherd posits that contemporary discussions of Caribbean feminism and women’s activism must be viewed within the historical lens of agency and activism by women (Shepherd, 2019). More importantly, she shows that it is important to understand the factors that shape women themselves, to better understand their political and intellectual decisions.

Sociologists Medwinter and Rozario (2021) argue that Caribbean womanism rather than feminism is a more effective tool for de-colonial analysis as it creates bridges between the diaspora and the region. They similarly argue that centering Caribbean women’s lives, activism against

multi-dimensional oppression linked to histories of slavery, indentureship, colonialism and economic inequity, and their scholarship provides a basis for understanding how the Caribbean diaspora navigates hostland. Both theoretical perspectives identify the continued gendered, intellectual and infrastructural trauma, and violence that undergird Caribbean women's experiences. As both participants and authors, we see ourselves as building a bridge between the Caribbean and the diaspora by grounding ourselves in a history that intersects with violence, oppression, and inequity and examining its impact on our identity as Caribbean women and mothers moving between homeland (Jamaica) and the diaspora.

Mobility through migration, access to education, lobbying for maternal leave, and responsive policies are some of the key contemporary responses to resist post-colonial and institutionalized post-independence oppression. Our reflection evolves out of the legacies of activism against gendered violence and trauma in the colonial, post-colonial, independence, and post-independence moment. Trauma emerging from the shared experience of mothering in academia within the post-independence moment is the motivating factor that guides our intellectual interests and interventions as we locate ourselves within a larger legacy of women's activism in Jamaican history.

### **Ou wi a tink bout dis: Engaging in Critical Groundings**

In wrestling through our understanding of our own collective postcolonial subjectivity, we reflected on some of the unsung and highly overshadowed works of Caribbean intellectuals who foregrounded Caribbean epistemologies and methodologies that have shaped our sense of being within the Caribbean diaspora. We turned to a relic and iconic figure in post-colonial Jamaica, Walter Rodney and his methodology, "Groundings." Rodney, as a pan-Africanist and scholar of Black consciousness used groundings as a method to educate the people and the masses (Lewis, 1991). Rodney remarked about the methodology,

I would go further down into West Kingston and I would speak wherever there was a possibility of our getting together. It might be in a sports club, it might be in a schoolroom, it might be in a church, it might be in a gully. (Those of you who come from Jamaica know those gully corners). They are dark, dismal places with a Black population who have had to seek refuge there. You will have to go there if you want to talk to them. I have spoken in what people call "dungle," rubbish dumps, for that is where people live in Jamaica. People live in rubbish dumps. (Rodney, 1969, p. 64)

Borrowing from Walter Rodney, in her book titled, *Decolonizing Qualitative Approaches for and by the Caribbean*, Stewart (2020) defines groundings as "a style of conducting focus group interviews that is authentic to the Caribbean context, to reason and derive consciousness from collective wisdom where the lines of power are blurred between the researcher and researched" (p. 5). Groundings refers to a deeply immersive, community-oriented approach to understanding and analyzing social phenomena, in particular Afro-Caribbean socio-economic and political dynamics. Using reasoning sessions as data collection methods, Groundings involve listening to and documenting oral accounts as valuable sources of information and insight. Reasoning sessions, or more commonly termed *hol' a reasonin*, include a bidirectional flow of knowledge where there is sharing of knowledge with community members, thereby empowering them and recognizing their expertise in their own lives and experiences (Stewart & Ferguson, 2024). For data analysis, Ground-

ings involves a consciousness-raising or a heightened consciousness of the socio-political and economic structures affecting the participants or community under study. Rodney's approach was deeply rooted in a critique of colonialism and imperialism, and this perspective guides the interpretation of data and narratives collected.

Groundings is an ideal methodological approach for this study because of its meaning and embodiment of the post-colonial and consciousness-raising ability to integrate criticality, collaborative excavation, and illuminate our individual and collective stories and lived experiences from a post-colonial Jamaican subjectivity (Stewart & Ferguson, 2024). More so, groundings present a unique, Jamaican-grown, postcolonial departure from the traditional form of western-Eurocentric qualitative approaches. In using the reasoning sessions over Zoom, we were able to exercise extreme vulnerability while divulging our authentic lived experiences, at the expense of exposing ourselves within systemic and hegemonic bourgeoisie.

### **Reasoning Sessions**

Due to the pandemic, the reasoning sessions took place over Zoom from January 2022 to August 2022. The participant researchers engaged in a total of 10 reasoning sessions on Zoom that ranged from one to two hours each. Each session was recorded and transcribed. During the first reasoning session, we developed general probing questions that guided each session. These questions included topics on our individual identities being born to parents of a former colony, our educational experiences in 1980s Jamaica, the nation-building, socio economic and political discourses of the time, our migration patterns and journeys, and the gendered hierarchies and patriarchal structures that governed our communities and households. Those questions allowed us to start our conversations broadly and then focus on areas that we felt were most important. Our conversations were dialogical, and fluid, each session allowed us the opportunity to explore ourselves as individuals but also as a collective unit, understanding the intersections of our shared experiences. We listened keenly to each other's stories, we allowed for the tangential and anecdotal Jamaican proverbs, memories and belly-full of laughter to be fully present and centered within each reasoning session. Each of us took turns answering questions by sharing our experiences, and then we asked questions, probed, made connections, and utilized opportunities to comment on each other's experiences and find shared examples of how we similarly or differently moved through these documented instances. We also engaged in critical reflection, documenting specific examples and connecting those to our post-colonial and post-diasporic subjectivity more specifically.

### **Consciousness-Raising**

Each reasoning session was transcribed and shared amongst each of us for review. We then had joint table reads of the transcripts to make sure our accents, patois, and idioms were translated accurately. Important to note is that while we spoke predominantly in patois, as academics we are prone to code-switch in and out of standard academic English to patois and vice versa. We transcribed the reasoning sessions in standard academic English for ease of reference to our readers. Our data analysis process included keenly listening to each zoom session and discerning commonalities throughout each of our stories, and memoing our experiences within our deeper consciousness-raising process. During each reasoning session, as we drew on similar consciousness-raising topics, we noted them as points to further interrogate and deconstruct together to see where there were similarities and points of dissonance in our interpretation and reasoning. Conventionally, this

process would be compared to coding, in which we analyzed first cycle and second cycle codes, and collapsed codes into thematic patterns. However, the analytical process of consciousness raising requires us to move beyond a traditional cyclical process of seeing how words repeat themselves but to consider the idiomatic relations within the larger socio-political constructs of our narratives. Initially, we were able to derive 33 idiomatic relationships that led to a sequencing of three patterns in our narratives. This is a deeply culturally, decolonizing approach to research methods that allowed us to analyze our narrative from our collective Jamaican consciousness. For each derived consciousness-raising topic, we then revisited the topic from the respective transcripts to build and expound on. At the end of the reasoning sessions, we divided the transcripts amongst each other and reviewed them prior to the next reasoning session. We then engaged in cross-transcript analysis by trading transcripts and honing in on the consciousness-raising topics and their supporting stories. Three major consciousness-raising themes emerged in our study: 1) Tools of Historical Oppression and its Consequences: Living with Colonial Humiliation in Post-Independence Education System; 2) Wait Your Turn: Delayed Economic Mobility for Young Educated Women Through Gender and Age Discrimination; and 3) Locating Ourselves and the Associated Tensions of an Evolving Post-Colonial Context. Throughout data analysis, we paid careful attention to how post-colonial histories influenced our experience specifically as Jamaican women. Several measures were taken to increase trustworthiness of the findings in this study. First, all three authors met to discuss all transcripts and thereafter the three emergent consciousness-raising themes, and process together as a group to reflect on the biases we brought to each stage of this project and engage in peer debriefing (Agyemang et al., 2018). Second, we anchored our experiences heavily in previously documented post-colonial theories and Caribbean literature that illuminated experiences that closely resembled those we were seeking to make sense of. Lastly, we all engaged in a continuous process of critical reflexivity and kept memos throughout the data collection process which allowed us all to document our memories, and reactions to each part of the research process.

### **Wat wi nuo se?**

Based on our collective sensibilities, the following consciousness-raising themes were identified reflecting Caribbean post-coloniality as well as the post-diaspora condition: 1) Tools of Historical Oppression and its Consequences: Living with Colonial Humiliation in Post-Independence Education System; 2) Wait Your Turn: Delayed Economic Mobility for Young Educated Women Through Gender and Age Discrimination ; and 3) Locating Ourselves and the Associated Tensions of an Evolving Post-Colonial Context.

### **Tools of Historical Oppression and its Consequences: Living with Colonial Humiliation in Post-Independence Education System**

Through the process of groundings, we have to come to realize that our individual experiences are also shaped by legacies of colonial humiliation. We define colonial humiliation as the mobilization of tools of oppression such as corporal punishment by persons in positions of power and/or seniority to shame, embarrass and reinforce a false sense of control. These weaponized tools have their origins in enslavement and post-emancipation manipulation of legislation and institutions such as the church and education as tools of social control. Colonial humiliation closely



reflects the various weaponized tools that the elite used during the period of enslavement to reinforce their power and control of status in the colony. We each experienced aspects of colonial humiliation primarily through educational institutions; groundings, as a methodological framework allowed us to understand that we were not alone in these experiences. Through our conversations we shared similar descriptions of shaming in education and use of corporal punishment as control, which we then concluded resulted in a humiliation that can only be described as colonial because of the appropriation of historical practices in the contemporary context. As Raquel stated during one of our groundings,

I often felt bullied, banished, and not supported in most of my schooling...My teachers wanted me to conform in a way I didn't know how to, and silenced me. So whenever I pushed back there was this...“but who are you” to question me, the holder of knowledge sentiment evident in most of my teachers [pedagogical approaches]...I was tormented through my high school years especially.

That same sense of shaming would be echoed by Saran who expressed that even working at the university held many tensions of shame and purposeful embarrassment. Being perceived as a woman who was too young to be a lecturer though very qualified meant that she was not readily accepted or viewed as valuable. In these scenarios, youthfulness was equated with presumed incompetence and inexperience. She stated

The shaming, you know...was really really powerful just hearing it and that real tension that lingers from the shaming within educational pipelines and systems, and how that manifested later on...I think I felt the same way while working at the university. It was very difficult to navigate.

Shani went on to express that the university can create “trajectories for upward mobility [but is] rigid and not responsive,” while Raquel echoed sentiments of feeling rejected by the very system that educated her and explained how it felt to navigate a constant tension of feeling as if she did not belong. Surviving colonial humiliation is to operate within an educational system but not actually belong, and/or be valued. For us, these experiences were reminiscent of the plantation economy where one’s labour is integral to an institution’s survival, but not valued for one’s humanity and/or creative genius. The culture of belonging to these reincarnations of the plantations begins at the early childhood level where respect for authority is enforced through corporal punishment. The instances of corporal punishment are etched in each of our primary school memories as either conduits for excelling, or fear of failure. Saran described vividly while in grade 4 receiving a lower grade on a math test and the teacher asking each student to line up for their beatings by using a ruler. Saran outlines,

We had to go to the front of the classroom and line up one person behind the other and depending on the number of questions you got wrong, that determined how many beatings you received by the teacher. Thankfully, I only got two wrong but for those who had all 10 wrong, I remember vividly how they cried and pulled away their hand from the beating...some children had to switch palms because the first was too red and blistered.

Corporal punishment was both a source of shaming as well as control and power through violence. It echoed similar practices to those during colonialism and in particular enslavement. Schooling was arguably a complex space of teacher-led violence and colonial humiliation. We acknowledge the ways in which the contemporary early childhood education system has evolved away from the use of corporal punishment in learning, our personal experiences with corporal punishment in our schooling informs the ways in which we navigated authority in school and currently as academics operating in post-independence institutions still steeped in colonialism. We also recognize how our individual and collective experiences have been shaped by our histories involving humiliation and fear.

### **Wait Your Turn: Delayed Economic Mobility for Young Educated Women Through Gender and Age Discrimination**

Within our discussions, we came to a shared definition about what coloniality means within a contemporary context. We define coloniality as present-day systems and practices inherited from colonialism to reinforce social differences and inequalities. Within the Caribbean context, migration is an important tool to disrupt generational poverty and provide opportunities for upward economic and social mobility. For us migration, was a valuable tool to expand intellectual offerings and provided both social and economic mobility. However, the homeland is not static during our absence. Rather, us, as migrants, and the homeland are both evolving and our perception of ourselves and our place in home is not always received with open arms. Migration especially for education alters our understanding of how we function within and outside Jamaica. For us, we encountered upon return behaviours that suggested that our presence was a perceived threat against those who stayed, particularly if one studied in the US. It was a tension that seemed subconscious—as operating in the workplace was a minefield of navigating social value based on where a doctorate was earned—that is a foreign doctorate vis a vis a local doctorate. This experience is nuanced and can be determined by one's gender, age, social and economic capital. We note that not everyone has this experience. Groundings revealed that we used migration differently, as a vehicle to determine accepting or rejecting tensions in the lived experience of our return. What we describe below is one component of that social tension which is epitomized in the phrase “Wait your Turn.” This term was expressed verbatim by all three authors in reference to their re-migration to their homeland and functioning in the work environment. Saran expressed,

I genuinely believed I could not return [home] without a Doctorate. I genuinely believed that and I think that had to do with my father's parenting that he knew and understood very, very well about the inequities in gender roles in Jamaica and he saw that, and the only way you can come back home is if you are going to be as competitive as any other man out there. And one of the things that stood out to me was you will have to out rank them, outperform them and still recognize that you are going to be asked to wait your turn.

The colloquial term of “wait your turn” is often used against younger women regardless of their experience or education level. There was an ageist assumption bred within coloniality, that the young must wait their turn to access upward social mobility and other opportunities. Similarly, Shani expressed, “The same thing was conveyed to me after I came back from my Doctorate on study leave and returned, and one of the things I was told was ‘I must wait my turn.’” Saran went on to explain that when first job-hunting in Jamaica and meeting with some of the adjunct and

assistant lecturers, the presumed gatekeepers are “the barriers to returning home...I remember the very same people who sat with me saying “you will need to wait your turn.” They said to me unequivocally “you will need to wait your turn, you are just coming out with your Ph.D., you need to wait your time basically.” The reference here to wait your turn, was to Saran’s job application for the lecturer role as the person providing advice was adamant that she should expect to receive an assistant lecturer role which is normally given to persons without the Ph.D. This statement was often made by older female lecturers who had earned their degree through the university system, but overwhelmingly spent over a decade to earn their Ph.Ds while being an assistant lecturer or tutor. They were constantly overlooked and made to believe that they must wait their time. Similarly, Raquel expressed similar sentiments when she returned home to work for a few years and was told that she needed to “wait a while” to be elevated to higher levels at work, even though she brought innovative ideas, unique energy, and credentials to the table. Navigating ‘wait your turn’ for us produced an overwhelming feeling of frustration and gendered based trauma reminiscent of the role of the female subaltern subjected to gendered trauma by the state of coloniality in a post-colonial and independent nation-state. As a consequence, this frustration ultimately creates a migratory impulse that often propels return to hostland.

In the unpacking of “wait your turn” we recognized that the act of becoming mothers further complicated our experience as returning migrants to post-independence Jamaica. We found our shared experiences to be centered around economic insecurity and the stress during and after pregnancy to be profoundly disillusioned. As we grappled with the tensions inherent in “wait your turn” we identified the below sub theme.

***Economic Insecurity, Stress and Disillusionment: Navigating Motherhood in a Post-Independence Context***

Our shared mothering experiences have shaped our responses to home—both inside and outside of Jamaica. We understood motherhood to be a precarious identity shaped by histories of trauma and poor health outcomes for the majority of the women—regardless of race—living in Jamaica during slavery, emancipation and the early post-independence period. In each period, mothering was integral to the survival of the economy but identities such as Black motherhood was rejected by plantation owners prior to 1807 as pregnancy and high infant mortality made it an unprofitable investment. However, after emancipation, Black motherhood was further discriminated against as the elite undermined Black and indentured Indian parents’ rights to control their children’s labor in the face of significant economic insecurity. Caribbean mothers’ continuous contestation of the paradigms of legal, education, public health, religious, and social control means that it is a profoundly political yet emotionally draining identity.

We contextualized our approach to mothering during our groundings, by acknowledging the historical context in which motherhood functions, and how it evolved as the post-independence moment. We see ourselves as products of our own mothers attempts at mothering. The philosophies we hold are created in response to our experiences as our mothers learned to mother. Allowing for us to situate our becoming mothers in both foreign homelands and in our hostlands. We expressed the jarring feelings of returning home as mothers which revealed insecurities about protecting our children. Saran notes

I returned to Jamaica as a mother...I left Jamaica not as a mother and I returned to Jamaica living as a mom and I think that is jarring to be quite honest with you because the utopic

feel of returning home as a mom revealed all the insecurities of not being able to protect your children...My role as a Mom is situated within absolutely growing up in Jamaica but heavily situated with being in the US and then returning back to Jamaica both that the original need was to raise them [children] home. Only to return home and realize how much trauma is embedded at home...The trauma from our own mothers and, we parent how we were parented. It's very difficult to break cycles like that...extremely difficult but that's also really important because our mothers grew up in a colonial Jamaica.

Raquel noted the constant struggle she feels of mothering outside of the homeland in terms of feeling guilty for not raising her children in Jamaica so they can experience Jamaican culture firsthand, and wrestling with the tensions of bringing her daughters back to the homeland to navigate the things she did when she was younger. She reflects "It's hard to think about the reality of bringing my children into a context where they would have to jump through hoops the way I did, and face many of the obstacles I did...decades later." Shani stated, "Because mothering requires you to put yourself behind in the list of things, you then have to become a lot more unsentimental about stuff if they don't add significant value." The cis-patriarchal dominance of coloniality was centered in our reflection as we described the tensions of being an academic mother and the primary caregiving responsibilities while also maintaining a career. Saran explained

Having those real tensions to conform, not to conform, being kinda placed in this box... And I find that it's a larger war that women were facing with all of the submissiveness, the crazy patriarchal dominance and hegemony that still is pervasive...Women do not have equal rights, let's just be honest about that in Jamaica.

When discussing our experiences [Saran and Shani] of being pregnant in Jamaica while working at the university, Shani remarked in response to an unaltered work schedule that "there is an expectation that we are not to succumb to stress [despite being pregnant]...African-American women are saying stress is killing us postpartum [but in the workspace] stress is killing us anyway..." Saran followed her in commenting,

Being a pregnant woman in Jamaica is one of the most unhealthy decisions, let's just face it...The regard for women and their fragility...It is absolutely insane in Jamaica. You know what it is though, it is the legacy of colonial history ... "the breeda women dem." We are not far removed from that generationally in that there are not enough laws...to protect pregnant women in our society.

Culturally and anthropologically, many within a Jamaican context like the idea of seeing pregnant women and honour it as a fragile state, however this romanticizing or support of pregnant women does not translate into the work environment except in extreme cases. Our comments highlight the tension between the social value of the pregnant woman and the economic value of the woman in the workplace who is pregnant. So, there is an enhanced social value but a diminished economic value. Since "Wait your turn" results in diminished access to economic mobility, pregnancy further exacerbates economic instability in the work environment.

## **Locating Ourselves and the Associated Tensions of an Evolving Post-Colonial Context**

Our groundings are anchored in searching for homeland and living between the liminalities of the homeland and hostland. We describe this theme as the multiple stages of our moving between states of belonging and functioning within the diaspora, and feelings of exclusion. The post-diaspora realities (colonial humiliation, wait your turn, economic precarity, general disillusionment) that we all faced include returning to a home that grew without us—returning however, did not exempt us from experiencing longing for utopic, child-like memories of home. When those memories of home meet reality, a sense of deep disappointment takes over and we have been left with being in a constant state of liminality unable to be or feel truly at home.

### ***Searching for the Homeland***

Migration propelled us to look for opportunities that would uniquely position us for upward mobility within the homeland. Upon our return home, we began our search for acceptance, recognizing that what we conceived in our minds about return did not match the reality—we now occupied an ambiguous space within our homeland. Both Raquel and Shani discuss the desire to return home to Jamaica and the constant tensions of wanting to be home, versus the reality of being home. Raquel states

I wanted to go home and make a difference, that's the main reason I entered [and won] Miss Jamaica and then I got this door slammed in my face because I was this young out of the box thinker, believing I was coming back to Jamaica and would be welcomed with open arms...We want home, we are on this quest to find and put together this puzzle and connect the pieces of our identities, our histories in the homeland. Yet, we can't get it from home and we can't get it from the hostland here [USA]...It's almost like piecing together things that continue to leave this gaping hole inside.

Shani, who also did her Ph.D. in the United States commented, “It became that kind of struggle because you want to go back home but I knew going back home to the previous work environment would not provide the intellectual independence and wiggle room to flourish.” Yet Shani believed that she could only be whole within the homeland. Saran discusses the tensions of not belonging to either the hostland or the homeland and living in a constant state of searching for the new foreign homeland. She states

Realizing that we never belong to either space fully, because there is this ebb and flow of what is home and what is not home anymore and within that level of post-diaspora, it is that we belong to the diaspora...We are in many ways in this unsettled feeling...It felt like honestly you were being chained to a system that you didn't create, I'm using chained very loosely because it felt like you were being subjugated to some form of oppression [by making a decision to return home] but you couldn't name it even though you are trained in these things cause it's so subversive...

Our search for homeland, therefore, was a search for acceptance and belonging that emerged in response to the rejection of our own perception of how we could occupy and participate in the homeland. The frustration, and the deep disappointment that we faced ultimately forced us

to redefine our expectations and turn our gaze outward (away from home). Migration for us, therefore, became not just a mechanism for social and economic mobility but a recrafting of what home is, and how we construct belonging to a home.

### *Living between the Liminalities of the Homeland and Hostland*

At some point the decision to return to the hostland became clear for us. Through our groundings we recognized that it is the frustration that provided us with moments of clarity that required us to dispense with the dream and reorient our visions of functioning within the homeland—this was essentially redefining our role and space within home, and accepting the space we occupied within both homeland and hostland. For Raquel, she described the sense of escape in returning to the hostland and highlights:

For me, foreign was an escape. I never knew what it was like but I felt like if I could go to this place, I could untap this brilliance and all my potential...that Jamaica stifled...At the end of my reign {as Miss Jamaica}, my aim was to run as far as I could from Jamaica, go where I wouldn't have to be shamed, talked about, picked to piece. So, there is this difficult loneliness that I think I have always felt...Feeling like you never ever belong, even in that space you consider home...

Similarly, for Saran, the decision to leave was a form of escape. She explained,

I just could not sustain the craziness from my institution, in many ways it was a rejection because I felt like there was nowhere else, but I had to leave, there was nothing else I can accomplish there. It is when you start getting into roles of leadership, you either conform and [be] completely blind to those atrocities or you reject the system and end up being hoisted out the system, its one or the other.

Though Shani now lives in the homeland, her survival depends on her ability to be fluid through choosing which spaces to occupy. Her approach was shaped by a mentoring experience with an older woman who also chose to return and navigated the tension of her perception of her place upon return, its rejection, and the reality of return. It was this mentorship that forced her to consider occupying 'in-between-spaces' that transcend or work around the rigidities of mainstream academia in Jamaica. It requires a gaze that is local, regional, and international—keeping one foot in and one foot out of home. It is not a blind acceptance of the homeland's reality, but a pragmatism that requires alertness, networking, and a responsiveness to change. Shani, however, notes that there is always an element of precarity occupying in-between spaces, as the homeland can reject whichever identity has been constructed by an individual, by systematically working to undermine its success. She acknowledges that at some point she may have to re-evaluate her position.

In addition to Saran's frustration with the work environment, the crime and violence that is pervasive at home added to the need to redefine home. Class and social capital did not protect us from the threat of crime...it encroached on everyday life through the sounds of gunshots. Redefining homeland and our place within it was essential to protecting our families as mothers as well as our own humanity. Saran shared

where I lived...to have my girls know what gunshots were from a very young age. [My daughter] in particular always knew when there was gang war and violence and I didn't realize how much it affected her until we re-migrated] and she made a comment to me that "it is so quiet here, I haven't heard one gun in the last month, not one." I took the silence for granted.

Raquel and Shani agreed with Saran's sentiment about violence, as the homeland was a place where they and their families both experienced violence firsthand. We all experienced a pivotal moment that demanded a repositioning of ourselves and the redefining of our relationship with our homeland, as well as navigating push factors to re-migrate. These experiences for escape were riddled with humiliation, trauma, and even violence which distorted our constant need, and search for home. It is important to note that living in the hostland for Raquel and Saran does not mean they are free from tensions and feelings of exclusion—in fact, living in the hostland now requires navigation of racism and exclusion that leaves them in a unique state of in-betweenness.

### **Wa wi a se: Rethinking Post-Colonial Citizenship as Transnational Jamaican Academic Women**

This work serves as a starting point of critical engagement about our lived experiences with the Caribbean post-colonial and post-diasporic conditions. Discourse about Caribbean post-diaspora is often omitted and/or othered, where the three of us do not usually see ourselves reflected in the literature. Much of this work is excavative in nature and seeks to push forward lost Caribbean identities or identities on the verge of extinction. However, as scholars, we too form a part of this long history of mobility that characterizes Caribbean identity. Encouraging more scholars to locate themselves in the post-diaspora, by naming and speaking about their experiences can open doors for change and further intellectual curiosity. As we reflect on our study, we recognize that to be a first-generation, post-colonial Jamaican citizen working within higher education, means being reminded of academic trauma over and over, and being invited to move past it by encouraging others to take part in their own journeys of becoming. It means accepting our own journey and situating that understanding within the context of post-colonialism and our new realities of the hostland. It means realizing the double-edged sword of what education is when it is identified as the mode for upward social and economic mobility out of poverty, and also when it entraps individuals in systems of exploitation, trauma, and oppression. To transcend colonial infrastructures in the post-colonial/post-independence space is to encourage through mentorship and sisterhood support systems: providing opportunities to grow and transcend.

We also understand that being a first-generation, post-colonial citizen living within and outside of a Jamaican post-colonial state means understanding that feelings of being an insider-outsider is inevitable, and that nostalgia of something never experienced is tied to a longing for something that no longer exists, never existed, or is vastly different from what previously existed and/or was experienced. It is also about accepting that we exist as outsiders even in the spaces where we once were accepted, and that returning home may come with it, the realization that we would have to recreate community, as our understanding and vision of Jamaica would need to be renegotiated.

We navigate home outside of the diaspora (working on and through home) by acknowledging our own experiences, remaining true to self, taking the bits and pieces that are resonant, leaving those that are not behind, and engaging in recreation of a home that transcends time, space,

and place. Also, by preserving home in ways that feel and are real and fusing that with new experiences that are emancipatory and unlimiting. By being unapologetic about the outsider component, we aim not to romanticize it, but to speak to the tensions of occupying this space of being an insider-outsider and understanding how that limits how we enter these spaces. Returning home comes with the recognition that there is always a need to be grounded and to be aware of a larger context; accepting a state of constant evolution or flux; honoring lessons learned from experiences; and always being aware of the historical and contemporary factors that serve to replicate inequality, oppression, and trauma. Home is finding balance, a safe space of peace, reflection, recovery, and community.

Finally, by examining how our role as mothers are shaped by a post-diasporic experience and implications on our children, cultural challenges associated with raising the next generation include being worried about losing our “Jamaican” identity because of location and being worried for our children not being able to experience being Jamaican in the same ways as we did, as they will be too American to be Jamaican and too Jamaican to be fully American, straddling their own liminalities between the homeland and hostland. Identity in this case being tied to memories of food, village, customs, music, and environment juxtaposed by a sincere desire to protect them from violence and harm that plagues Jamaica. Living in the U.S. has brought an acute awareness to us of the fragility of identity and the ways in which institutional and structural racism undermine efforts to provide our children with an empowered childhood. Constantly worrying about what it would mean to have children in the U.S. and feeling from early on that it was not viable. Recognizing though that as mothers, living in the “homeland,” does not come with guarantees. Our preoccupation is still racialized, classed, and gendered. Motherhood, or the act of mothering, is deeply political, it is a deliberate commitment to transformation that has no guarantees. As we underscore the need to rethink citizenship and our independence, we argue that counter narratives need to be developed that (re)define home and citizenship, reframe and contextualize, and perhaps even reclaim independence. We challenge politically infused notions of identity and citizenship by centering voices not traditionally engaged in the archive, public spaces and academia along with developing a re-definition of home and understanding one’s identity fully. On a political or macro-level, the counternarratives must start with Jamaica redefining herself as fully independent and a republic.

### **We wi a go? Framing A Collective Identity for Transnational Academic Women**

This study reiterates that we are embarking on new ground of (re)creating a framing for how we understand Jamaican transnational academic women who are first generation post-colonial citizens. Our act of resistance is capturing *our* collective stories through Rodney’s (1969) groundings. Groundings, as a methodology, rejects colonial, anti-Black and white supremacist ways of constructing knowledge. It centers the personal through an empowering methodology that allows us to see ourselves, and our experiences as valid to understanding the community and our place within it. We encourage women who come after us to consider these framings, so they see how their own histories of colonial humiliation, delayed economic mobility because of gender and age discrimination, and the tensions of an evolving post-colonial context, along with their own narratives and stories, can be more expansive. This type of scholarship is relevant to educators more comprehensively as it supports ideologies for the inclusion of lived experiences as affirmations of who we are entirely, both inside and outside of our professional lives. Recognition (and acceptance) of multiple identities, as well as nuanced experiences can allow educators to show up



authentically and leverage their whole selves as a launching pad for elevating their own consciousness, and the pursuit of unconventional ways of teaching and learning.

We stand on the shoulders of many women before us who were monumental to Jamaica's history but taken for granted or rendered inconsequential to nation-building and our epistemic sustainability. We name the Jamaican academic women Sylvia Wynter, Eudine Barritea, Verene Shepherd, Lucille Mathurin Mair, Elsa Goveia, who labored tirelessly under duress and unprotected by policies but steadfast in their work, assertions, and unwavering pursuit of knowledge production for and by the people. As we contribute to the work of trailblazers who set the foundation for us, we present our own truths, our own politics of memory, and name the colonial humiliation, the role of gendered trauma related to the constant state of coloniality and our collective post-diasporic realities of Caribbean post-coloniality. We recognize this is not everyone's truth and it will be contested, but it is our collective re/historization of home.

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**Appendix****Jamaican Creole (Patois) to English Translation**

| <b>JC translation using JLU-Cassidy</b> | <b>English</b>                                |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Uu wi bi                                | Who are we?                                   |
| Ou wi kum fi bi                         | How did we get here?                          |
| Ou wi a tink bout dis                   | How are we thinking about the matter?         |
| We wi de ina ischri?                    | Where are we in history?                      |
| Wat wi nuo se?<br>Wat wi a se nou       | What do we understand now?                    |
| Wa dem a se                             | Reasoning/Meditating/Philosophizing           |
| We wi a go                              | Where are we going? Thinking about the future |

Websites used to help with translation:

Jumieka Languij: Grama/Jamaican Language: Grammar

Jumieka Languij: Vokiabileri/Jamaican Language: Vocabulary



## *An Analysis of Teachers' Reports of Bullying Incidents*

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### **Abstract**

*Bullying behavior impacts the victim, the bully, and the overall school climate. Recording and reporting bullying behaviors reliably will aid schools in designing and assessing interventions. This study examines how teachers in a K-8 combined elementary and middle school reported bullying incidents to the office over seven years. Two hundred twenty-eight reported bullying incidents were recorded and examined for how teachers defined bullying compared to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) uniform definition and what types of bullying were reported most often. Results indicated that teachers rarely included any of the six CDC components when documenting bullying. "Peer Who is Not a Sibling" (98%) was the most referenced component, whereas "Power Imbalance" (2.6%) was the least referenced. The authors found that the frequencies of specific elements included in the teachers' referrals did not align with prior research. Verbal (58.3%) and physical (46.5%) bullying were teachers' most reported bullying incidents.*

**Keywords:** *bullying, discipline referrals, qualitative, middle school, elementary school*

Bullying is recognized as a global school issue. The impact this behavior has on students and the school environment has been studied by scholars worldwide (Cohn & Espelage, 2020). In the United States, researchers estimate that about 22% of students between the ages of 12 and 18 are bullied at some point during the school year (Irwin et al., 2021). For the students who have been bullied, research indicates negative impacts on the victims' school attendance (Baams et al., 2017; Hutzell & Payne, 2012), their physical well-being (Bogart et al., 2014; Gruber & Fineran, 2008), as well as their psychological health (Campbell et al., 2012; Chester et al., 2017). For students who identify as bullies, research suggests that these students can experience increased depression, antisocial behaviors, employment issues, and drug use (Copeland et al., 2013; Farrington & Ttofi, 2011). As a result, there is a need to effectively identify the types and frequencies of specific bullying behaviors to provide interventions.

### **The Bullying Definition**

Despite the clear evidence of the impact on students, a conclusive definition for bullying has yet to be well established (Canty et al., 2016; Chang, 2021; Slattery et al., 2019). While the idea of bullying has been studied for more than a century (Hughes, 1913, as cited in Koo, 2007),

it was Olweus who initially explored the notion of “bullies and whipping boys” more than 40 years ago (Olweus, 1978). Researchers have generally accepted a definition of bullying based on three components: intentional aggressive behaviors, repetition, and imbalance of power (Canty et al., 2016; Slattery et al., 2019). Researchers also generally agree that there are three common bullying behaviors: physical, which could include bodily harm or property damage; verbal; and relational/social (Chang, 2021; Ey & Campbell, 2021). Recently, cyberbullying has been investigated as another type of bullying exhibited by school-aged children (Armitage, 2021). Some bullying events may encompass all types, while others may be singularly described.

There is some common consensus on the components that make up the definition of bullying. However, some of the components of the definition, such as “physical,” are still too obscure to apply meaningfully (Chang, 2021). It is difficult to measure how much strength or force a student must exhibit for the behavior to be considered bullying. Chang (2021) points out that these elements can be viewed differently depending on one’s moral or social perceptions. She argues that *intention* is too ambiguous because “the awareness of harm, the subjectivity of intention, and the group consensus that may legitimize actions leading to harm, make determining the intent to harm difficult” (p. 150). Intentional aggressive behavior is a subjective term because an action not meant to harm could cause harm, or a person who means to cause harm but does not harm anyone depends on how the target perceives those actions. She also argues that researchers have not determined how to measure repetition because there is no standard measurement for the frequency or duration of bullying. Finally, she states that the idea of an imbalance of power is fluid depending on how one views the different forms of power. For example, there does not have to be a physical size difference for one to hold power over another. As a result, the terms meant to quantify or qualify the act of bullying do little to provide a concise insight into what, for how long, to whom, by whom, or to what degree a behavior must occur for it to be categorized as bullying.

Other researchers argue that there is little consensus on the overall term itself. Slattery et al. (2019) conducted an in-depth analysis of the definition of bullying from articles and abstracts used over the past 40 years. They conducted an extensive literature review and coded how researchers, federal legislation, state legislation, school staff, students, and parents define bullying among school-age children. They found no consistent definition of bully across the differing stakeholders. A total of 57% of the 901 articles and abstracts reviewed did not specify a definition for bullying. Of the identified types of bullying, 22% included direct/physical bullying, 14% included verbal bullying, and 14 % included social aggression. Of the identified components of the bullying definition, 32% identified power imbalance, 25% were repeated, and 17% were intentional. Based on these findings, Slattery et al. (2019) concluded three significant issues related to defining bullying. First, definitions are inconsistent between individuals and groups addressing the behavior. These inconsistencies can lead to underreporting or misreporting. Second, there is a lack of clarity that prohibits an objective assessment. There are differing interpretations of the elements that make up bullying.

Like Chang’s findings (2021), Slattery et al. (2019) question the consistency of how elements such as *intent to harm* or *repetition* are defined within the overall definition of bullying. These ambiguous elements make it difficult to determine the extent of the problem. Finally, Slattery et al. (2019) argue that the lack of consistency and clarity can lead to unintended consequences in how bullying is addressed in schools. How the behavior is determined can lead to inconsistency in how the behavior is addressed. The authors conclude by stating that it is essential that school staff responsible for addressing the needs of victims have a consistent definition of bullying (Slattery et al., 2019).

### **Bullying Definition and Teachers**

Teachers are often the first adults to address, redirect, and consequence inappropriate behaviors. However, studies have shown that teachers are inconsistent in responding to bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Byers et al., 2011; Mishna et al., 2005; Mishna et al., 2006; Rigby, 2020; Shamsi et al., 2019). Research suggests that teachers' trouble responding to bullying in schools could be related to their perception that certain behaviors do or do not constitute bullying or not knowing exactly how to identify bullying when it occurs (Campbell et al., 2019; Ey & Campbell, 2021). In this study, it may be that the lack of detail results from a lack of time and knowledge about what constitutes bullying.

Identifying a behavior as bullying as it is occurring has been difficult for teachers (Mishna et al., 2006). Mishna et al. (2005) state that "identifying an incident as bullying and knowing to intervene emerged as complex and confusing for teachers" (p. 724). As a result, teachers will be more likely to address specific types of bullying more often than others. For example, Byers et al. (2011) examined how teachers responded to overt (hitting) versus covert (social exclusion) bullying. They found that teachers were much more responsive in addressing overt bullying than covert bullying. Other studies found that teachers were more likely to single out hitting and pushing as bullying than they were more social or relational behaviors such as teasing or taunting behaviors (Shamsi et al., 2019; Williford et al., 2021). If the behavior does not directly impact the student in an observable, tangible way, teachers are less likely to intervene (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Byers et al., 2011). These less tangible behaviors may include name-calling, ridiculing, and violating personal space. Unfortunately, even if less tangible behaviors are identified, such as social behaviors like bullying among friends, the intervention has been largely unsuccessful because bullying peers with lower standing continues to provide more status or popularity within one's friend group (Faris et al., 2020). However, better training on intervening in such situations may lead to better outcomes for the victim (Paluck et al., 2016).

In addition to recognizing bullying behaviors when they occur, teachers have also had difficulty defining the phenomenon. Bullying has generally been defined with some uniformity that includes aggressive behaviors (physical, verbal, or relational), repetition of behavior, intention to harm, and an imbalance of power (Canty et al., 2016; Slattery et al., 2019). However, research has indicated that teachers must consistently identify these specific behaviors when asked. For example, earlier bullying research conducted by Naylor et al. (2006) found that teachers were more likely to reference instances of physical abuse (75%), verbal abuse (59%), and imbalance of power (70%) and far less likely to include social exclusion (12%), repeated behaviors (17%), and intent to harm (25%) in their definitions. In the more current research, Ey and Campbell (2021) reported that teachers used terms that indicated repetition 76% of the time, and Wooley (2019) reported that teachers used terms that indicated repetition 75% of the time. Similarly, both researchers reported that imbalance of power was used far less than other definition elements. Determining best practice interventions can be more challenging if teachers indicate inconsistencies in defining bullying.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Inconsistencies in recognizing, addressing, or documenting bullying can hamper the ability of school personnel to address the severity of the incident or protect the targets of these behaviors. Failing to recognize particular behaviors as bullying can lead to teachers misrepresenting a bullying incident (Byers et al., 2011; Slattery et al., 2019), mischaracterizing the seriousness of



the event, or attributing blame to the victim (Mishna et al., 2005). Perhaps the most harmful consequence of failing to recognize bullying is the uncertainty surrounding when and how to intervene to protect the victim (Byers et al., 2017; Mishna et al., 2006). There is a need to develop consensus among school and district stakeholders on bullying terms to track and analyze the various patterns and trends of bullying behaviors reported by teachers.

Research has focused on understanding teachers' perceptions primarily through surveying their definition of bullying, qualitative focus groups to discuss bullying, or presenting teachers with hypothetical prompts to ask how they *might* respond. To our knowledge, no research exists on how and what teachers report regarding bullying in the teaching setting. This study aimed to determine teachers' ability to effectively communicate bullying behaviors through office referrals and the type of bullying incidents teachers reported.

### Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework is Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS). PBIS is a multi-tiered framework of support for identifying students' needs and improving outcomes across the district. PBIS integrates data, a systems approach, and improving practices based on data to impact the school climate positively (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2023). Central to the PBIS framework is “data-based decision-making focused on building social and other functional competencies, creating supportive contexts, and preventing the occurrence of problem behaviors” (Kincaid et al., 2016, p.71). Effective data collection is critical for identifying issues, improving outcomes over time, and determining if interventions are implemented with fidelity (Sugai & Horner, 2006). Bullying prevention has been addressed within schoolwide PBIS and is “a logical framework for integrating strategies targeting bullying behavior (Good et al., 2011, p. 51). As with PBIS as a framework, accurate data collection is vital to identifying and intervening in bullying. The current study aimed to determine how teachers document bullying behaviors through office discipline referral, the primary means of data collection within a schoolwide PBIS system.

### Methods

#### Participants

This study occurred in a rural school district in the southern United States. The campus is a combined elementary/middle school, sharing the same building and common areas but different classroom areas. Over the seven years this study covered, the K-8 population averaged around 500 students. The elementary school (K-5th grades) averaged around 330 students, and the middle school (6th-8th grades) averaged around 160 students. The school is designated as a Title I school and is historically 97% Caucasian.

#### Data Collection

Researchers obtained district consent and university IRB approval to analyze de-identified student discipline data. The school uses an online electronic software platform as its primary in-house data collection system. The study included seven academic years of discipline data (2013-2020). De-identified data from each year were exported to Excel, including referral type, date, time, location, description, grade, and gender.

## **Analysis**

For this study, the qualitative data related to bullying incident reports documented by teachers were analyzed using a deductive approach, or the process of applying predetermined codes to data (Saldana, 2009), to determine 1) what descriptive terms of bullying are documented and 2) what type of bullying behaviors teachers are documenting. To analyze this data, researchers first agreed to use the Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2023) definition as the uniform definition for bullying.

Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth, including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm. Common types of bullying include

- Physical such as hitting, kicking, and tripping
- Verbal including name-calling and teasing
- Relational/social such as spreading rumors and leaving out of the group
- Damage to property of the victim (CDC, 2023)

To analyze how teachers describe bullying, we used the six a priori codes defined by Marengo et al. (2018) from the CDC definition for bullying: 1) aggressive behavior, 2) inflicts harm, 3) peer who is not a sibling or current dating partner, 4) power imbalance, 5) repeated, and 6) unwanted. The authors applied these six codes to the coding process.

To analyze what type of behaviors teachers document as bullying, the researchers used the CDC's common types of bullying: physical, verbal, relational/social, and damage to property (CDC, 2023). While other researchers include property damage with physical bullying (Armitage, 2021), the CDC definition presents this as separate from physical bullying. For this study, the researchers maintained consistency with the CDC definition.

The three researchers independently reviewed a randomly selected sample of 23 (10%) referrals from the data set. After coding the sample using the six a priori codes and the CDC's type of bullying, interrater reliability was assessed by Cohen's  $k$  to determine consistency among raters. The agreement between Researchers 1 and 2 was .723 ( $p = .000$ ). Agreement between Researcher 1 and 3 was .779 ( $p = .000$ ), and agreement between Researcher 2 and 3 was .679 ( $p = .000$ ). Landis and Koch (1977) suggest that a  $k$  between 0.61 and 0.80 is considered to have substantial agreement. Differences in coding were discussed and used to modify the code book for consistency. Coding was completed in NVivo to organize and analyze codes.

## **Results**

### **General Characteristics**

A total of 228 referrals were identified from the data coded as bullying. The researchers did not code four referrals because the description included bullying toward the teacher, not toward another student. Male students were reported to the office for bullying more than three times as female students. This trend did not differ among the two settings. Finally, the classroom was where bullying was reported as happening most often (See Table 1, next page).

**Table 1: General Characteristics**

|                 |                    | Total<br>K-8th<br>n = 228 | Elementary<br>School<br>K-5th<br>n = 134 | Middle School<br>6th-8th<br>n = 94 |
|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <i>Gender</i>   | Male               | 179 (78.5%)               | 108 (80.6%)                              | 71 (75.5%)                         |
|                 | Female             | 49 (21.5%)                | 26 (19.4%)                               | 23 (24.5%)                         |
| <i>Location</i> | Classroom          | 106 (46.5%)               | 54 (40.3%)                               | 52 (55.3%)                         |
|                 | Hallway / Stairway | 35 (15.3%)                | 22 (16.4%)                               | 13 (13.8%)                         |
|                 | Cafeteria          | 27 (11.8%)                | 20 (14.9%)                               | 7 (7.4%)                           |
|                 | Playground/Outside | 17 (7.5%)                 | 15 (11.2%)                               | 2 (2.1%)                           |
|                 | Gym                | 15 (6.6%)                 | 8 (6.0%)                                 | 7 (7.4%)                           |
|                 | Restroom           | 11 (4.8%)                 | 7 (5.2%)                                 | 4 (4.3%)                           |
|                 | Bus                | 5 (2.2%)                  | 0                                        | 5 (5.3%)                           |
|                 | Unspecified        | 12 (5.2%)                 | 8 (6.0%)                                 | 4 (4.3%)                           |

### Referrals and the CDC Definition

The first part of the analysis examined how teachers described bullying in relation to the CDC definition of bullying. A total of 224 referrals contained at least one component of the definition (See Table 2). The most frequently coded component of the CDC definition was *Peer Who is Not a Sibling*. This component appeared in over 98% of the referrals. This was defined as another student being identified by name, as “other student,” or references by gender, such as “a boy” or “a male student.” In approximately 15% of the incidents, teachers referred to the target of the bullying behavior either by name or initials. Any identifying student name (first and last name, for example) was de-identified before the researchers reviewed the data.

*Aggressive Behavior* was the second most identified component of the definition. It was coded in 43% of referrals. *Aggressive Behavior* was defined as verbally threatening another student or making physical contact. Examples of aggressive behavior that is verbally threatening include “<Student> threatened <student> that he was going to punch her in the face on the last day of school” and “<Student> incessantly verbally abused one student.” Examples of making physical contact included a range of behaviors such as pushing, hitting, spitting, throwing a student to the ground, hitting a student with an object, or fighting. For example, one teacher described a student as “hitting and pushing another student while coming in from recess.” More than 70% of the *Aggressive Behavior* was documented at the elementary level.

While all bullying could be considered *Aggressive Behavior*, 57% of the reported incidents were not coded with aggressive behaviors. The behaviors teachers documented included vague descriptions that were not considered aggressive. For instance, a teacher reported bullying as "Arguing with another student and calling her names. I asked him to quit arguing with this student, and he continued." Referrals not coded as *Aggressive Behavior* mainly included descriptions of name-calling.

*Repeated* was coded when a teacher noted the student engaged in the behavior more than once, the target of the bullying reported the behavior was continuous, or the teacher noted the behavior had occurred before the current incident. One teacher reported, "This is not the first time he has bullied this student in my classroom." Other teachers included phrases such as "He has done this multiple times," and "<STUDENT> WAS BULLYING <STUDENT> YET AGAIN" (all caps included for emphasis from the teacher). Another wrote, "The 6th grader indicated that this was not the first time." *Repeated* appeared in 30% of the referrals.

While all bullying is unwanted, and it could be argued that this component is a part of each referral by default, the researchers defined *Unwanted* as when a student asked another student to stop or the teacher noted that there was a reaction by the student who was targeted such as crying or getting upset. Multiple referrals included descriptions of students crying because of the behavior. One teacher noted, "The child asked her to stop several times. She kept on pulling it off and laughing at the child, making her cry." Another teacher said, "It was obvious that <Student> was not wanting or enjoying this."

The final two components appeared in less than 10 percent of the referrals. The researchers defined *Inflicts Harm* as a teacher describing that the incident hurt the student or some physical mark resulted from the incident (e.g., a red mark). Examples of this code included "pushed another student's head into a water bottle on the lunch table and made the student's nose to bleed" and "grabbed a boy by the back of his hoodie and pulled till the boy couldn't breathe." Finally, the researchers coded an incident as a *Power Imbalance* when a teacher included some reference to control, age, or size difference. Five of the six referrals noted a grade difference, such as "Student was picking on second graders during recess." One noted a size difference, "another male student who is very small was in front of me."

**Table 2: Frequency of Components of the CDC Definition**

|                           | (n = 228)   | Elementary School<br>(n = 134) | Middle School<br>(n = 94) |
|---------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Peer Who Is Not a Sibling | 224 (98.2%) | 132 (98.5%)                    | 92 (97.9%)                |
| Aggressive Behavior       | 99 (43.4%)  | 70 (52.2%)                     | 29 (30.8%)                |
| Repeated                  | 70 (30.7%)  | 39 (29.1%)                     | 31 (33%)                  |
| Unwanted                  | 49 (21.5%)  | 23 (17.2%)                     | 26 (27.7%)                |
| Inflicts Harm             | 20 (8.8%)   | 12 (9%)                        | 8 (8.5%)                  |
| Power Imbalance           | 6 (2.6%)    | 1 (0.74%)                      | 5 (5.3%)                  |

## Referrals and Types of Bullying

The second part of the analysis examined what types of bullying referrals teachers sent to the office using the CDC categories (see Table 3). A total of 270 incidents were coded in 224 referrals. Forty-nine referrals included multiple behaviors. Most of the referrals with multiple incidents paired two types of bullying together, such as, “Sent <STUDENT> to the office for physically harassing (threw him down) another student. He told him he was gonna break his neck.” However, one referral mentioned all four types of bullying:

The student claims he is being bullied, however while I was watching him he called several students different names. Threw another student's crayons on the floor, elbowed a student, and repeatedly stirred ill feelings toward him all in a 10 minute period.

Verbal bullying was the most reported type in approximately 58% of referrals. The authors coded physical bullying in almost half the referrals.

**Table 3: Frequency of Coded Types of Bullying**

|                     | n (%)<br>(n = 228) | Elementary School<br>(n = 134) | Middle School<br>(n = 94) |
|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Verbal              | 133 (58.3%)        | 74 (55.2%)                     | 59 (62.8%)                |
| Physical            | 106 (46.5%)        | 69 (51.5%)                     | 37 (39.4%)                |
| Property Damage     | 25 (11.0%)         | 11 (8.2%)                      | 14 (14.9%)                |
| Relational / Social | 9 (3.9%)           | 5 (3.8%)                       | 4 (4.3%)                  |

\*(Multiple Types Could be Reports in the Same Incident)

## Co-occurrence of CDC Definition Components

Table 4 (next page) denotes the co-occurrence of CDC definition components. No referral included all six components of the definition. However, three referrals (1.3%) included five components. One example of a referral that contained multiple codes includes:

<Student> admitted to calling another boy names this morning at breakfast. He kept on doing it after the boy asked him to stop. The boy put his hand on <student>'s throat. (Both students admitted to their part.) Then <student> said that he pinched the part of his neck and was trying to rip it out.

A total of 13 referrals (5.8%) included four of the components, 47 (21%) included three components, 99 (44.2%) included two components, and 62 (27.7%) included one component. Apart from those occurrences, *Unwanted* and *Repeated* occurred together 27 times (12.1%), and *Repeated* and *Aggressive Behavior* occurred together 24 times (10.7%).

**Table 4:** Co-Occurrence Table of CDC Definition Components

|                        | CDC Def | Peer Who<br>is Not a<br>Sibling | Aggressive<br>Behavior | Repeated | Unwanted | Inflicts<br>Harm | Power Imbal-<br>ance |
|------------------------|---------|---------------------------------|------------------------|----------|----------|------------------|----------------------|
| CDC Def                |         | 224                             | 99                     | 70       | 49       | 20               | 6                    |
| Not Sibling            | 224     |                                 | 99                     | 70       | 49       | 20               | 6                    |
| Aggressive<br>Behavior | 99      | 99                              |                        | 24       | 17       | 19               | 3                    |
| Repeated               | 70      | 70                              | 24                     |          | 27       | 4                | 3                    |
| Unwanted               | 49      | 49                              | 17                     | 27       |          | 3                | 2                    |
| Inflicts<br>Harm       | 20      | 20                              | 19                     | 4        | 3        |                  | 2                    |
| Power Im-<br>balance   | 6       | 6                               | 3                      | 3        | 2        | 2                |                      |

## Discussion

This study examined how teachers defined bullying when recording a discipline incident and what types of bullying incidents teachers tended to report most often. The current study differed from previous studies in that it reviewed the practice of writing discipline referrals rather than providing teachers with surveys to ask for their definitions (e.g., Byers et al., 2011) or interpret hypothetical scenarios (e.g., Bell & Willis, 2016). This is a crucial point to note because some of the findings from the current study differed from previous research. The current study examined how teachers defined bullying in everyday practice by documenting bullying incidents. Teachers in previous studies were asked how they defined the phenomenon. The reflective approach of previous studies included the teachers' perspective on how they think about bullying when given time, prompts, or cues and how they report the behavior in the applied setting. Both approaches are essential to understanding how to prevent bullying in schools effectively; however, this study provided insight into how teachers write referrals. While examining teacher perceptions of bullying may guide professional development, examining how teachers report bullying indicates gaps between professional development, policy, and practice.

### Teacher's Documentation of Bullying

The first aim of this study was to examine how teachers described bullying in relation to the CDC definition of bullying. The definition component that indicates if the participants in the bullying situation are related is *Peer Who is Not a Sibling*. In the current study, this was overwhelmingly the most cited component (98%) of the CDC definition by teachers. However, Moreno et al. (2018) found that only 4.1% of participants included the same component. The difference could be explained by the context in which teachers were asked to apply the definition. When

given the prompt “provide an example of bullying,” it is easy for a teacher to define the behavior strictly. For example, “bullying is hitting or pushing” or “bullying is name calling.” However, it is difficult to accurately describe a bullying situation when a teacher is asked to document a bullying incident without including the participants involved. For example, “John was hitting Paul” or “John was calling Paul names.” Results from the current study suggest that this component is a natural part of describing bullying when teachers have to apply their definition to practice.

*Imbalance of Power* was the least cited component (2.6%) of the CDC definition despite being one of the distinctive characteristics of bullying (Canty et al., 2016; Slattery et al., 2019). The result is consistent with previous research that found that teachers identified this component far less frequently (7% - 10%) than other definition components (Moreno et al., 2018; Woolley, 2019). However, the current results differed significantly from other studies (Naylor et al., 2006; Ey & Campbell, 2021) that found teachers referred to an imbalance of power more frequently. The results from the current study suggest that this is not a component that teachers include in a description when documenting a bullying incident. The lack of reference to *Imbalance of Power* may be because a great deal of bullying occurs between friends and close social networks (e.g., Faris et al., 2020), and teachers may not view aggressive behavior as a result of an imbalance of power. However, some researchers assert that *Imbalance of Power* is essential for determining whether the incident is bullying or general aggression. According to Volk et al. (2014), the behavior more likely resembles general aggression as the power imbalance decreases. Excluding this component from the reporting process limits the assessment other stakeholders can make in determining the types of bullying found within the school setting.

Other components that appeared with less frequency were *Repeated* (30.7%), *Unwanted* (21.5%), and *Inflicts Harm* (8.8%). Much like *Imbalance of Power*, these components have been cited as key descriptors of bullying. Teachers have routinely associated repeated behaviors with bullying (Cheng et al., 2011; Ey & Campbell, 2021; Woolley, 2019). Teachers in this study tended to strictly describe the behavior they perceived as bullying and did not include the phrases “repeated” and “intent to harm” in their reports. As discipline referrals are the product of teacher observation, the behavior is more tangible (e.g., physical contact, threats). The teachers are describing the “here and now” and may not consider additional information regarding frequency (repeated), intent (unwanted), and severity (inflicts harm). However, including these components allows the incident to be defined as either bullying or general aggression. For example, *Repeated* is a key component of bullying because it differentiates bullying from trivial incidents of aggression (Volk et al., 2014). This component also describes the impact of bullying because exposure to bullying over time denotes greater harm to the victim. The bullying descriptor *Repeated* is essential to determine when designing and implementing strategies for those who repeatedly bully others or are bullied.

Aggressive behavior was coded in less than half of the documented incidents. This component was defined as verbally threatening another student or making physical contact. For example, codes included such descriptions as “he let it flip and hit the boy in the eye,” indicating physical contact, or “getting into another student's face and threatening to fight the other student,” indicating verbal threats. Moreno et al. (2016) recorded a similar finding, identifying that only 33% of descriptions referenced aggressive behaviors when asked to define bullying. A total of 57% of the incidents recorded by teachers in this study were not coded as aggressive behavior but included vague descriptions of behaviors or behaviors that could be considered mild. For example, one teacher reported, “Called a male student a girl. Wrote it on paper and showed it to him.” Another teacher wrote, “The student was laughing and encouraging another student to make fun of another

student.” While these incidents could be considered a form of verbal harassment and certainly not appropriate, it does not fit the definition of aggressive behavior. No threat of harm or physical harm was perpetrated. Previous research has suggested that teachers are less likely to observe and intervene in bullying behaviors that are not overtly physical (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Byers et al., 2011). However, the present study suggests that teachers may be more aware of covert bullying around them, such as teasing and name-calling.

### **Teacher Referrals for Types of Bullying Behaviors**

The second aim of this study was to examine what bullying behaviors teachers tended to document. Consistent with previous research (Boulton, 1997; Bradshaw et al., 2013; Byers et al., 2011; Naylor et al., 2006; Shamsi et al., 2019; Woolley, 2019), teachers documented verbal (58.3%) and physical (46.5%) bullying more than property or relational/social bullying. These are behaviors that teachers can see and hear and, therefore, are more likely to know when to intervene (Bell & Willis, 2016; Bauman & Del Rio, 2006). Social/relational bullying accounted for less than 4% of the incidents reported despite evidence that 40% to 50% of students report experiencing this type of bullying (Nishioka et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2009). The lower reporting of social/relational bullying is typically associated with teachers failing to take this type of bullying as seriously (Byers et al., 2011; Mishna et al., 2005) or having less empathy for victims (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Williford et al., 2021). In this study, it is possible that more relational bullying is occurring, but teachers are not reporting this as bullying.

### **Importance of Establishing a Common Local Definition**

The current study highlights one school's lack of a common definition of bullying behaviors in discipline referrals. It does not appear from the referrals that the teachers used any specific definition found in a checklist or template when documenting the behaviors for disciplinary action. Teachers in the current study did not seem to have a common understanding of what constitutes bullying or how to communicate the topography of the behavior. The lack of a clear definition could lead to inconsistencies and misrepresentation of the behavior in schools (Byers et al., 2011; Slattery et al., 2019) and potentially hinder the ability of the other stakeholders to determine the overall climate and culture of the school environment, thereby limiting essential resources to aid in bullying prevention. By including specific components of an agreed-upon definition, data can be collected and analyzed based on the descriptive elements of the referrals.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The advantage of accessing the frequency of particular bullying descriptions is to tailor interventions to reduce the bully's behaviors or support the victim. For example, Nelson et al. (2019) note that *Imbalance of Power* can be physical or social. The approach to intervention for these circumstances can be quite different. Collecting this specific data regarding bullying focuses interventions to specific situations, students, or school climates and cultures. Monitoring the occurrences of bullying referrals after interventions have been initiated will also provide information regarding the success or impact of the intervention.

Data collection and analysis are key to creating supportive environments and preventing problem behaviors (Kincaid et al., 2016). For this to be effective, everyone must examine common



problems through a similar lens. For schools to identify and prevent bullying, teachers must operate under a clear and consistent definition (Jones & Augustine, 2015; Moreno et al., 2018). However, applying one common definition to every school does not consider the differences in local demographics and culture (e.g., Carlyle & Steinman, 2007; Xu et al., 2019). Therefore, instead of adopting one definition for all schools, local stakeholders should determine a definition based on their local understanding of this issue and how the behavior manifests in their school climate.

Teachers will need professional development on identifying these bullying behaviors, the essential information documentation, and when reporting is necessary (Bradshaw et al., 2013; Bauman & Hurley, 2005; Williford, 2015). A rationale for including more descriptive elements within the referrals would be presented in the training. The descriptive elements would be part of a locally agreed-upon bullying definition that would include a variety of stakeholders, including students. By doing this, teachers within a school can communicate with each other about the common phenomena of bullying. They can work to prevent the behavior and provide support for victims. Without a clear definition, teachers will hold more stereotypical views of bullying (Migliaccio, 2015). Working within a common definition will provide a more efficient reporting process and aid in data analysis.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Several limitations limit the generalizability of this study. First, the analysis was conducted from just one rural southeast United States school and was limited to kindergarten through eighth grade. Therefore, the results are influenced by local culture, how bullying is viewed in the community, teachers' training, and local school policies. Future studies should examine other geographical regions and settings, such as urban and suburban. Second, this study used the CDC definition as the uniform definition for analysis. The CDC definition is just one possible definition of this behavior (e.g., Slattery et al., 2019). A different definition, such as the one used by the World Anti-Bullying Forum (WABF), could result in different results.

Several delimitations should also be addressed. First, the rise of social media has led to an increase in cyberbullying (Devos et al., 2018), which the researchers did not include in the data reviewed in this study. No discipline referrals included in this data set referenced bullying experienced outside school. This may be because the teachers do not write referrals for cyberbullying or bullying outside of the school property. Secondly, only those data coded for bullying in the school-based data set were examined. It is possible that other behavior that could be classified as bullying was also reported but not coded as such in the data set.

### **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the literature in that it is one of the first studies that examines the documentation of bullying referrals written by teachers. The results indicate that teachers included few details within the body of the referral rather than specific descriptions of observed behaviors. The researchers posit that referrals aligned with agreed-upon common definitions that represent a local understanding of what constitutes bullying would provide more data to gauge the frequency of specific behaviors, thus promoting effectively designed interventions and aiding in the assessment of the interventions.

Providing an agreed-upon definition that multiple stakeholders and teachers create may increase the accuracy of the discipline referral. An agreed-upon definition could also increase

awareness of when bullying occurs, allowing for more specific interventions to address behaviors to be designed. A well-written discipline referral is the first step in determining the types and frequencies of bullying. However, the behavior will go unreported if teachers do not recognize bullying (e.g., bullying in friend groups). Establishing a shared definition of bullying among stakeholders can aid in identifying its types and frequency. However, all school stakeholders must remain vigilant to all types of bullying, including more subtle forms, and take prompt action to ensure a safe school climate for all students.

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## ***But I was a Teacher!: Communities of Practice Supporting Teacher Educators' Development***

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### ***Abstract***

*Oftentimes, the transition to being a teacher educator may involve shifts in identities, responsibilities, and opportunities. We advance a model for inducting and retaining teacher educators into the higher education landscape. Drawing on the findings of a collaborative autoethnography, we share how a multi-institutional and varied positionality community of practice (CoP) is an approach that can support teacher educators with learning how to navigate the roles and responsibilities associated with teaching, researching, and serving in teacher preparation programs. We operationalize how this type of community of practice can be replicated.*

***Keywords:*** *teacher educator learning, communities of practice, induction, retention, higher education*

*“I was a teacher for years. How can being a teacher educator be so different and challenging?”*

**M**embers of our research team have asked each other this question throughout our collaborative work. Similar to many teacher educators, our professional journeys began as PK-12 teachers. Each member taught in elementary school contexts for a different number of years prior to the transition to higher education. Some members taught for five years while others spent eleven years teaching elementary-aged students. We each transitioned to the role of teacher educator at different times, but all for the reason of seeking employment opportunities in teacher preparation as adjuncts, lecturers, or doctoral students. Our journeys into higher education came with new territories and shifts in the role of teaching. Often, demands of conducting research, securing funding, and engaging in service were added to the more familiar role of teaching.

For this study, we define teacher educators as individuals who teach coursework in formal teacher preparation programs, conduct research connected to teaching and learning, and provide

service to the field of education. We experienced, as the literature base has established, that shifting into the role of a teacher educator is not straightforward, but complex and challenging (e.g., Butler et al., 2014; Labaree, 2005; Williams et al., 2012). Thus, we began to wonder what approaches might support the induction and retention of teacher educators within higher education?

Drawing upon data from a collective autoethnography, we advance that one approach for inducting and retaining teacher educators is through communities of practice (CoP) that are multi-institutional and involve varied teacher educator positionalities (e.g., doctoral student, assistant professor, lecturer, professor). Each member of our community of practice (CoP) sought assistance with navigating roles and responsibilities associated with teaching, researching, and serving in the teacher preparation landscape. We refer to our CoP as the Connecting Contexts Group (CCG) to reflect our domain of interest. Table 1 details each member's demographics delineated according to when they entered the CCG in 2016 and their current demographics in 2024. Demographics include the member's position, number of years being a teacher educator, the types of teacher educator positionalities, and the number of higher education institutions at which they were employed. As Table 1 (see appendix) reveals, the members represent a variety of positionalities and years within teacher education.

In this article, we outline CCG members' discovered benefits related to their induction, retention, and ongoing support within the higher education community. Additionally, because the CCG involves members from multiple institutions with varied positions (e.g., doctoral student, assistant professor, lecturer, professor), the type of CoP we describe holds the potential to influence future scholars and the broader teacher educator community. Thus, we operationalize how this type of CoP can be replicated by others who seek to elevate the humanizing elements of teaching and learning while inducting and retaining teacher educators. We advocate for this model of a CoP so that teacher educators in their varied roles can leverage the support of peers and enhance the success of all CoP members.

## Literature Review

### The Teacher Educator Role

Teacher educators' development is critical as their expertise is integral to the success of new teachers (Kelchtermans et al., 2018). Individuals may enter the role of *teacher educator* from a range of positions such as doctoral student, novice faculty member, adjunct, or lecturer. Regardless of one's positionality, "the process [of becoming a teacher educator] involves critical changes in professional practice and identity" (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 6). Research is still emerging that focuses on the professional learning, identity, and development of teacher educators (Loughran, 2014; Swennen et al., 2010), but extant research emphasizes that working in teacher education, in particular, requires a complex pedagogy of simultaneously *learning to teach* and *teaching to learn* (Loughran, 2006/2014). Despite this complex identity shift, Dinkelman et al. (2006) noted that many graduate programs do not provide enough support to doctoral students as they embark upon the field of teacher education. For example, some members of this research team were assigned as the instructors of record for undergraduate courses during their first semester of their doctoral programs. These members assumed this teacher educator role without any supervision or with only one introductory meeting about the course. Other members were tasked with performing research tasks such as compiling literature reviews without faculty mentorship or before taking doctoral coursework that taught how to engage in these scholarly tasks.

Similar to doctoral students needing instruction and support, especially in their first few years of their programs, Boyd and colleagues (2011) described the induction period for novice teacher educators as the first three years after an academic appointment has been secured. Their research demonstrated the additional support novice teacher educators required during this time and recommended that institutions be proactive, strategic, focused, and utilize effective communication methods during this unique time. Supporting graduate students with strong mentorship, support staff, coursework, and time and space to develop teacher educator identities in higher education can help the induction period go more smoothly.

Cochran-Smith (2003) revealed the lack of consensus on how to prepare or support teacher educators. A persisting belief that a doctorate indicates qualifications for and knowledge of how to prepare teachers does not consider institutional differences regarding the doctoral program's purpose and research intensiveness (Murray, 2017). That is, one doctoral degree-granting institution may focus on preparing teacher educators for a career in educational research, whereas another institution may focus preparation efforts on careers in institutions requiring intensive teaching loads. Additionally, learning to be a teacher educator is more complicated than simply learning how to teach adults. Being a teacher educator involves roles and responsibilities beyond teaching to include research and service, depending upon the hiring institution's focus (Butler et al., 2014; Hadar & Brody, 2017; Kleinsasser, 2017). Institutional expectations vary greatly regarding specified amounts of time devoted to teaching, scholarship, and service, which make guidance for navigating expectations crucial for retention (Young et al., 2017). Hence, learning how to be a teacher educator is often a solitary journey, depending on the size of the institution, and professional development opportunities available (Butler et al., 2014; Cochran-Smith et al., 2020).

Importantly, support for inducting and retaining teacher educators is warranted due to the well established trend of higher education faculty burnout and exiting from academia (Johnson, 1993; Lackritz, 2004; Watts & Robertson, 2011). This body of literature reveals that female faculty and younger faculty tend to experience higher levels of exhaustion. In addition, female faculty are also more likely to experience emotional exhaustion, partly due to the amount of care-work they do (Pope-Ruark, 2022). As Malesic (2016) argued:

Burned out faculty cannot be the teachers and mentors that students need them to be. As the profession becomes more economically precarious...the working conditions foster burnout become more widespread...The response to faculty burnout, therefore, should not be to shrug and say that academic work is a labor of love, and some just aren't cut out for it. Instead, the response should be to find ways to give these highly skilled workers the rest, respect, and reward they need to stay healthy and effective. (para. 4)

Thus, one way to reduce burnout may be to design and implement effective strategies related to induction and retention.

### **Effective Approaches for Inducting and Retaining Teacher Educators**

Despite institutional efforts to boost the retention of teacher educators, "Most influential professional learning for teacher educators, across all sectors, appears to take place in informal workplace settings and interactions in the department or team" (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 15). In 1992, Huling-Austin identified three factors that lead to the attrition of teacher educators: 1) ineffective mentorship or little support from more experienced teacher educators; 2) giving multiple course



preparations or subjects outside teacher educators' expertise; and 3) evaluating novice teacher educators with the same metrics as experienced teacher educators. Additionally, Huling-Austin argued that because learning to teach is a highly complex process, it requires time, reflection, and support from experienced teacher educators.

Other researchers have developed practices to assist in the induction of teacher educators. Koster et al. (2008) demonstrated how portfolios can assist novice teacher educators in establishing their identities within higher education. Kitchen and Parker (2009) argued that self-study and reflective inquiry was a necessary component of the induction process. Timmerman (2009) highlighted the value of role models in developing a new professional identity as a teacher educator, and Ritter (2009) stressed the importance of qualitative self-study in collaboration with peers as a beneficial strategy for retaining teacher educators. In the same way shifting identities does not have a one-size fits all model, finding what supports burgeoning teacher educators is not a one-size fits all approach. More research needs to be conducted that explores different ways of supporting novice teacher educators (Body et al., 2011).

Mentoring, induction, and retention of teacher educators depends upon levels of institutional support available, as well as teacher educators' proactive navigation of resources and their efforts to find a learning community that nurtures their identity as a teacher educator (e.g., Butler et al., 2014; Hadar & Brody, 2017). As research has demonstrated, professional development beyond the doctoral degree largely depends on the teacher educator's search for opportunities to learn from others in the profession, which can include engaging in communities of practice with other teacher educators interested in pursuing knowledge to improve teaching and learning (Gallagher et al., 2011; Tuval et al., 2011). Hadar and Brody (2017) described such communities as a self-guided path for professional learning, where research to improve practice can occur through self-study or through collaborative studies. Collaborative research efforts in such a CoP can solidify teacher educators' and researchers' identities in the academy while contributing to improved teaching and learning, and act as one possible solution to retaining novice teacher educators as they enter the workforce.

### **Self-Study Communities of Practice (SSCoP)**

Self-study is a method for exploring one's own professional actions; it is both a practice and a form of research. Self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) has become a rigorous and imperative field of research whereby teacher educators study, reflect, and improve upon their practice (Kitchen, 2005). As Russell (1998) explained, "just as actions are said to speak louder than words, so how we teach may speak more loudly than what we teach" (p. 5). S-STEP has emerged as a way to better understand and reflect upon the *how* of teaching such that teacher educators can learn from their own experience and the experiences of others. Because being a teacher educator is a multifaceted endeavor, Kosnik and colleagues (2015) argued that studies of teacher educators "need to capture the complexity of their work by examining their identities, practices, backgrounds, transition, challenges, individual talents, and contexts" (p. 217).

Many scholars contend that the most powerful professional development exists within a community or network (Barack et al., 2010; MacPhail et al., 2014; Patton & Parker, 2017). Through these professional development networks, teachers change their attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions (Guskey, 1986). Louie et al. (2003) argued that collaboration provides self-study researchers with much-needed social support, a deeper culture of reflectiveness, and increases the transferability of work to others. Communities of Practice (CoPs) were described by Wenger and

Wenger-Trayner (2015) as “groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (p. 1). CoPs come in many forms, but regardless of what they look like they are purposeful groups that revolve around authentic tasks.

SSCoPs have been conducted in a wide variety of settings. Some occur within the same institutions and educational departments. For example, Gallagher et al.’s (2011) CoP included pre-tenure faculty of one department as they explored their identities as teacher educators. Han et al. (2014) worked across different departments at one institution as a college-wide Diversity Committee; they incorporated culturally responsive teaching into their respective courses and reflected on the challenges and successes of collaboration. Teacher educators have designed collaborative SSSCoPs that span institutions (e.g., Appleget et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2022). They found that working collaboratively allowed them to be vulnerable and avoid some of the fear they might have experienced doing the same work within their own respective institutions.

Both tenured and non-tenured faculty are leaving the profession at an alarming rate (Tugend, 2020). Tugend found that more than two-thirds of the 1,122 college and university faculty surveyed in October of 2020 were struggling with increased workloads and over half were considering retiring or leaving. Given the complexities of becoming a teacher educator, researchers have called for more CoPs related to S-STEP (e.g., Butler et al., 2014; Kitchen & Parker, 2009). This scholarly essay seeks to contribute to this body of knowledge by sharing how one multi-institutional SSSCoP inducted, retained, and supported teacher educators at various points in their career. By sharing about this SSSCoP, we hope that other teacher educators will seek out and form their own CoPs to continue their professional development, provide necessary mentorship, and ultimately, establish professional friends and colleagues.

### Theoretical Framework

The nature of our multi-institutional and positionality community of practice was grounded in the theoretical framework of CoP (Wenger et al., 2002). Wenger and colleagues (2002) outlined three main characteristics of a CoP, including (a) domain of interest; (b) community; and (c) practice. Common interests result in a shared space that creates an opportunity for social learning where members of varying levels of expertise join to advance knowledge in a specific topic. A CoP provides both short and long-term value to group members and the greater organization to which members belong. Membership allows for personal and professional growth beyond increased knowledge because members gain confidence in their abilities by confronting research challenges, accessing a shared knowledge bank, and engaging in meaningful work.

Applying Wenger and colleagues’ (2002) characteristics to our group, the Connecting Contexts Group (CCG), our *domain of interests* are instruction and research focused on literacy instruction for teacher candidates. *Membership* in the CCG does not exclude membership in other CoP, but all members remained active in the CCG since its inception in 2016. The literacy research community benefits from members that seek innovative solutions, remain current in the discipline, and enhance members belonging to the larger community. Finally, the *practice*—or meaning created together through this shared work—provides avenues for developing competency in our work (i.e., teaching and research). Members continue to teach and have vested interest in the instructional community.

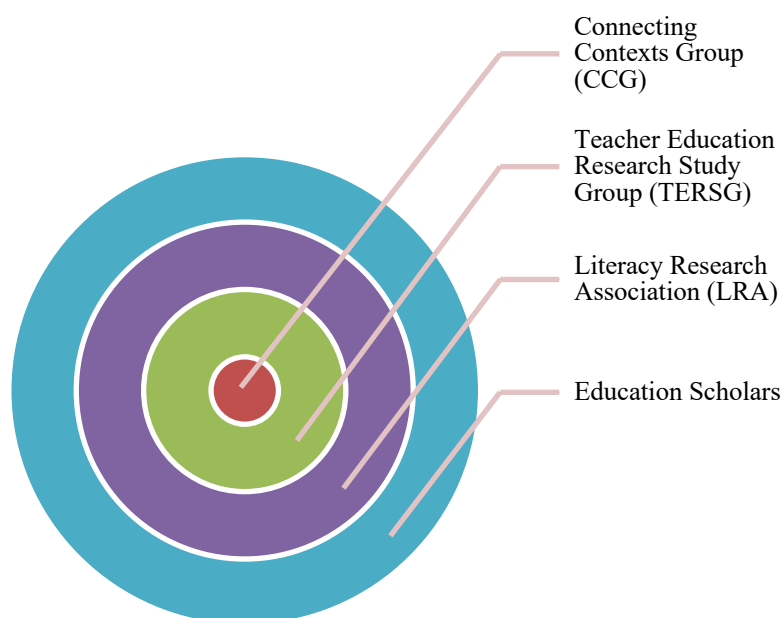
The process of collaborative research has allowed us to cultivate our place in the CCG as our roles, experiences, and knowledge changed through participation (Wenger et al., 2002). Nov-

ice participants enter an authentic task and participate on the periphery of a CoP. As novices develop deeper understandings of the domain of interest they move through a continuum of mastery. While interactions between novice and expert practitioners create a trajectory of growth for novices, it could be argued that membership creates opportunities for growth for all members. We suggest that entering authentic practice-based problems offer opportunities for all members to learn and to consider new identities. Three of our members joined the CCG as doctoral students with nascent experience in research and two members were assistant professors. The last two members had a range of experiences that helped guide novices through aspects of research, such as narrowing research questions, exploring methods, investigating theories, writing, and publishing. Thus, the legitimate peripheral participation of our novice members was never stagnant, but “continuous, active, engaged, situated, and identity-forming” (Cox, 2005, p. 528). Over time, novices and experts in the CCG experienced growth in their confidence to conduct research, evolve their teaching practices, and (re)envision their service roles.

Lastly, working within a CoP reifies collaborative practices, which encourages sharing of expert knowledge. Subsequently, the CCG also formed a learning community as it promoted group norms that embraced a “culture of learning in which everyone is involved in a collective effort of understanding” (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999, p. 271). In a CoP, all members take responsibility for sharing new ideas/learning. As Rogers (2000) noted, “no one individual...is burdened with the task of ‘knowing it all’” (p. 384). For the CCG, we divided research tasks, maintained fluid roles within the group, and shared our various expert knowledge with each other.

### **The Connecting Contexts Group**

Members came to participate in our CCG through membership in other CoPs, which are nested (see Figure 1). Initially, CCG members self-identified as education scholars at their individual institutions. CCG members first met when we attended the Literacy Research Association’s (LRA) annual conference in December 2016. One LRA study group, the Teacher Education Research Study Group (TERSG), provides space where literacy scholars connect with others around shared interests for teacher education. TERSG’s purpose is to advance research in teacher education through forming collaborative research groups around areas of interest pertinent to literacy research and educators’ pedagogy. Our team of seven researchers shared an interest in addressing the intersection between literacy and teacher education. Through this shared interest, we developed into a collaborative research group that examined connections between literacy coursework and field work (Peltier et al., 2019, 2021; Shimek et al., 2021).

**Figure 1:** *Nested Communities of Practice*

We want to emphasize that initially the CCG functioned as a collaborative research partnership rather than a community of practice. This was demonstrated by our focus on studying how other teacher educators connected their teaching to field experiences. We did not initially connect this research to our own roles and positionalities as teacher educators. During our three-year longitudinal study, the iterative process of data analysis created the space for our group to begin to shift focus and connect our research to our own personal work as teacher educators. It was during this time that our group transitioned from operating as a collaborative research group to a group that identified as a community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002).

As our CCG recognized that our roles and interactions were shifting, we began to discuss how our teaching practices were impacted by the knowledge we gained from our research. We were curious to know if our CCG had influenced more than just our teaching practices so we employed a collaborative autoethnographic approach to determine how engagement in the CCG may have contributed to individual induction/retention, professional growth, and identity formation within the academy and field of education. Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that is both process and product designed to uncover how personal connections lead to cultural shifts (Adams et al., 2015). Sawyer and Liggett (2012) explained that autoethnography is both inherently systematic but also subjective in nature; it is the process of drawing upon personal experiences to better understand the culture(s) of which we are members. It is a method whereby “authors use their own experience in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interactions” (Holt, 2003, p. 19), seeks to dissolve the hierarchies in traditional research (e.g., power dynamics between researchers and participants; Sawyer & Liggett, 2012), requires significant self-reflection (Ellis et al., 2011), and is both a recursive analytic process and a process of always becoming (Holt, 2003). Collaborative autoethnography reflected the type of multi-institution and

positionality CoP that we had created—a CoP where hierarchies and longevity in the field did not elevate a members' experiences and ways of understanding.

Throughout our collaborative autoethnographic study, we met bi-monthly or monthly, dependent on schedules and deadlines. We videotaped our meetings as well as reviewed the extensive notes of conversations and decisions we made throughout meetings. In our reflective discussions, we documented changes in our teaching practices, approaches to research, and service roles. In addition to our meetings, we individually wrote reflective journals about changes we noticed in ourselves as our research, teaching, and service evolved over time. We shared these journals amongst each other during our meetings and then reread them outside our formal meeting times, resulting in a recursive and reflective process whereby we examined our experiences both as individuals and as a CoP. The personal journals along with the meeting recordings and documents became our primary data sources—revealing our knowledge, experiences, positionalities, and responsibilities as literacy teacher educators.

### **Hearing our Stories: Voices from the Community of Practice**

Given that collaborative autoethnography emphasizes the collective, but also the individual lived experiences of a group, we determined that sharing reflections of the CCG would best support why the particular CoP we are advancing holds potential for inducting and retaining teacher educators. In this section, we share the findings of our collaborative autoethnography by each sharing an aspect of our professional and personal identities that were influenced through our involvement in the CCG. We elected to incorporate our personal identities (author names) into descriptions as a way to maintain the collaborative autoethnographic design. We then follow up with discussion about the importance of a multi-institutional and varying positionality CoP within higher education and provide implications for other individuals wanting to engage in a similar CoP.

#### **Induction into Teacher Education - Laura**

As a third-year doctoral student at a large research-intensive university, I wandered into TERSG during lunch one day at Marliese's invitation. I was looking for a research community that shared my interest in teacher candidates' education. Though I felt a little nervous and unsure of myself as a potential contributor, I was hungry for an opportunity to engage in productive academic work and collaborate with others who shared my research interests. TERSG had a proven track record of publications, and as a novice I was eager to both partner with and learn from them. I hoped this would help to demystify aspects of the research and publication process that I felt unequipped to tackle on my own while also supporting me in my teaching. I quickly found a subgroup of like-minded colleagues who were grappling with the same questions I was in my teaching—questions about preparing teachers for fieldwork and for future teaching contexts with curricular mandates and scripted materials. The CCG started with a focus on teacher preparation as our shared domain of interest. Within a couple of meetings, I felt I had found my home at LRA as we began planning our first research study. Through my final two years of graduate school, the CCG remained a productive and supportive network for me, both in my research and in my teaching. In addition to conducting research together, we frequently discussed teaching ideas and resources such as course texts and technology tools. By bringing together questions and issues I was grappling with as a teacher educator with my desire to grow as a researcher and academic writer, the CCG helped induct me into the role of teacher educator.

As I reached the end of my graduate school years, though I had grown to love the research and writing aspects of academic work, I decided to pursue a career at a small, teaching-focused college. My own journey into academia had begun during my undergraduate years at a faith-based, private, liberal arts college where my professors in the education department had cultivated my intellectual curiosity and passion for lifelong professional learning through a relational approach to mentoring. I could think of no career path more fulfilling than to work at a similar institution where I would know and mentor my students in this way. Even so, as I transitioned from being a doctoral student at a large research institution to being a teacher educator at my alma mater, I experienced challenges in learning to navigate my new role. My continued involvement in the CCG provided a productive and sustainable way to pursue my research interests while also continuing to grow as a teacher educator. Our regular group meetings kept me connected to a rich professional learning community beyond my small institution, helping me remain abreast of broader trends and issues in the field while also refreshing my teaching with new ideas. Through the COVID-19 pandemic, I appreciated having a group with which to puzzle through the new challenges we are all navigating in our teaching. Our collaboration continues to be vital to sustaining two core aspects of my scholarly work and identity—teaching and meaningful scholarship that grows out of my teaching practice. In this way, the CCG has supported not only my induction into the profession but also my retention.

### **Growing as a Novice Scholar – Elizabeth**

When I joined the CCG in December 2016, I was a new assistant professor halfway through my first year at a regional comprehensive university. My role included a 3/3 teaching load, where effective teaching is highly valued, though productive research plays a crucial role in my tenure-track position as well. In seeking to merge my own teaching and research, I joined this group hoping to find support for my scholarship as an emerging scholar.

The CCG initially formed around a similar domain of interest—understanding how to merge coursework with fieldwork experiences for teacher candidates at our respective universities. I was excited at the prospect of merging the theoretical knowledge base I developed during graduate school with our group's first research project. My scholarly identity was budding from my dissertation work and early research endeavors, and I eagerly anticipated engaging with other literacy education scholars. Drawing on my dissertation research fostered confidence in my membership despite being a novice scholar. Our initial research project pushed me to new boundaries in my own identity as a researcher, as I had previously only conducted qualitative research projects. As the CCG moved into a mixed-methods study, I was uncertain about contributions I would be able to make regarding quantitative methods. These tensions easily faded when group members with more experience in mixed-methods took the lead and guided novices, like myself, in collecting mixed-methods data. It became clear at this point that membership in the CCG was indeed a collaborative process whereby our research efforts drew from a culture of learning where everyone was involved via Bielaczyc and Collins' (1999) notion of a collective effort for engaging in research.

As our collaboration and research endeavors progressed, we designed additional qualitative studies, interviews, and case studies. My former experiences with semi-structured interviews and case studies merged with practice-based problems identified by the CCG and enhanced my knowledge as a teacher education researcher. I excitedly engaged in designing interviews, reviewing documents, and coding qualitative data for our case study research. As I drew from theories

and methodologies studied in graduate school, I extended this knowledge in newfound ways as I was able to conduct research that ultimately improved how I prepared teacher candidates. Under the guidance of our fluid and shifting roles as novices and experts within the CCG, our authentic practice as a group further enhanced my own confidence as a researcher while shaping my ever-evolving identity as a novice scholar. My membership in this group fostered my ability to seamlessly merge practice and research. This contributed not only to my growth as a scholar, but also my development as a teacher educator. Six years after joining the CCG, I celebrated receiving tenure and promotion at my institution and undoubtedly value the impact of my membership in our group on my induction and growth as a teacher educator.

### **Engaging as a Scholar in a Non-Tenure Track Role – Stephanie**

Participation in the CCG has helped each one of us carve out our individual roles at the university level. When we began meeting in 2016, we were in various positions which provided perspective and experience. Our six members are now in Lecturer, Assistant, Associate, and Full Professor roles. Rather than take on a tenure track position upon completion of my program in 2009, I decided to take the unconventional route and remain in a Lecturer role. A combination of location-bound and family obligations made this the right decision for me. This decision was met with varying responses of affirming, questioning, and even disapproval from mentors and peers. Further, this decision also developed an inner dilemma within me of doubting my contributions and questioning my university status. The inevitable loss of the individual research focus I developed in my doctoral program impacted my identity as a scholar.

As a Senior Lecturer, I have the desire to continue my involvement in research projects and to share this with the wider scholarly community. Continuing with research and writing are challenging but I had opportunities over the years to participate in groups that developed important questions and worked together to create and strengthen results of our efforts. Being a member of the CCG provided me with opportunities to collaborate with others dedicated to literacy instruction across the United States. Gathering data, analyzing results, and publishing are tasks that any professor can find daunting on an individual level. This collaborative effort provides the framework for a natural progression of continued work that has led to conference presentations, journal publications, and book chapters. All these experiences keep me involved in literacy research and provide me with opportunities to write. That would be more than most lecturers could manage with a demanding teaching load. My identity as a scholar extends beyond my required lecturer teaching load and includes this valuable research avenue I have chosen to continue to pursue.

### **Growing Through Service- Courtney**

Being inducted into the CCG has not only enhanced my research acumen, but has provided invaluable connections and service opportunities. In 2018, I was approached by the two past TERSG leaders about serving as Co-Chair of TERSG despite being a novice doctoral student in the CCG and the broader TERSG. With mentorship and guidance of these two experts, I served as Co-Chair of TERSG for three years. The service, mentorship, and leadership role in a well-established and respected study group from an international professional conference benefited me in developing my identity as a teacher educator and an academic.

Serving both the TERSG and our broader LRA communities encouraged communication that allowed me to network with a number of professional colleagues and friends that I can turn to

for advice, connect with on projects, and to check in with as my career progresses. These relationships and support we provide each other as members of the CCG have been the most beneficial factor for me. As a novice researcher, assistant professor, and former graduate student, it was invaluable for me to enter a CoP where I did not need to know it all, but found I could contribute in some ways. I work hard to emulate the mentorship provided by experts before me and work to give back to the larger CoP. When I hear of doctoral students attending LRA for the first time, I explain how beneficial this group has been for me and encourage them to attend our TERSG sessions. Several decided to join research groups and are being mentored by other members of our community through their respective research projects. Being a part of a larger CoP requires members to recognize that the success of any research sub-group helps move our field forward, and we can support one another through acts of service.

Finally, other study groups expressed interest in how the TERSG operates. We shared the approach used by the CCG and other TERSG research groups with other LRA study groups and they are beginning to emulate their own versions of our process with their content foci as they work to induct new members and provide support for current members in innovative ways. In this way, the CCG serves not only group members and TERSG, but also the larger LRA community of literacy and teacher education scholars.

### **Developing as an Academic Writer – Ann**

The age-old publish or perish statement reified the emphasis of writing as an integral aspect of professional success in academia. However, writing is not a natural process for everyone. The process of becoming a proficient scholarly writer, however, is a process and a skill that continues to improve the more you write. Participation in the CCG gave me a safe space for my own writing improvement. I joined TERSG with feelings of unease knowing that scholarship translated to research and written dissemination of findings. Through participation in the CCG, writing would not be a solo event, but a collaborative and communal process. Aspects of writing such as my knowledge of academic vocabulary and a scholarly voice would be evaluated by a group of individuals who I had yet to know on a personal level. I had to make myself vulnerable to share and receive feedback on my writing.

Fortunately, I found a group of early scholars and seasoned veterans who provided guidance on improving my writing practice. My writing identity continued to evolve as I read and collaboratively revised our work alongside group members. While at times intimidating, benefits of belonging to a group far outweighed the risks to my professional identity. The CCG enhanced my writing skills in a way that would not have occurred if I was writing solo. Our collaborative group focused on finishing written products (proposals, chapters, articles), divided up writing tasks, used our multiple perspectives to hone manuscripts, and most importantly, offered a safe space for being vulnerable in writing. Working collaboratively, for all the positive benefits, does make a scholar responsible to the group. As a writer in a CoP I have found a space to build my identity as a writer.

### **Finding an Academic Identity Through Collaboration – Roya**

In 2009 I was hired to teach in a regional institution that emphasized teaching, where I am one of two reading faculty members. I chose my regional institution because I wanted to engage



in research for pleasure instead of being pressured to publish, but that also meant fewer opportunities for collaborations. TERSG meetings and collaborations are the best professional development I have ever experienced because of opportunities to participate in CoP. These opportunities directly contributed to my desire to remain in my teacher educator role. Discussions during TERSG meetings result in collaborative projects where we unite in our study of issues that inform our work with teacher candidates, in-service teachers, and with the larger education community. I find this stimulating and it helps me take part in projects that tackle issues extending beyond my region.

TERSG collaborations contribute to my professional development because I learn more about practices beyond my institution while being prompted to reflect on my practices as a literacy teacher educator and as a researcher. TERSG provided me with a research home that is not possible in my institution or by simply attending sessions in conferences. In TERSG and the CCG we value every voice, regardless of rank. First semester doctoral students work alongside professors of all ranks, and from all types of institutions - from research-intensive universities, regional comprehensives, and private institutions. All are welcome, all are valued, and we strive to solve problems of practice together while reflecting on our own practices. Practical findings from my involvement in the CCG strengthened my teaching and my institution's teacher preparation program. Most importantly, I found my voice as a teacher educator and researcher. Collaborations solidified recognition (by others and of myself) as a teacher educator and scholar, which I internalized. Being part of the CCG where others are fueled by the same desire to grapple with issues facing teacher education is energizing because I am part of the team who can make a difference. That shared passion and energy keeps me in the profession and continues to serve as a catalyst for positive change in teacher education, which would not be possible if I remained isolated in my regional university.

### **Identifying as a Collaborator - Marliese**

I began my formal participation in TERSG in December 2016 when I attended the annual conference for LRA. One of my fellow doctoral students had recommended that I consider joining TERSG because of my research interests in literacy teacher education. Each day I grabbed to-go lunches and scurried off to TERSG. Over three days, the CCG formed with members from multiple teacher preparation programs. Together, we planned a research study, an authentic task, that we would conduct over the coming months. As a doctoral student and novice scholar, it was in the CCG that I felt less vulnerable. The CCG members validated my emerging scholarly knowledge—encouraging me to extend my thinking and incorporating my contributions into the broader conversation. At the time, I identified as a legitimate peripheral participant in the CCG even though I felt limited in my scholarly knowledge and research experience.

CCG members continued their validations and explicit apprenticed approaches beyond the conference into our research group meetings. CCG members mentored me through the processes of conducting collaborative group research, crafting conference presentations, and writing for publication. These learning opportunities defined my doctoral journey, shaping how I position myself as an education scholar. Over the years, I have transitioned from legitimate peripheral participation to more “expert” forms of participation. For example, my deepened understanding as a researcher and writer undergirded my ability to confidently serve as the lead author for several publications and presentations. Furthermore, I have also felt driven to join additional communities where I can mentor other novice researchers, supporting their transitions through the continuum of mastery. I look forward to continuing to pay it forward to future education scholars.

### **Discussion: Growing Individually and Collectively as Teacher Educators**

The practice of forming and cultivating a CoP is widely discussed within the education field (e.g., Martin & Dismuke, 2015; Tuval et al., 2011). From explorations of the literature, articles speak to cultivating CoP within one's department, college, or university. Illustratively, Martin and Dismuke (2015) were colleagues at a single institution who examined their collaborative process of changing practices in their writing methods courses. Tuval et al. (2011) formed their CoP in response to a university mandate for the development of a teacher education program. In this article, we extend this research by sharing how to cultivate CoP beyond individualized institutional boundaries. In looking across our collective autoethnographies, membership in the CCG intersected with members' positive reflections about experiences related to induction, retention, and ongoing support within teacher education.

As previously noted, many graduate programs do not support doctoral students as they enter the field of teacher education (Dinkelman et al., 2006). In addition, Boyd et al. (2011) demonstrated in their research the need for supporting novice teacher educators and recommended that institutions be proactive, strategic, focused, and utilize effective communication methods. Illustratively, among our CCG, two out of seven of us received formal training addressing how to teach in teacher education programs during our doctoral programs. Upon receiving our initial faculty appointments, three of our CCG members received induction support for newly hired faculty. This ranged from a volunteer one-time orientation meeting to informal meetings with a mentor in the same department to address annual review, promotion, and tenure guidelines. The most extensive induction program involved a two-tiered approach where the CCG member met monthly with a mentor in the same department to receive guidance on research, teaching, and service. The second tier was mandatory participation in a university-wide induction program for all newly hired tenure-track faculty regardless of rank. The induction program met weekly for three hours and focused on a range of topics (e.g., learning how to use the learning management system, the university governance system, university diversity, equity and access initiatives).

With the stark absence of formalized and comprehensive induction assistance (i.e., focused on research, teaching, and service) for the majority of us, our CCG served as a tremendous support for the induction of our members who transitioned from graduate studies into tenure track roles and members who were novice teacher educators. Our CCG is proactive, focused, and utilizes effective communication methods. Our biweekly meeting structure creates opportunities to routinely share problems of practice. Our research has evolved so that we can be proactive in learning how to revise our pedagogical practices. This speaks to the need that McKeon and Harrison (2010) discussed regarding the difficulty in modifying pedagogical skills needed for effective teaching and higher education. By being multi-positional, we recognized that we can also be proactive in mentoring. We lean on others within the group with different contexts, experiences, and positions to help us know what to expect and learn how to navigate varying institutional challenges. Our personal reflections above speak to how the CCG filled the void and supported members with induction into their roles as teacher educators, and literacy scholars. Marliese, Courtney, and Laura joined the CCG as doctoral students or novices. Through members' mutual engagement and their shared repertoire of knowledge and teaching practices, these doctoral students and novice teacher educators felt capable and welcomed to legitimately participate in the developed research project—the joint enterprise of the CCG.

An additional strength of this particular CoP is how membership in the CCG relates to our individualized retention in the field of teacher education. Conducting research requires thoughtful,

purposeful, and structured methods, which can be time-intensive. The realities of conducting research can be at odds with institutional expectations around teaching and service. Nevertheless, each member encountered varying expectations that they remain engaged in research and scholarship. All CCG members benefited from the collective knowledge of scholarship. Six of the seven of us hold tenure-track positions with automatic implications for publication. Each member in their autoethnography highlighted the importance of this group to their growth as a scholar. We found that collaborative research brought about not just a better product (e.g., findings, implications for the field) but also supported the development of our critical thinking.

A final strength of our CCG is the ongoing support we provide each other. The CCG was founded around the idea that research should inform practice, especially our practice as teacher educators. For each of us, researching our own teaching practices led to intentional self-reflection of our own practices, ongoing professional development, and learning. Via conversation with each other, we borrowed ideas, made changes to our courses, and engaged in an ongoing and intentional, reflectional process. Because we set aside the time and space to do our longitudinal research, we also created spaces where we could talk about our own practices, share successes with one another, and intentionally adapt our teaching practices.

Our success as a CCG did not come without its challenges, as we navigated problems surrounding scheduling, technology, institutional guidelines, and varying perspectives and approaches to engaging in the research process. Our various institutional appointments do not include a designated load to engage in work such as our CCG that focuses on our teaching. Young et al. (2017) delineated the ways in which institutional expectations vary regarding time for teaching, scholarship, and service and purported the significance of providing guidance for navigating expectations to support retention in the field. Our CCG address these different institutional expectations and while each of us embraces the value of this CoP, we all ebb and flow with the amount of time we are able to commit due to teaching loads, leadership roles within our institutions and professional organizations, and our personal family lives (loved ones battling cancer, the loss of family members, and the birth of children, to name a few).

Utilizing technology to engage in productive work within our CCG has presented various challenges over the years. We began our collaboration prior to the Zoom era and experienced technological hiccups with the use of programs that were new to us, such as Bluejeans for virtual meetings. Additionally, finding access to technology systems to engage in data analysis across seven different institutions has proven difficult at times. For some projects, Google Sheets proved effective to code data and for different projects we tried Dedoose. No one method came without its limitations, though we recognize this as a common challenge in the field of research. Moreover, the IRB process and its varying requirements and regulations presented challenges in the ways we share data for each of our projects. Despite our challenges, we purport that developing and sustaining a CoP can provide tremendous support to teacher educators for induction and retention in the field, all while creating the space to elevate the humanizing aspects of teaching and learning. Engaging in the collaborative work of a CoP can provide opportunities to learn about the landscape of teacher preparation programs and also amplify our abilities to share this knowledge with others.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

Cultivation of a cross-institutional and positional CoP has far-reaching effects for teacher educators' induction, retention and ongoing professional growth. This group—nested in contexts of local, national, and global literacy work—reified the construction of a CoP aligned with Wenger

et al.'s (2002) characteristics of domain (interest), community (shared learning and information), and practice (resources and tools) in the field of literacy education. Our collaborative work impacts our domain of interest, our local and national literacy body of knowledge, but also the practice of teaching and learning. Lessons learned from this experience (e.g., effort of finding shared meetings times, consensus on research, creating final products) may be transferable to other members of academia and how to navigate various experiences within institutions. As we reflect upon our involvement in the CCG we consider this work's impact on local institutions and their situated communities, and broader implications for the professional and national organizations.

First, what we learned in the CCG can be transferred to our individual institutions. This implication extends findings from Butler et al. (2014) in that involvement in a CoP supports teacher educators to "become more conscious of who we are as professionals and to develop a coherent professional identity" (p. 270). Membership in the CCG has helped aid our novices (i.e., doctoral students, novice faculty) to move to legitimate participation in research, teaching, and service. Over time, we have grown in knowledge—not isolated or siloed knowledge, but a shared space to become better at the *tasks* of our profession. For example, our research required online data coding with which many of us had limited experience. The need to learn "how" became an opportunity for professional growth.

Another implication extends beyond our immediate community, but to our encounters with teacher candidates and with other professionals in local, state, national, and international arenas. As members in the CCG grew in knowledge over the years, we moved through the continuum of novice scholars to becoming more experts in the field. Knowledge gained both informally (conversations) and formally (publications) is shared in multiple ways. As mentioned, membership in the CCG heightened our reflexivity and intentionality in teaching. Thus, teacher candidates benefitted as we improved our practice, especially around connecting our coursework with their field-work experiences. Our local institutions and situated communities reap benefits of this shared knowledge. Illustratively, teacher candidates were able to build bridges between the formalized teacher preparation coursework to the local school's classrooms utilized for field experiences. Our dedicated work added a new body of knowledge to national and international forums that other educators and literacy researchers reflect on and use as practice to advance the field of literacy education. Nationally, CCG members participate widely in professional organizations and research collaborations. We use knowledge gained in research design, methods, and data analysis to add value to these larger groups.

In all, our CoP provided us with increased knowledge of our field, confidence in our teaching, and areas of growth that we strive for in our practices. Through designing, conducting, analyzing, presenting, and publishing research together, we helped each other grow as individuals and as a collective group. We are more effective teacher educators as a result from our work together, and we experienced growth and development in our scholarship and service. Through this CoP, many of us were inducted into the life of academia, remain in the field, and continue to support one another as we navigate various roles in our institutions of higher education. Our CoP has shown us that together we can achieve so much more than we can as individuals, and confirms Aristotle's (980) saying, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

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## Appendix

**Table 1:** CCG Member Demographics

| When Entering CCG |                     |                                          |                                                                                      |                                                     | Currently                               |                                          |                                                                                                        |                                                     |
|-------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
|                   | Position            | Number of Years Being a Teacher Educator | Types of Teacher Educator Positionalities                                            | Number of Higher Education Institutions Employed By | Position                                | Number of Years Being a Teacher Educator | Types of Teacher Educator Positionalities                                                              | Number of Higher Education Institutions Employed By |
| Marliese          | Doctoral Student    | 5                                        | Adjunct Lecturer<br>Doctoral Student                                                 | 2                                                   | Assistant Professor                     | 12                                       | Adjunct Lecturer<br>Doctoral Student<br>Lecturer I<br>Assistant Professor                              | 5                                                   |
| Ann               | Assistant Professor | 3                                        | Doctoral Student                                                                     | 1                                                   | Associate Professor                     | 7                                        | Assistant Professor<br>Adjunct Lecturer                                                                | 1                                                   |
| Roya              | Associate Professor | 12                                       | Doctoral Student<br>Fixed Term Faculty<br>Assistant Professor<br>Associate Professor | 2                                                   | Full Professor                          | 19                                       | Doctoral Student<br>Fixed Term Faculty<br>Assistant Professor<br>Associate Professor<br>Full Professor | 2                                                   |
| Courtney          | Doctoral Student    | 2                                        | Doctoral Student                                                                     | 1                                                   | Assistant Professor                     | 8                                        | Doctoral Student<br>Assistant Professor                                                                | 2                                                   |
| Elizabeth         | Assistant Professor | 4                                        | Doctoral Student                                                                     | 1                                                   | Associate Professor                     | 7                                        | Doctoral Student<br>Assistant Professor                                                                | 1                                                   |
| Stephanie         | Lecturer            | 0                                        | Lecturer                                                                             | 1                                                   | Senior Lecturer                         | 13                                       | Lecturer<br>Senior Lecturer                                                                            | 1                                                   |
| Laura             | Doctoral Student    | 3                                        | Doctoral Student                                                                     | 1                                                   | International P-12 School Administrator | 9                                        | Doctoral Student<br>Assistant Professor<br>P-12 School-Based PD Leader                                 | 2                                                   |