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Finding Hope: Student Empowerment in a Segregated School District

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the program chair, has been presented to and accepted by the Department of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education.

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Finding Hope: Student Empowerment in a Segregated School District

by

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A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

May 2020

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand how students are self-empowered in a racially and economically diverse school. A literature review revealed a body of peer reviewed research in relation to student empowerment through educational, sociological, and psychological theories. Within the literature review, the need for restructure of teacher/student relationships became apparent across a range of theories and frameworks. Yet, insufficient studies have been conducted to understand student empowerment and identity from a student perspective, or to what extent they are able to empower themselves and what methods or support they seek to feel more empowered. Through collecting and coding in-depth writing prompt responses and student interviews, this study examines strategies students have for empowering themselves in a unique school environment. This study utilized a phenomenological approach to triangulate qualitative data that collected the responses of fifty students in addition to four students who were asked open-ended questions in personal interviews. The interviews were detailed case studies into the lives of student participants that lasted approximately twenty-five minutes. Findings suggest that students thrive in environments where the learning is at a slower pace, where they can connect to the learning on deeper levels, and are empowered through surprising networks of support. These findings have implications for all students, with special consideration to students that face higher levels of inequity, systemic racism, and trauma. This study proposes that administrators and school districts rethink policies surrounding fast-paced learning, abiding only by state standards, and how educators can support students in unconventional ways.

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“Creativity grows when a seed is planted.

The rhythm of people working together to achieve a
goal is what allows the plant to bloom”

-Anonymous 8th

Chapter 1: Introduction

Being a teacher is hard work. One may expect to begin their career excited about educating America's youth under the false premonition that it will be easy and joyous work. Tell that theory to a new teacher who is on week one of their first year. Being a teacher is hard, hard work. Being a teacher neither for the weak minded nor the easily scared. Even those entering the field optimistic and excited to embark on their journey, are more often than not met with the harsh realities that many teachers face. The number one piece of advice that most new teachers receive in their training is to, "build relationships with their students." Yet, one of the first and easiest mistakes that many teachers make in their first year is their inaction to actually build those relationships. The absence of quality relationships between teachers and students most commonly result in a class that is unwilling to engage in classroom learning and is dismissive to the educator. What may come of a class that is highly unwilling to participate is the educator feeling inadequate in their abilities, a sense of resentment towards the students themselves, and a desire to leave the profession. One of the most interesting phenomena about teacher/student relationships, is that they manifest in many different forms and only require the authenticity of the educator and their true caring of the students.

Why is it that even though teachers have been trained that building relationships is one of the most important parts of educating young minds, yet many teachers fail to actually build these vital relationships? What does this deprive students of who may not have other networks of support? Teachers are truly on the front line of defense for many students, especially students who come from historically impoverished areas, communities predisposed to discrimination, and students with trauma. Building relationships with them is simply not an option, but rather an essential component of being an educator.

This research dives deep into students' voices— voices that are often left out and forgotten during discussions concerning policy that directly affect their lives. According to the literature considered in this work, students are empowered through positive teacher/student relationships that defy conventional means of power imbalances (Freire, 1970). American systematic structures in education have historically focused a concentrated amount of power within the hands of a few (teachers and administrators) while little to no power is given to the majority (students). Bringing life back into the classroom by rethinking the banking method in exchange for a more engaging, culturally relevant curriculum is at the forefront of academic revolutionaries (hooks, 1994). When students are allowed to use their voice in the classroom and draw connections between their lived experiences and education, they become transformative learners (Mezirow, 1994). Furthermore, theories support that students who face adversities are not destined for failure, but instead find ways to thrive under seemingly difficult conditions (Resnick, 2000).

Statement of Purpose

This study seeks to understand how middle school students are self-empowered in a racially and economically diverse school setting and how educators can best serve their unique needs. Additionally, this study sought to learn directly from the students as to gain insight into what beliefs and approaches they maintain that impact their perception of their own empowerment. Previous research has been conducted on the lives of students of Color in diverse school settings (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017). Frameworks cited in the literature draw upon the importance of culturally responsive leadership in a diverse school setting as a means to challenge wide inequities that students of diverse backgrounds may face (Johnson, 2007). However, this study is more concerned with teacher/student relationships and how those

relationships can be fostered and reimagined to help students. This research specifically seeks to learn from students what tools and approaches positively and consistently impact their empowerment in a racially and economically segregated school site.

Overview of the Research Design

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to qualitative data collection to better understand the empowerment of students in a racially and economically diverse school setting. The research is driven by the unique school and political environment where the researcher is a teacher and the ways in which middle school students in this environment feel empowered as learners. This method of phenomenological research allows the researcher to study an occurrence within the participants, to examine trends in the lives of students, and to gather information to better meet their individual needs. The qualitative approach to research explores individual and/or group understanding of social and human problems (Creswell, 2018). Fifty students in the researcher's social studies class were given weekly writing responses over the course of ten weeks. An additional four students were interviewed to allow for a complex look into each of their responses to the open ended questions posed. Interviews tended to last around twenty to thirty minutes and were conducted from the comfort of the researcher's classroom. The research was designed in a narrative stylistic approach to highlight the individual identities of student participants and draw upon intersectionality within student interviews. By participating in this study, students were invited to be co-creators in a unique opportunity to further their knowledge about themselves, question their surroundings, think critically about their environment, and to be a part of something that is being conducted at the graduate level at a University. Students benefited socially, emotionally, and from the received additional support in literacy development that accompanies answering thought provoking prompts.

Positionality

The researcher is a professional educator who has developed significant relationships as an educator to the students, who are her participants in this study. The researcher identified, to the best of her capability all personal biases before conducting the research. During the process of conducting the research, the researcher removed to the best of her ability these biases before coding, categorizing, and analyzing data results. There are several outside factors and personal biases that could have shaped the research if they were not properly taken into account. As an educator who has deep, personal connections with many of her students, the researcher has significant bias in helping her students feel empowered and motivated. Coupled with a school district that is in turmoil because it may cease to exist the following year due to legal implications combined with a series of tragic events within the community, student response reliability may have been unusually skewed that showcased their sense of empowerment negatively. In order to account for validity and reliability, the researcher utilized triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing as safeguards to test the results and validity of the research findings (Creswell, 2018 p. 200-201).

Significance of the Study/Research Findings

Findings from fifty student written responses and four unique research participants delved into the real and raw lives of students who are living through this remarkable historical event- the desegregation of their own school. The significance of the study is that students exposed their own methods of self empowerment that can be heightened through the help of educators. Student participants in the research discussed empowering strategies such as taking aspects of their life slowly, connection between their engagement in classes with interesting

curriculum, and how revealing how they use interesting networks of support to empower themselves.

The findings of this study demonstrated that the impact of students who feel comfortable in a classroom are also seen in their ability to connect with learning in more meaningful ways. The research discovered that students long for the feeling to slow down in the classroom which allows them to absorb all of the learning taking place more fully, rather than memorizing important information that will leave their brains the second a test is over. Another significant finding is that students expressed an outright desire to connect with subject matter on a deeper level- a desire to share their own experiences in outlets with how they see it relate to what they are learning in the classroom.

The finding of student support systems expanding far beyond the traditional realms of immediate family was an unexpected discovery for the research. In this study, students identified some of their main sources of support from adopted siblings, school friends who are classified as “high risk”, and support staff who are school employees of color. The significance of these results of the study have concluded that students empower themselves through unconventional means that educators have traditionally overlooked.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review seeks to better understand the educational, sociological, and psychological theories in peer reviewed research that have contributed to a greater understanding of student empowerment and resilience, specifically in racially and economically diverse school settings. Currently, there is a need for research that studies the impact of severe economic inequality and racial diversity of students as it manifests in a single school site and district in the modern era. This literature review integrates many of these sources and approaches to develop a background of knowledge relevant to the lives of students of color in diverse school settings (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017) and to look at positionality in teaching as a relevant asset to support the personal and academic growth of all students in a school setting with pronounced economic and racial disparities. The researcher seeks to explore how educators can create classroom environments in which all students can feel safe, welcome, engaged, and empowered at school even when the conditions of their lives are radically different.

Gardner (1983) identified how students carry an array of experiences and multiple intelligences with them through their educational journey and Vygotsky (1978) demonstrated how each student brings his or her own prior knowledge and life experiences that he or she continues to expand on both in and out of school (consciously and unconsciously) as a tool of continuing knowledge (Plucker & Espring, 2014). As educators, how are we highlighting and celebrating the “informal” knowledge that our students are acquiring in their own worlds? What is a teacher’s role in addressing what students who attend school in a racially segregated site may experience of the injustices that are occurring in their neighborhoods and larger community? And what can students teach us through their own voices and perspectives?

“Authenticity in teaching” has been recognized as an important yet under-researched phenomenon in the world of educational research (Kreber, 2007). Authenticity in teaching aids the empowerment of students as it relates to educators’ own passion for learning, and for the subject matter, and then more naturally engages students in genuine dialogue around ideas that matter to them (Kreber, 2007). When a teacher can bring their own interests and passions to the experience of a classroom their teaching aids in creating a space for all students to feel excited about learning. The presence of authenticity in the classroom is a central part of Transformative Learning Theory, and assists students, especially disadvantaged students in their true essence of feeling empowered (Dillard, 2006).

With this in mind, new curricula and support programs have been created by many elementary, middle and high schools to help students of color, low income students, and “high risk” students achieve higher levels of academic success. Yet, year after year, the same “target students” are failing to meet predetermined marks of what schools consider to be a “successful” student. Why is this happening? What needs to change? Where do we begin?

This literature explores some of the educational, sociological, and psychological frameworks and theories that address underrepresented demographics of students, in particular, and transformative learning experiences more broadly. The following frameworks and theories are described in sections of narratives pertaining to Paulo Freire’s Critical Pedagogy and how it relates to bell hook’s *Teaching To Transgress*. hook’s work draws upon the framework of Freire’s pedagogy and creates a bridge to the principles and practices of Critical Race Theory in public education. Finally, the theory of Transformative Learning, more recently brings forward these pedagogical frameworks and explains the learning process that all beings do in constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience

in the world (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Transformative Learning addresses how change happens during learning so that a learner can integrate a different perspective, or grow in the ability to understand greater nuance and complexity. Authentic Competency Based Assessment is included as a section in the literature review as it naturally relates to the student's comfort in their openness to transform as a learner.

The presence of authenticity in the classroom is a central part of Transformative Learning Theory, and assists students, especially disadvantaged students in their true essence of feeling empowered (Dillard, 2006). Culturally responsive leadership is an important theme in the literature review as the framework seeks to create inclusive organizational structures at the school and district levels that empower students and parents from diverse racial and ethnic communities (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The last section in the literature review focuses on resilience and student voice as a vital component that empowered students to embody.

Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy

The roots of what is now widely regarded in the field of education as “Critical Pedagogy” is traced to Paulo Freire’s 1968 book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire was a Brazilian educator whose middle class family became impoverished due to the stock market crash of 1929 that resulted in a global Great Depression. According to Freire, the experiences that he had playing football with the other “poor kids” would shape his worldview as an adult, making him a pioneer of pedagogy for marginalized and disadvantaged populations (1970, p. 13).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire states that instead of impeding his experience of himself of becoming a learner, hunger and poverty correlated with his ability to be successful in academia (1970, p. 14). Throughout the book, he claims that educational success was the result of how he understood the conditions of his own social, economic, and racial background (Freire,

1970, p. 15). As a result of the conditions of his family and life growing up, preventing poverty by means of equitable and meaningful education became a pronounced concept in Freire's work.

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* has become one of the foundational texts of critical pedagogy, identified for the way that seeks to blend modern educational philosophy and cultural studies towards applied critical thinking. According to Freire, educational pedagogies that fail to acknowledge political, economic, and social context only serve to maintain the power of privileged members of society, thus contributing to the status of the oppressed. His perspective is that conditions should be clearly identified and discussed so that they do not become unspoken and unexamined assumptions about learners and what they are capable of accomplishing. He is also concerned about self-perception and how students are taught to view themselves in their dynamics with teachers and figures of presumed authority.

Freire begins his inquiry into critical pedagogy by illuminating how the sociological concepts of dehumanization and oppression coexist. He claims that members of any group, class or institution who oppress another are actively engaging in the dehumanization of the oppressed (1970, p. 25). According to Freire, the process of dehumanization, insidiously affects both the oppressor and the oppressed, albeit much differently. In Freire's view, the oppressor becomes dehumanized for exploiting the oppressed, whom they do not consider their human equal. By the oppressed allowing themselves to be exploited, they contribute to their confined status in society to remain dehumanized and demoralized. Freire saw a duty to help to free the oppressed (Shih, 2018). Yet, since the vast majority of people in Brazil lived in "ignorance" and in a "silent culture" due to high illiteracy rates that predominantly affected Brazil's lower class, the silent culture could not view the world they lived in through a critical lense (Shih, 2018).

In order to revolutionize this seemingly omnipresent societal phenomenon between the oppressor and the oppressed, Freire proposes two stages aimed at the oppressed (1970, p. 45). The first stage is that the oppressed must fully comprehend the configuration of their oppression and earnestly advocate to transform the old, dehumanizing ways into a newer, more humane way of life. Understanding the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor through humanization allows the oppressed to reconstruct their society not just for themselves, but for all members (Shih, 2018). The second stage Freire sets forth is that once liberation from oppression has been achieved, the systems that led to and sustained oppression must be abolished in order for new constructs of the liberated people to be made accessible for all- by doing so, liberation becomes a permanent aspect of an oppressive free society (Giroux, 2010).

According to Freire (1970), the oppressed members of a society, group, or community, are the only people who are rightfully capable of transforming their entire status, since they are the ones who hold a true understanding of what it is to be oppressed. In turn, the oppressed often fear this change to their status from oppressed to revolutionists, as they have grown accustomed to their “place” in society – a place of forced conformity and constant fear of speaking out (Freire, 1970, p. 44). The disruption to a particular balance of power may lead to anxiety as systems are transformed and people advocate for greater equality (Chiang, 2010).

Chiang (2010) supports that these concepts of dehumanization and oppression appertain themselves to education and (what should be) the symbiotic relationship between teachers and students. When Freire’s Critical Pedagogy is applied to the student-teacher relationship, the student becomes the oppressed (without power or knowledge) while the educator holds the position of oppressor (the ruling party and holder of power and knowledge) in a classroom or school setting (Freire, 1970). Freire sought a vision in education that was progressive in nature

and away from traditional “banking methods” (Mayo, 2014). The “banking method” is described by Freire (1970) as a practice that “deposits information” by educators into the minds of students (1970, p. 7). While students may accomplish the memorization of a certain date, or formula, they bypass the entire process of critically thinking about the subject matter at hand. Thus, according to Freire, the student is unable to defend him or herself with his/her own individual thoughts, which in turn, creates an ideal new generation of uneducated people for oppressors.

If students are not taught to think reflectively about the ways in which they think, and why they think as they do, then they are more likely to simply accept and adopt the ideology of those who have taught them. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire draws critical attention to the traditional schooling methods that “treat the student as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge” and instead advocates for a mutual approach to education that creates what he refers to as “co-creation of knowledge” (1970, p. 79).

According to Freire, this “authentic” approach to education must allow people to be aware of their incompleteness and empowered to be more fully human. Chiang (2010) describes Freire’s ideal educational world, where the teacher and the student would not have a dehumanizing relationship in which one individual is to be taught and the other is to teach, but rather the two would coexist in their efforts to equally learn and teach one another. In a classroom that gives up one-sided lectures for a mutual dialogue, Freire claims that “education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (1970, p. 72). Paulo Freire's concept of mutuality in education opened new avenues of critical dialogue about educational practice, and has particular relevance in trying to understand how to create equitable and empowering student learning experiences (Shih, 2018).

Transformative Learning Theory

The concept of “Transformative Learning Theory” was first presented by Jack Mezirow in 1978 (Mezirow, 1994). Over 40 years later, Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning remains prominent in the marketplace and matrix of discussion for educators, researchers, and pedagogical theorists. Mezirow’s theory has been the focal point of twelve international conferences (Transformative Learning Network, 2016), and in 2003 inspired the creation of *The Journal of Transformative Education*, a quarterly publication of scholarly and peer reviewed articles (Markos & McWhinney, 2003). Transformative learning theory explains the learning process of constructing and appropriating new and revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience in the world (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). It addresses how change happens during learning so that a learner can integrate a different perspective, or grow in the ability to understand greater nuance and complexity.

The transformative learning theory is linked to Carl Jung’s psychological notion of the process of individualization (Boyd & Myers, 1988). Individuation is a process of transformation where the personal and collective unconscious are brought into consciousness by means of an active imagination, dreams, and free association to become assimilated into one’s whole personality (Boyd & Myers, 1988). Jung defines individuation as a “process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated...having as its goal the development of the individual personality” (Boyd & Myers, 1988, p. 261). The dynamics associated with Jung’s theory of individuation transpire in the psychological sense as differentiating and becoming aware of the existence of the different selves operates within the psyche (Jacoby, 1990). This process involves an active dialogue between one’s consciousness and the seemingly pervasive contents that manifest in the unconscious. Jung’s theory of individuation inspired Mezirow’s theory of

transformative learning, which in turn influenced the work of Boyd, who grew both concepts into a vision for transformative education.

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning was initially developed after a study was conducted that researched adult women returning to higher education after a period of absence (Mezirow, 1994). The findings of this study concluded to Mezirow that learners do not simply apply their old methods of learning and thinking to new problems, but rather they "discover a need to acquire new perspectives in order to gain a more complete understanding of changing events" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 255).

Transformative learning involves learning "how to negotiate and act upon our own purposes, values, feelings and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 94). The process referred to as "perspective transformation" within transformative learning theory has three elements: "psychological (changes in understanding of the self), convictional (revision of belief systems), and behavioral (changes in lifestyle)" (Clark, 1991, p. 34). Developing more reliable beliefs, exploring the validity of those beliefs, and making informed decisions are fundamental to the transformative learning process (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning asserts that individuals must rewire themselves to unlearn conformist views and beliefs rooted in ignorance, assumptions and stereotypes (social, political, and/or class stereotypes/structures) that were enforced during their youth by reconsidering their foundational beliefs in order to construct more crucial systems of obtaining knowledge and application (Mezirow, 1981). When individuals can identify their "uncritical beliefs", the structures or frames of reference are open to revision and can be replaced with more mature, educated and inclusive philosophies (Mezirow, 1981, p. 52).

Transformative education theory aims to adopt the “end-in-view of helping individuals work towards acknowledging and understanding the dynamics between their inner and outer worlds” (Boyd & Myers, 1988, p. 56). For a learner, this means the active engagement in working towards an authentic relationship within themselves and with others (Boyd & Myers, 1988). Since educators are learners as well, and contribute to the “co-creation of knowledge”, the attribute of an educator seeking their own authentic relationship with themselves and with others plays a vital role in the transformation of education for all parties (Freire, 1971, p. 33).

Transformative learning in education cannot be guaranteed by adopting a particular script, framework, or content and curriculum – only opportunities can be made (Fullerton, 2010). Transformative educators do this by assisting learners in their own journeys of first becoming aware of their assumptions and then criticizing those belief systems. In order for this to occur successfully, educators need to be participating in their own on-going transformative reflection and learning process. It is their role as an educator, instead of assuming power and right perspective, they need to adopt a practice of constantly revising and reevaluating the beliefs that stem from childhood, environments, political ideologies, etc., and that contribute to the co-creation of knowledge with other learners. By being in tune with their biases, experiences, and preconceived notions, and willingly and actively challenging them to revisit them, educators share in transformative learning and contribute to the transformative education for all.

In transformative education, the educator(s) must support the learner's practice in recognizing and adjusting frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991). One of the educator's roles is to assist learners in becoming more critical in assessing assumptions, better at recognizing frames of references and alternate perspectives, as well as effective at collaborating with others to assess and arrive at judgments in regards to beliefs. The goal of this is to understand problems from

different situations/perspectives and to create a community of learners who are "united in a shared experience of trying to make meaning of their life experience" (Loughlin, 1993, p. 73).

Transformative education for all encompasses the establishment of a safe environment that builds trust and respect and facilitates the development of growing relationships amongst and between all learners (including the educator) as a fundamental and foundational principle that fosters empowerment (Taylor, 1998).

Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom

Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom, is a literary work by author, professor, feminist, human rights and social justice advocate, under the pseudonym bell hooks. Through hooks' upbringing and education in the segregated south, she offers insight into the realities of receiving an education in a segregated school, compared to the integrated public school that she transferred to. Among the many authors, political activists, feminists, and race theorists to have inspired hooks, Paulo Freire is cited as being a major educational influence on her theory of engaged pedagogy- she begins her work by quoting Freire: "...to begin always anew, to make, to reconstruct, and to not spoil, to refuse to bureaucratize the mind, to understand and to live life as a process-live to become" (hooks, 1994, p. 1). hooks' own contribution to the field continues and extends many of Freire's concepts.

Within hooks' collection of essays, she offers a close analysis of the classroom and all of its many dynamics; the challenges that learners and educators face with identity, oppression, and freedom in the traditional academic space, and how educators can overcome those obstacles and be the guide towards wisdom. At the core of *Teaching to Transgress*, the cooperation of engaged pedagogy with feminist pedagogy encourages all students to grow into critical activists within society and in the classroom (Lane, 2018). In her experience, she learned more in a segregated

school where she had predominantly black female teachers who were “on a mission” than she did in an integrated school, because black educators were able to give her a better vision and understanding of the prejudices she would face as a young black woman (hooks, 1994, p. 5).

hooks recalls that teachers at her segregated school:

Worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race [...] to fulfill that mission, [her] teachers made sure they "knew" [them]. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshipped, what our homes were like, and how we were treated in the family. (hooks, 1994, pg. 3)

As a result, attending school was a sheer joy for hooks. She claims through her work that before she attended an integrated school, “home was the place where I was forced to conform to someone else's image of who and what I should be. School was the place where I could forget that self and, through ideas, reinvent myself” (hooks, 1994, p. 3).

In her experience, hooks describes the transition into an integrated school where learning became miserable, where knowledge was measured by information only, suddenly, it had “no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist struggle” (hooks, 1994, pg. 3). Thus, her pedagogy in *Teaching to Transgress* was born, a cultivation of her own experiences as a student and the inspiration from educational theorists in a hope to establish a pedagogy that ensured anti-oppression activism, freedom, opportunity, and empowerment by acknowledging and minimizing authoritative roles of educators/administrations and empowering the position of students (Giroux, 2010).

hooks acknowledged through her experience in graduate school at Stanford that the “banking system of education (based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored and used at a later

date)” did not interest her (1994, p. 5). She became enamored with Paulo Freire as a mentor who reinforced her belief that education was her salvation for liberation. In fact she dedicated an entire chapter in *Teaching to Transgress* for Freire. In her own theory, engaged pedagogy, Hooks stresses that excitement among the students in their areas of study is of utmost importance and that excitement among learners should not be viewed as potentially disruptive or chaotic, but rather a comforting and engaging environment where students feel that sense of “pure ecstasy” to learn (Shih, 2018). hooks claims that teachers' excessive use of power and ultimate authority over students minimizes the students' enthusiasm for learning and only teaches mindless obedience to authority, which does the opposite in hook’s activism against oppression (hooks, 1994, pg. 12).

By “confin[ing] each pupil to a rote, assembly-line approach to learning,” what are educators doing in their efforts to aid students in their ability to develop critical thinking mechanisms that challenge authority, the status quo, conformity, and oppression? (hooks, 1994, pg. 12) According to hooks, educators who practice engaged pedagogy must truly have a passion for the subject they are teaching and be willing not only to empower their students with knowledge, but themselves as well (1994, p. 21). This includes teachers actively taking the same risks in their teaching that they ask their students to do (Shih, 2018).

In order to transgress from the old “banking method” ways of traditional schooling first identified and articulated by Freire, hooks advocates for educators to adopt a progressive educational model that strives to construct a school of education that demonstrates to society a “joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom (hooks, 1994, p. 34). When educators understand that it is their obligation to understand the dynamics of multicultural settings, to learn and be accepting of the many differing ways that cultures, races, and gendered

individuals think, and being culturally aware (i.e., cultural codes), they will be participating in transformative education through their teaching – which, in turn, is their activism (Lee, 2016).

It is hooks's belief that all educators are capable of creating this engaging and culturally inclusive classroom that invites students and educators to come together as learners and broaden their minds to explore new ideas freely in pursuit of liberation (hooks, 1994, p.41). A part of hooks's philosophy of engaged pedagogy is her drawing upon her experiences in education: experiences in a segregated school, experiences in an integrated school, and experiences being the minority at one of America's most well respected institutions of higher education (Mahmoudi, Khoshnood & Babaei, 2014). hooks believes strongly in the importance of incorporating and celebrating student's individual life experiences with classroom topics (1994, p. 81). In fact, she attributes the alienation and isolation of students in traditional, regressive schools to discriminatory practices, systemic racism, sexism, and classist policies that manifest themselves in educational systems and within society (Mayo, 2014). Reflecting on her experience as a teacher, hooks generally found that when students added to the classroom discussion with ideas/concepts generated from their own personal experiences, class discussion was deeper, more meaningful, more relatable, and students were visibly more enthusiastic about participating (1994, p. 86).

By encouraging students to share their life experiences with the class during discussion times, the opportunity to relate subject matter to the real world is deemed as valuable in the academic arena (Emily, 2014). Not only does this validate the real, raw experiences that humans go through and give it an applicable space in education but it also teaches students to share this personal knowledge in a respectful manner (Shih, 2018). This type of respectful exchange of experiences, observations, and ideas that hooks encourages students to partake in, is also

encouraged among teachers and critical thinkers that wish to transform the educational process (hooks, 1994, p. 129). Communication and critical thinking among advocates for a transformative teaching phenomenon transpires in an understanding of education from all members of society, giving the opportunity for theories, philosophies, methods, pedagogy, and ideas to be both challenged or built upon. hooks firmly believes that teachers who “cannot communicate well cannot teach students how to communicate” (hooks, 1994, pg. 151). It is important for educators to be students just as the students must also be the teachers- the two coexisting in guiding each other, never solely confined to the one position in their process of exploring new topics and challenging all systems of oppression in their quest for freedom through wisdom.

Critical Race Theory

The Critical Race Theory, or CRT, is a framework widely used in the social sciences and applied in the field of education (Yosso, 2005). Critical Race Theory originated in the 1981 alternative course on race at Harvard University law school taught by professor Derrick Bell and then researched by Tara Yosso, a professor of Graduate school at University of California, Riverside (Yosso, 2005). It was a grassroots movement devised by law students during their studies at Harvard. In the students efforts of revising critical legal studies concerning race, the constructors of CRT became rooted in two themes: (1) That Critical Race Theory presumes that white supremacy and power are maintained institutionally over time and (2) That Critical Race Theorists investigate the possibilities of transforming the intersectionality between law and white supremacy. Yosso begins her work “*Whose culture has capital? A Critical Race Theory discussion of community cultural wealth*” by quoting Gloria Anzaldúa (1990):

Theory, then, is a set of knowledges. Some of these knowledges have been kept from us—entry into some professions and academia denied us. Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space. Critical Race Theory examines how society and culture relates to race, justice, and power. CRT is important in understanding how white dominance has affected education in a post Jim-Crow society and why African American students are “not succeeding in academics at the same level of Caucasian students” (Greer et al., 2008). Applying CRT to the classroom, CRT-oriented teachers have views of practices that embody the following: 1. A focus on the role that race plays in determining past and present inequity. 2. An emphasis on questioning the prioritization of property rights over human rights in U.S. society. 3. A development of students’ abilities to use the intersection of race and property as a tool to analyze inequity (Martell & Stevens, 2017).

Transformational Resistance

The theories of transformational resistance are rooted in an understanding of the complexities of culture and oppression to explain the relationship between schools and the dominant society (McLaren, 1994). In 1968, a global educational revolution transpired with transformational outbreaks arising in France, Mexico, Italy, and the United States. In March of 1968, over 10,000 students walked out of their predominantly Chicano and Chicana East Los Angeles high schools to protest the vastly inferior quality of their educational experience. For years prior to the massive walkouts, community members in East Los Angeles had made many unsuccessful attempts to generate change and to improve the educational system through

mainstream accepted channels. Their formal requests of initiating change went unanswered as the quality of education either remained stagnant or diminished. As a result of the unacceptable educational conditions and the fact that multiple attempts to raise awareness regarding community concerns were ignored, empowered students boycotted their classes and conferred an official list of grievances to the Los Angeles School District's Board of Education (Bernal & Solórzano, 2001). Their grievances list consisted of thirty-six demands, "including smaller class sizes, bilingual education, and more emphasis on Chicano history" (Bernal & Solórzano, 2001, p. 309). Subsequently, the students received national attention, with support earned from numerous people and organizations within the East Los Angeles community and throughout the nation. To Bernal and Solórzano, transformational resistance theories "demonstrate how individuals negotiate and struggle with structures and create meanings of their own from these interactions" (2001, p. 315).

The current resistance theories represent a significant advance over more deterministic reproduction models of schooling by acknowledging human agency — the confidence and skills to act on one's behalf (Solórzano & Solórzano, 1995). According to Bernal and Solórzano in their view of transformational resistance, they assert that "the majority of resistance studies provide information about how youth participate in oppositional behavior that reinforces social inequality instead of offering examples of how oppositional behavior may be an impetus toward social justice." (2001, p. 301).

Within the broad, seemingly endless array of resistance theories, the concept of conformist resistance exists. This type of resistance refers to the oppositional behavior of students who are motivated by a need for social justice yet hold no informal or formal "critique[s] of the systems of oppression" (Bernal & Solórzano, 2001, p. 318). These students are

motivated by a desire of life chances to get better for themselves and others but are likely to blame themselves, their families, or their culture for the negative personal and social conditions rather than the structural causes of the problems. In the theory of conformist resistance, “students often choose to strive toward social justice within the existing social systems and social conventions” (Yosso, 2001, p. 57). However, in a transformational resistance, student behavior presents both a critique of oppression and a desire for social justice. In this circumstance, the student holds a level of awareness and critique of their oppressive conditions and must be at least partially driven by a sense of social justice (Bernal & Solórzano, 2001).

Authentic Competency-Based Assessment

Authentic Competency-Based Assessment describes the intended and unintended effects of assessment on instruction or teaching (Biggs, 1996) and student learning (Dochy & McDowell, 1998). Biggs’s (1996) theory of constructive alignment stresses that effective education requires instruction, learning, and assessment to be compatible. If students perceive a mismatch between the messages of the instruction and the assessment, a positive impact on student learning is unlikely (Segers, Dierick, & Dochy, 2001). The two most important reasons for using authentic competency-based assessments are (1) the construct validity and (2) their impact on student learning, also called consequential validity (Gielen, Dochy, & Dierick, 2003). Construct validity of an assessment is related to whether an assessment measures what it is supposed to measure. Learning outcomes should be relevant to the lives and experiences of students, to make the educational experience more meaningful and applicable.

One important concept behind constructive alignment in authentic competency-based assessment, is that learners construct meaning and value from what they learn. Students’ learning is individualized in its linkage between new conceptual material and the experience of the

students. In a direct refute of standardized testing, authentic competency-based assessment seeks to measure “intellectual accomplishments that are worthwhile, significant, and meaningful” (Bergeson, 2006). Authentic assessment practices reinforce the theories of Freire, hooks and others in the sense that they encourage student voice, and minimize the role of the educator as the sole possessor of power. This approach seeks to give learners a platform to exercise their voice and their likeliness to succeed at an assessment that is relevant and in accordance to their understanding of the material.

Culturally-Responsive Leadership

As schools across the nation become increasingly culturally, racially, linguistically, religiously, and ethnically diverse, Culturally-Responsive School Leadership (CRSL) has become important to research on the grounds of culturally responsive education, reform, and social justice education (Davis et al., 2016). In its essence, CRSL integrates essential leadership practices that emphasize high expectations of achievement inclusive to all students; incorporates the history, values, and cultural knowledge of students’ home communities with the school curriculum; and works to develop a critical consciousness among school community members to challenge the inequities in larger society (Johnson, 2007). Originally created by Ladson-Billings, "culturally relevant pedagogy" was grown from the seeds of earlier anthropological research that noted a cultural discrepancy between students from culturally diverse backgrounds and their teachers, particularly in terms of language and communication structures (1995). Ladson-Billings contributed her study, *The Dreamkeepers* (1994), a now essential piece in culturally responsive teaching and leadership that showcases the experiences of eight exemplary teachers of African American students.

Culturally responsive leadership also seeks to create inclusive organizational structures at the school and district levels that empower students and parents from diverse racial and ethnic communities (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Similar terms such as *culturally proficient leadership*, *culturally relevant leadership*, *multicultural leadership*, and *diversity leadership* have been used to describe these leadership practices that support students from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds and create inclusive schooling environments. Culturally-Responsive School Leadership focuses on how school leaders can effectively serve students – those who have been historically marginalized in school and society (Davis et al., 2016). In Davis et al., 2016, the researchers outline specific CRSL behaviors that center inclusion, equity, advocacy, and social justice in school. Pulling from literature on leadership, social justice, culturally relevant schooling, and students/communities of color, they describe five specific expressions of CRSL found in unique communities including: “assessing your own behavior, getting to know your students, making your classroom a judgment-free zone, adapting your teaching, and including all cultures in your teaching”

Resilience and student voice

Resiliency refers to the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risks (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984). For more than forty years, theorists have been researching the protective factors and risk factors associated with resilience theory (Rutter, 1985). An essential requirement of resilience is the presence of risks and promotive factors that either help bear a positive outcome or risks and promotive factors that reduce or avoid a negative outcome. Resilience theory, is highly concerned with risk exposure among adolescents and remains focused on strengths rather than deficits (Resnick, 2000). The starting point of resilience

theory's investigation, "was the examination of adolescent populations at high risk, i.e., with a heightened probability of multiple adverse outcomes, primary interest was in the identification of variables that enabled some not merely to survive, but thrive under conditions of seeming adversity" (Resnick, 2000, p. 158).

Several retrospective studies have been conducted to better understand why exposure to adversity does not necessarily result in negative outcomes for adolescents.

Resilience theorists generally agree that the presence of one or more protective factors can reduce the effects of exposure in the face of adversity. The more protective factors or "assets" available that one has in their tool box, the more resilient a young person will be. Adolescents who are impoverished growing up, for instance, are at a higher risk of a number of negative outcomes, including poor levels of academic achievement and violent behavior (Doctoroff, 2003).

Conclusion

The literature studied elucidates the ways in which students learn and thrive in spite of structural inequities. Furthermore, this review explains how teacher/student relationships have existed in traditional educational approaches while simultaneously addressing the need for change. The cultural and systematic structures have focused a concentrated amount of power within the hands of a few (teachers and administrators) while little to no power is given to the majority (students). Through frameworks and theories that have applied quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method approaches to gather data, these pieces of literature have created a solid foundation for rethinking the bigger structures of power that manifest within education. The research shows the benefits of teachers owning their own authenticity and minimizing authoritarian roles as a new future of educating students. Upon considering the available

literature relevant to student empowerment in racially diverse populations, there is substantial reason for researchers to continue to study, develop, and implement practices and theories that deconstruct power structures and humanize students. The literature clarifies the various psychological theories that have contributed to transformative learning theory with interventions from psychologists, educators, and activists. These contributions explain the phenomena associated with how students learn best and connect lived experiences to the classroom. The literature review provides insight into how frameworks can be incorporated into classrooms across the world in practical ways that have big payoffs for educators and students. As expressed in the research from the literature, a plethora of methods exist for educators to implement in their own classroom that seek to deconstruct systems in order to humanize students. Nevertheless, a comprehensive review of past research also presented that an insignificant amount of research has been conducted to better understand how students, especially students in racially oppressive environments empower themselves. This thesis serves to add a new perspective to the conversation on how students are empowered in the modern era in racially oppressive environments. In many ways, this research uncovers more than just how students are disadvantaged within school districts by also delving into the larger oppressive forces at play. In the face of blatant adversity, this study contributes to previous research by uncovering the stories of how these students empower themselves in this complex environment?

Chapter 3: Methods

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to longitudinal qualitative data collection to better understand the empowerment of students in a racially and economically diverse school setting. The rich and diverse culture of the school setting is experienced by school staff, community members, and students alike. The research site recently became the first California school district to have a mandated state order to desegregate in over fifty years. What is reported in the news, captured in interviews, and spoken about throughout the community is only one side of a very important story. As is often the case in many school environments, what seems to be missing in the midst of this conversation is the perspectives and experiences of the students who are living through a historical movement centered around racial oppression in the year 2020. How often is it the case that two communities are so segregated to the point that on one side of the highway features multi-million dollar homes while the other side is almost entirely composed of public housing tenants? More importantly, what effects does that stark segregation have on the community's most vulnerable members- children?

Research Questions

This research was constructed to be a phenomenological approach to longitudinal qualitative study with the focus on a combination of student responses to writing prompt series and individual interviews. The writing prompts and individual interview questions were created based on the following essential questions:

As educators, how are we highlighting and celebrating the “informal” knowledge that our students are acquiring in their own worlds?

What is a teacher's role in addressing what students who attend school in a racially segregated site may experience of the injustices that are occurring in their neighborhoods and larger community?

And what can students teach us through their own voices and perspectives?

The study was rooted in these essential questions around student empowerment in a racially and economically diverse school setting.

Research Approach

This research is embedded in a transformative worldview using a phenomenological approach to acquire qualitative data collection. Creswell (2018) notes that “a transformative worldview holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever level it occurs ” and is influenced by the works of writers including Habermas and Freire. The research is driven by the unique school and political environment where the researcher is a teacher and the ways in which middle school students in this environment can and do feel empowered as learners. Specifically, this study seeks to understand how middle school students are self-empowered in a racially and economically diverse school setting and how educators can best serve their unique needs.

This study seeks to learn from students, and through a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2018), what tools and approaches positively and consistently impact their sense of empowerment in a racially and economically segregated school site. An approach that includes phenomenological research design is apt for this study as the data exhibits a triangulation of transformation over the duration of the study. The study benefits participants as it motivates them to become more in touch with their inner selves through self-reflection. This method of phenomenological research allows the researcher to study an occurrence within the participants,

to examine trends in the lives of students, and to gather information to better meet their individual needs. The qualitative approach to research explores individual and/or group understanding of social and human problems (Creswell, 2018). By administering weekly writing prompts that will engage students to think deeper and in a more meaningful way about their educational journey, the research qualitatively explores the numerous ways in which diverse students understand their own lived experience as resilient and empowered young people. Through asking meaningful, open-ended questions in the writing exercises and interview process, students are encouraged to think deeper and in a more meaningful way about their educational journey. Additionally, the individual interviews provided more data on resiliency and empowerment that can be coded through body language and tone through the researcher's approach of a casual, comfortable conversation. The research utilized triangulated methods to qualitatively explore the numerous ways in which diverse students understand their own lived experience as resilient and empowered young people.

The rationale for a transformative, conversational, and phenomenological approach to qualitative research is to support students in voicing their own nuanced and subjective lived experiences with power, race, class, resilience and learning. This is then applied toward shifting the dynamics and understanding of how teachers and communities can be of greater service to these students. The research takes into account Freire's framework of critical pedagogy, that an educator and students are co-creators in knowledge and environment (1970). By having students explain their life experiences in a safe and trusted space, the researcher is gathering deep, rich data in a secured environment.

Research Design

Sites and entry to the field

Fifty middle school students were invited to participate in this study from the researcher's two eighth grade classes at the research study site in Sausalito, California. The research site is a Title I school site in which the district is going through a mandated desegregation process. Although the media portrays the school site in a light that is favorable to white, upper class students of Sausalito, the school currently ranks within the top 5% for diversity within the state of California. Students are vilified on campus, in the community, and the media for attending the "better of the two schools in the area." What the media and uniformed people do not see are the issues surrounding teacher turnover rate, administrator turnover, and funding at both of the school sites. The school district is currently in the process of unifying the two school sites, causing an even bigger divide among community members as they consider the positive outcomes along with preparing for consequences. The researcher is currently a social studies instructor and developed relationships with the student participants as one of their teachers prior to the start of the study.

Participants and sampling procedures

Eighth grade students were introduced to the research study during class time and informed about the invitation to participate by their instructor. All participants are minors under the age of eighteen and represent multiple genders as well as culturally and ethnically diverse populations. All student participants gave their verbal and written consent as well as had parental consent to participate in the weekly writing responses for this research.

An additional four eighth grade students were invited to participate in two separate individual interview segments that were held in the researcher's classroom during school hours. The four eighth graders in the researcher's class were given the option to participate, and a separate parental consent was requested in a letter home to families detailing the specific questions they would be asked during the research process. Two males and two females were selected to participate in the study and their ages ranged from thirteen to fourteen years old.

Methods

Participants completed weekly open-ended writing prompts in class. The writing prompts consisted of a statement or a question that students responded to by writing at least 3 sentences (see Appendix B). Students were given three to four words after the prompt in parenthesis to help guide them and encourage them to widen their thinking. The researcher provided individual note cards for each student who consented to participate. Note cards remained confidential and were only read by the researcher. The researcher stored all note cards in a locked cabinet file in her classroom. The writing prompt activities were administered starting in January during class for students who opted to participate. Students who did not opt to participate had time to work on an assigned written reflection that correlated within class curriculum. Writing prompt responses gave the researcher insight into her central questions of what students express through their own voices and perspectives about what students who attend school in a racially segregated site may experience?

A sample of writing prompt questions (#1, #6, and #8):

1. I feel most empowered when...(open, hear, comfort, steady)
6. I have the power to transform... (turn, listen, while)
8. When I feel down, I know I can get back up because... (light, rooted, see)

Individual interviews were conducted with four eighth grade students after consent was given from the parents and the individuals to participate in the study. The interviews with students were all conducted in the researcher's classroom during students' lunch period. Each interview consisted of ten predetermined and open-ended questions, with some follow up questions included as needed. In some instances, clarifying statements were also helpful to deepen the dialogue or help students understand what was being asked of them.

Interviews tended to last around twenty minutes. When a student arrived to be interviewed, during a selected lunch period, the researcher invited them to make themselves comfortable, and to feel free to sit in the comfortable (and fought-over) chair in the classroom. As each student settled in, the researcher asked if any snacks were helpful, if the student had eaten lunch, and whether or not they needed anything else before the process began.

In order to ensure that students did not feel put on the spot, and felt familiar with the process they were about to enter into, the researcher showed each student the full list of interview questions before beginning any conversation. The researcher also let each student know that she may be asking some follow up questions at a later time, depending on a student's responses and to also further reflection on what was shared.

When students looked through the questions with the researcher before beginning, one student recalled when a news team visited the school site to ask students for quotes to be used in an article on the school district. This student remembered this as a negative experience. She wanted to make sure that her thoughts and responses represented her best self before she offered anything that might be recorded. This was helpful for the researcher to know, and gave the researcher a chance to reassure this student that the student's authenticity is valued, and that the researcher would do her best to represent the student as she would like to be represented.

Each interview was recorded through the Voice Memo program on the researcher's cell phone, and the researcher also took notes on paper throughout each interview. These notes included attending also to body language, tone of voice, sense for authenticity of answer, new findings, and differences between how students behaved in the interview and how they most often might behave in a classroom setting, based on several months of observation as a classroom teacher working with all of the students interviewed, and in reflection on previous conversations with other faculty and staff at the school site where interviews took place. The researcher's dual position as teacher and researcher allowed for a different level of reflection on the content of student interviews, and provided a secondary context for conversations with students. Interviews provided new insight into each student's experiences and needs for the researcher, as well as illuminating patterns that serve as top-level findings.

Individual interview questions were meticulously designed to gather information about how students view themselves and are empowered in a racially and economically diverse school setting (see Appendix C). These individual interview conversation points also explored student voice from the perspective of middle school eighth graders who are about to embark on their journey to a large high school where the racial dynamics are not as diverse.

The individual interview questions were designed to provide data and insight into the central question of this research, as well as allow the researcher to account for observational data on body language, tone, engagement, and expression in a verbal way. By participating in this research, students at the middle school level were co-creators in a unique opportunity to gain knowledge about themselves, question their surroundings, think critically about their environment, and to be a part of something that is being conducted at the graduate level at a

University. Students benefited socially, emotionally, and from the received additional support in literacy development that accompanies answering thought provoking prompts.

Sample individual interview questions (#2, #6, and #8):

2. What does self-knowledge and/or internal dialogue mean to you? Is it important in school? If so how does it relate to success in school and why is it important?
6. What beliefs about yourself would you like to change about yourself after eighth grade?
8. What support systems and tools do you feel schools need to emphasize and provide to help students believe in themselves?

Data analysis

The written results of all writing prompts were collected by the instructor after each writing session. The longitudinal data points were categorized by date and coded using both concept and open coding methods with an emphasis on identifying transformation over time (Creswell, 2018). The researcher looked for an exploratory set of concept codes within the collected data based on: self-awareness of resilience, student inspiration, motivation, and empowered identity. Open coding methods were used in both the writing prompt data and the individual interviews when concept coding did not anticipate certain themes to arise.

The interview data points were also categorized and coded using both concept and open coding methods with an emphasis on identifying transformation (Creswell, 2018). The researcher looked for an exploratory set of concept codes within the collected data based on: self-awareness of confidence, motivation, authenticity, and empowered identity. Open coding methods were used in the individual interviews when concept coding did not anticipate certain themes to arise.

Concept mapping was utilized to organize initial codes of student responses into themes and sub themes by using an approach inclusive to open coding in the writing responses and interviews. Emerging trends within the participating student's responses as they related to the researcher's initial exploratory set of predetermined codes were taken into consideration for the final product of the research. The research additionally took into account an open coding of body language, tone, expression, and context as qualitative research. As the links between premeditated concept codes and open codes revealed themselves through concept mapping, the researcher used identifying variables to accredit and define these themes (Creswell, 2018 p. 157). In addition to the anticipated codes that the researcher had originally accounted for, the following codes appeared in the data responses: responsiveness to value of student voice, student motivation to succeed academically, surprising networks of support, concern over having the "right answers", and the disconnect between empathy and agency.

After concept mapping, the researcher analyzed for consistency in student responses across responses and interviews, as well as for any aspect of the research that presented itself as an outlier within the general student's response patterns. Data conducted from the writing prompts and interviews were triangulated to showcase comparing and contrasting codes.

Validity and reliability

The researcher is a professional educator who has developed significant relationships as an educator the students, who are her participants in this study. The researcher identified, to the best of her capability all personal biases before conducting the research. During the process of conducting the research, the researcher removed to the best of her ability these biases before coding, categorizing, and analyzing data results. There are several outside factors and personal biases that could have shaped the research if they were not properly taken into account. As an

educator who has deep, personal connections with many of her students, the researcher has significant bias in helping her students feel empowered and motivated. Coupled with a school district that is in turmoil because it may cease to exist the following year due to legal implications combined with a series of tragic events within the community, student response reliability may have been unusually skewed that showcased their sense of empowerment negatively. In order to account for validity and reliability, the researcher utilized triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing as safeguards to test the results and validity of the research findings (Creswell, 2018 p. 200-201).

Chapter 4: Findings

For this research, this researcher administered weekly writing prompt exercises to fifty students and interviewed four middle school students, all of whom are currently in the eighth grade in Sausalito, California. The researcher has chosen to describe each interview separately in the following discussion, as a set of four case studies of students. Throughout the four interviews, the researcher will synthesize findings and draw toward principal conclusions about similarities, differences, and informative themes from this study. This approach was taken because the researcher wanted to present each student as an individual, create an ample portrait of each conversation and interaction, and provide depth before comparison and integration. The school site at which the four interviews were conducted is a complex educational environment, and the researcher wants to dive deep into the intersectionality of the participants, first by trying to most clearly see each individual student. Students were encouraged through the course of the study to make themselves feel at home in the comfortable classroom chair and to speak their truth as the researcher listened for their responses. The researcher took note of students who were taking it slow through body language, tone, authenticity, and enthusiasm in each of the interviews. Responsiveness to feeling their voice as valued was evidence that students were taking it slow to the researcher as participants became more open, relaxed, and disclosed new information throughout the research process.

The primary themes that emerged from the research are titled as a homage inspired from the context within the interviews which include: *Taking it Slow*, *Bringing it Home*, *Surprising* and *Surprising Systems of Support*. These themes begin to present themselves in different interviews, and then are explicitly highlighted within individual interviews and discussed further

in the findings conclusion. Quotes from student writing prompts will be embedded into the themes at the conclusion of this chapter.

The theme of Taking it Slow refers to students feeling a sense of safety and comfort at easing into an educational situation and the complementary forms of communication, and, importantly, the role of the teacher in creating the conditions for the student to have the spaciousness to be seen, heard and appreciated in this way.

Bringing it Home illuminates the student's own relationship with academia and learning. The theme of bringing it home encompasses the 'sticking factor' and the 'feeling of being at home and comfortable' in the joy and exploration of any lesson or topic covered in school that a student is inspired and motivated by. Embodiment of acquired knowledge in the individual students provides an inside look into students' connections to their lived experiences and learning in the classroom. The commonality that students shared their desires to "get good grades" and work hard in school was new and surprising information to the researcher. Since all of the student participants are in the researcher's various classes, the researcher has had months of observing the student's study habits. Before the interviews were conducted, the researcher had cast a judgment about the students' self motivation to succeed in school. After the research was completed, the researcher walked away with new found insight into the deep motivations of each student and their ambitions to bring it home.

Surprising Systems of Support were recognized in the findings of each interview as a key theme of the study. This research affirmed the importance of a strong support network for students that includes teachers, family, peers, and the broader community, and also supported that there is a need for more opportunity to strengthen teacher-student relationships. It is not new knowledge that support systems are vital for student wellbeing and success. The significance this

theme adds to the research lies in the fact that educators who take meaningful time to get to know their students are offered a deeper understanding into how students are empowered through support systems that the educator may have not known to exist.

Interview One

The first interview and findings discussed in this research was with an eighth grade male student. This student is also in the researcher's History class, Global Studies class and homeroom. He identifies as African-American, and is fourteen years old. The student will be referred to as "Student A" in this thesis. English is this student's first language, and he lives primarily with his father. This student receives free lunch under the Free and Reduced Lunch Policy. He is considered an at-risk student by the school site, and is reading three to four grade levels below his current grade in school.

The researcher began by asking Student A to "Define what strength is for you." When the student heard the question, he hesitated and asked if the researcher was being "literal" with the question and was seeking "a textbook definition"? In response, the researcher tried to assure the student that there was no particular definition that was correct, and what was being asked was for the student's personal feeling about "strength." The theme of students feeling they needed to have a "correct answer" emerged from the very beginning of this conversation as a finding that students felt a pressure to perform how they felt an educator may want a question answered.

Once the student felt he could speak his own ideas, he responded with confidence in his voice and seemed to be open about his opinions. He began by saying: "For me, [strength] is when I know in my heart that something is right to do and I stand by it." Student A identified sports as a consistent source of strength for him, and said sports have become "a part of who I am." He also spoke about "respect" for others and doing what's right as a part of strength, and

noticing when someone else is “going through something.” This student seemed to draw a connection between strength and confidence built through sports, and between himself and empathy for others.

When the student was asked: “Where do you find help when you need help with your homework?” Student A quickly responded with a single reply: “My mom mainly.” This response was curious to the researcher given that Student A lives primarily with his father, who is often at work until late. In hindsight, the researcher wishes she had asked clarifying questions to determine how Student A’s mom helps with or supports homework. During the interview, the researcher asked a follow up question to understand whether or not Student A attends an after-school program with Bridge the Gap College Prep (BTG) in Marin City, which offers supplementary learning and homework help, as well as social-emotional development. Student A responded, “Yes,” but noted that he does not feel that BTG helps him focus on homework, saying that “homework is usually the last thing we do, which is not right at all.”

He associated the adults at BTG with help, but also said there are times when he does not find anyone to help with homework. The value of including this response in the research lies in the support systems available to Student A that offer supplementary learning to students. Even though Student A spoke about how he felt like he could not get his homework done there, the researcher knows the significance of the supplementary learning and educational strategies that help students bring it home at BTG. It is in the researcher’s personal judgement that perhaps Student A feels a sense of frustration that he has little time to complete homework on his own, given that he is involved in after-school sports, so he made the claim that it was wrong for BTG not to help with the students homework as a priority. He does not fully understand, however, that BTG is committed to helping students develop their skills needed to succeed in and outside of

the classroom. Not only does his response indicate that he has a strong network of support available to him, but it also showcases that he is motivated to complete schoolwork and would appreciate receiving additional help with it.

With regards to the ways he experiences support horizontally...the researcher asked Student A about friends: “How do your friends contribute to your life?” Student A responded: “Friends always got your back. I have grown up with many of these people here – there is trust and loyalty with us. Like we cheer each other on the court, in the classroom, and after school.” The researcher has observed Student A in many interactions at school, and noticed that he is popular with other students. However, the researcher also senses that Student A likes to be an independent personality and does not want to feel overly influenced by his peers. He did not go into detail, nor identify a particular instance for him that spoke to the qualities of friendship identified as “trust” and “loyalty.”

The researcher then asked Student A, “Who are the people in your life who inspire you?” Student A confidently and quickly said: “Kobe...my dad, my mom, and my brother.” The word “Kobe” came out quickly, and the rest followed after a pause.

January 27th, 2020, the day after basketball player Kobe Bryant’s passing, our class grieved together as we shared a moment of silence for the man who had seen a hero of many of the boys’ worlds. A standout moment in this memory was when student A, a student who is already an accomplished and avid basketball player, a social butterfly at school, well-spoken about by everyone in the community, and a leader amongst his peers, broke down hysterically crying during our moment of silence for Kobe. He burst out of the classroom in tears, shaking right outside the door. When the researcher went to check on him, unsure of what to say or how

to comfort him, Student A just sobbed and asked if he could give the researcher a hug. He was really hurt by this experience of loss, expressing devastated emotions.

In follow-up, the researcher recalled this experience to the student and asked, “Can you explain how [Kobe] is such an inspiration to you?” This was the most expressive moment of the interview for the researcher in listening to Student A’s responses. He said:

Yeah...I had to leave the class....I was crying. Thank you for checking on me, by the way, but I just grew up watching him, wanting to be him, wanting to know him. He is really my hero and someone I look up to. When I heard about him dying, I thought it was fake and my friends were messing with me. I have his posters on my walls and stuff, like he is such a hero to me.

There was clearly a felt connection with Kobe Bryant for Student A, and value for him in this person who he understood as a “hero” and role model. Student A is someone who the researcher perceives as developing comfort in being vulnerable and expressive with emotion. In this interview question, the research found that Student A acknowledged his emotional side in a way that was not shameful or dismissive, but rather took ownership of emotions he felt were valid. The theme of student responsiveness to feeling their voice as valued was prominent as he spoke with a sense of pride reflecting on his actions that day. It was surprising to the researcher that the class comforted him in his state of despair and that Student A felt his own voice as valued, even asking for a hug from the researcher after he left the class to cry outside.

The researcher then asked Student A: “What would be something about the community that you grew up in that you would like to see change for the next generation or for a younger person.” Student A sighed and shook his head as a first response to this question, and the researcher felt this reaction as an expression of a kind of defeat for the student. After a pause,

Student A said, “Oh man, I’m not really sure. I feel like it’s fine for the most part and I really wouldn’t change much.” For the researcher, Student A’s first body language and response felt like a place where a sense of agency was absent or lessened.

After a moment, Student A continued talking about community change saying, “I guess for a younger person it would be good to get more stores...more things to do, maybe more space but I’m not sure.” Student A tries to focus the question and his answer on other people, imagining how life might be for them, but still expresses a sense that he may not be able to say. He seemed to sense that anything he might identify would be unlikely to happen, as though his opinion did not carry much weight and could not generate change he felt was significant. The disconnect between empathy and agency was apparent in this response as Student A was able to identify certain aspects about the community that could be improved but he felt may not happen for his generation.

Question seven and Student A’s response also stood out to the researcher. In this question, the researcher began by asking: “In what ways do you feel supported by your classmates? Student A quickly reacted in a tone that seemed to express anger: “In what ways?! Never...they don’t really support me. What do they do for me?” The researcher sensed that the word “classmates” triggered something in Student A, who looked around the room at the empty desks and chairs as he first spoke. To keep the conversation moving, the researcher followed with a gentle, “Never?” to let the student say more about his experience. Student A then acknowledged: “Okay, fine...I feel respected by my peers. I feel like I can be a leader even though I am quiet in class.” The first part of this comment (“Okay, fine”) came with a long pause before the full statement was expressed. The second part of the comment, concerning him being quiet in the class is quite out of character for Student A who is a socially popular student and a

well respected athlete among his peers. Student A seemed to think about how class feels for him, and how his peers might view him in the classroom versus on the basketball court or in the lunchroom.

Without a further prompting question, Student A shifted the focus to himself and commented on feeling hesitant in class and worried to speak unless he feels certain he has the right answer: “For some reason, I want to raise my hand but I raise it in my head because I feel like it’s wrong, but it is right. I double guess myself a lot. I should just start saying more things.” Student A’s tone was expressive in this part of the interview too, and he seemed to feel frustration but also a desire for change. There was a quality of vulnerability in his answer that stood out to the interviewer as curious to know if the student felt conflicted about embracing academia in the classroom while simultaneously fearing that he might set himself up to look “stupid” in front of his classmates?

When asked further about school, and what he enjoys about learning, Student A spoke about Social Studies and said that he enjoys learning about what “motivates” people to act the way they do, for example, why people go to war. Student A also spoke about how he takes this learning home and likes to speak with his dad about what he is learning, saying “I talk about it every day after he picks me up.” He draws a connection to his dad through learning here: “My dad’s favorite subject was Social Studies.”

Toward the end of the interview, the researcher asked Student A about his experience of his own “resilience.” Student A said that he thinks of resilience as “how someone carries themselves.” He identified himself as calm and able to handle most things well, signifying to the researcher that he takes it slow. This seemed to connect to his answer to the next question, which asked about the importance of having “an adult you trust in your life.” The student talked about

learning from parents and other generations about what they have experienced and how they have dealt with challenges, showing that he has actively applies real life experiences to classroom curriculum.

Interview Two

The second interview and findings discussed in this research was with an eighth grade female student. This student is also in the researcher's History class, Global Studies class and homeroom. She identifies as African-American, and is thirteen years old. The student will be referred to as "Student B" in this thesis. English is this student's first language, and she lives with her mother, who is a single parent. This student receives free lunch under the Free and Reduced Lunch Policy. She is not considered an at-risk student by the school site, but is reading two to three grade levels below her current grade in school. Student B had a noticeably more confident and comfortable approach to the interview process. Over the months leading up to the interview, through regular classroom interaction, Student B and the researcher have developed a meaningful relationship in which the student trusts the researcher on a deeper level than most other participants.

The researcher began by asking Student B to "Define what strength is for you." When the student heard the question, she was confident and forthcoming in her response. She spoke with little hesitation and a strong tone as she proclaimed:

I feel like building skills makes me stronger....It's really important for me to be strong mentally, I have a lot of family members who aren't mentally strong, like they're kind of crazy. That's the reason I have therapy to keep me mentally strong.

From the beginning of the interview, Student B identified family as a significant aspect of her life. It is significant to note that Student B phrases her wording as "hav[ing] therapy", since the

participant was first referred to therapy through the advocacy of her mother. The school site only has one part time counselor for a K-8 school, who only is able to provide services to students who have written permission from a parent. The researcher started this finding as crucial to understanding the dynamics of the student's home life and the support systems that help her succeed in different aspects of her mental, emotional, and academic growth.

The second question in the interview asked was: "Where do you find help when you need help with your homework?" Student B very quickly responded by telling the researcher that she attends Bridge the Gap College Prep on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school. She continued by saying that if she is not at BTG, she does homework with her Auntie and her mom. During the interview, the researcher asked a follow up question to determine if her Auntie lived in close proximity to her. Student B responded by saying, "No, she lives in Ohio so we Facetime... I didn't get a lot of school time last year because of my surgery...after my surgery, I was homeschooled so I had to learn everything without an actual teacher." She later went on to describe how her mom and her Auntie became "like [her] full time teachers."

For relevance to this response and context for this thesis, Student B suffered from a serious infection last academic school year that led to an infection in her brain, causing her to need brain surgery. Student B's mother has fully utilized school provided resources to ensure that her daughter has every system of support available to her. Student B will discuss later on in this interview some of the adversities that she had to overcome from having brain surgery which resulted in having difficulties with her memory and having missed out on over a year of instructional time.

Moving on from this heavy topic, the researcher asked Student B about friends: "How do your friends contribute to your life?" Student B sat there, perhaps from the researcher's previous

understanding, still in reflection about the last question asked. The researcher followed up with, “Let’s start with who your friends are...” Student B perked up and responded giddily by naming her top four girl friends at school. An interesting note that the researcher recorded in her notebook was that Student B’s tone shifted when she spoke about her friends – she seemed protective and slightly defensive of them. She said:

I know that *Angela and *Lauren (names changed to protect anonymity) will look like they are not helping me [during class], but Angela really pushes me to be the best person I can be especially when we are not around other people. Angela has a lot of integrity and I really really think she gets a lot of that from me because when she first came to this school she was hanging around with the wrong crowds.

Student B had an initial tone of defense – almost as if she felt that she was inclined to stand up for Angela and Lauren’s moral character and past behaviors. Angela and Lauren are both high risk students who struggle with academic success, expressing emotions, and have exhibited behavioral issues at the school site. The researcher noted how Student B was aware of how most educators may perceive Angela and Lauren in a school setting by the way she defended their moral character. Her tone then shifted from a defensive tone to a soft whisper when she spoke about Angela’s possession of integrity and how she believes to have contributed to that.

Student B continued on with this question once she became open to talking about her friends at school. She told the researcher about how the girls she previously mentioned “all made a pact [that they] would push each other in class so [they could] get good grades.” The four students she mentioned are all students in the researcher’s homeroom, history class, and global studies class. It was interesting for the research to note this admission as a new finding of knowledge about the girls- three of which are high-risk concerns both academically and

behaviorally. This was a surprising system of academic support that the researcher assumes was previously confidential among the girls. Student B's tone of voice presented a sense of motivation and determination when she spoke about the pact the girls made. Additionally, her body language suggested a re-affirming story as she repeatedly drove her closed fist into her open palm when she talked about the girls pushing one another academically.

The next significant point of the interview came in a question asking about resilience. The researcher asked Student B: "Resilience is defined as, 'The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties' – what do you think that means in your life?" This was one of the most heartfelt and authentic moments in the entirety of the research process with Student B. Her response to hearing and applying the definition of resiliency to her own life was the following:

I don't really think it's important to recover quickly. Sometimes you gotta take it slow. Going back to my surgery, I had to go at a slow pace. I had to learn to walk again and talk again. I couldn't do anything on my own. I think people should take their time to recover if it's going to be more effective in the long run. I couldn't just get out of the hospital bed and start walking, I had to take it slow.

The theme of taking it slow was inspired by Student B's responsiveness to hearing the definition of resilience. Student B's strong inner voice stood out to the researcher in how she defended her opposition to the statement. She relayed a position of opposition, arguing that for some people it is within their own best interest to not recover quickly. As Student B shared her own voice by reliving this traumatic experience, the researcher nodded her head in solidarity, understanding why it is so important for students to take it slow.

The interview concluded with Student B speaking to how she would help people in the world have a voice. Student B spoke with a softness in her tone and said the following:

Really, I have wanted to do this ever since I was little for people who are homeless. Me and my mom came up with an idea to bring them bags of food. For a while we were doing it in Oakland because it's really bad over there. My heart breaks when I think about people who are living on the streets in winter when it's raining and they have nothing to protect them. I feel like we have the money to help them but since we don't think about them as much and we care about ourselves and our community more nothing gets done until someone speaks up, and I want to be that person who speaks up.

The researcher felt that the student spoke with genuine concern but possessed a tone of doubt and helplessness when she spoke about the failures of government and community in regards to the homeless. Her tone then shifted toward the end of the interview when she became animated and empowered by talking about her aspirations to help others who are less fortunate but not explicitly stating a way in which she could do that, thus contributing to the on-going continuation of disconnect between empathy and agency which manifests itself in that feeling students have of feeling helpless because they are just a kid.

Interview Three

The third interview discussed in this research was with an eighth grade male student. This student is also in the researchers History class and Global Studies class. He identifies as Asian, and is thirteen years old. The student will be referred to as “Student C” in this thesis. English is this student’s first language, and he lives with his mother and father. This student does not receive free or reduced lunch under the Free and Reduced Lunch Policy. He is not considered an at-risk student, he reads at grade level but struggles with socio-emotional development and has various behavioral issues, ranging from disruptive behavior and verbal aggression to physical

violence against others. The researcher began by asking Student C to “Define what strength is for you.” Student C responded with confidence in his usual loud and fast-paced tone, saying:

A strength that I have is my memory. Oftentimes my family will try to remember a small detail of a trip we went on, or something that happened, maybe what my auntie said two years ago for Thanksgiving dinner and everyone will turn to me because I remember everything like that. I often wow them with that – they always say, ‘Your memory is so good...your memory is so good...you should be able to use that for something.’

The researcher considered it a noteworthy finding that the participant was able to recall a specific strength in which his family praised him. Additionally, the researcher made a note during the interview that the compliment was two sided. On one hand, Student C’s family heavily praised him for having such a strong memory, but, on the other, also pressured him that he needed to use it for something and that he was letting his talents go to waste.

The researcher then asked if there is an area in academics that the participant particularly likes. The participant responded excitedly:

I’m not even going to lie right now, I do like History a lot. I don’t know if I have told you this or not, but I like Ancient Egypt and I’ve been reading about that a lot lately. Yeah, I guess because I was born in the Philippines I am always interested in the history there.

Like yeah we learn a lot about the U.S. government and how that works but I get curious to know more about the Philippines because maybe I’ll move back there one day.

This was an interesting follow up conversation for the researcher and participant to engage in because Student C is open about his adoption and he begins to allude to it at this point in the interview on the second question. The researcher feels like it is necessary to point out that this participant and the researcher have an anomaly of a relationship for a student and teacher in that

he feels open and comfortable expressing his past with adoption, despite being a new student in the classroom. Student C's responsiveness to feeling his voice is valued and feeling that he is in a safe environment contributes to the top findings later discussed in this research.

The next interview question asked Student C to speak about the people who inspire him. Student C spoke in a genuine tone when he said:

I'm really inspired by my sister because she always puts in hard work, she has a lot of friends, she's popular and everyone likes her. She just got adopted with us recently but she's been living with us for a year now and when her adoption day came I was so happy like I saved up money to go get her something really nice and we had a big party at our house.

That response was the second time student C spoke about being adopted during the interview. The researcher was interested in Student C's feelings of admiration toward his sister. As a student who struggles with intrinsic motivation in classes, it was new knowledge that the researcher discovered that he was inspired by his sister "put[ting] in hard work." A surprising system of support was the deep connection he felt toward his newly adopted older sister despite only having known her for around a year. His older sister is a recurring figure of support- as the two share a closeness in age and a connection through their adoption.

Student C was reluctant to answer the following question pertaining to changes in the community. The researcher asked Student C to answer, "What would be something about the community that you grew up in that you would like to see change for the next generation or for a younger person?" Student C spent some of his childhood growing up in San Francisco, California, so he spoke about his experiences of community from that setting. The researcher found Student C to be extremely hesitant when it came to answering the question thoughtfully,

she could tell that the participant was being careful with his words when he said, “I mean, in San Francisco there is a lot of bad stuff and like a lot of homeless people. I don't want to be offensive so I don't really know how to put this...” The researcher reaffirmed to the student that this was a safe conversation, there was no “correct answer” expected, and that he was free to speak his mind openly. After a long pause and a sigh, Student C began to speak again:

Well I guess I would really like to see things change and have the city run better. My parents took me out of school there because we would just have to walk to school with needles being on the ground and I would cry because when I was little, homeless people would yell at us. The school I went to was failing. The principal was terrible and all the students were not following directions they were doing their own thing. The teachers were really trying to make it work but it's hard. Our playground had this fence where you can see outside on the streets and we would always see hobos drinking out of brown bags and cussing and getting into fights. How do you even change that for the next generation? Like it's such a sad situation, I don't want to be mean or offensive because they need help but it's also scaring young kids who have to see that every day. So my mom put me here because it got so bad.

Student C spoke quickly – almost too quickly to take notes on during the conversation. The researcher gained the impression from the conversation that Student C was speaking from pent up anger towards his experience of attending school in San Francisco. He was careful not to offend the researcher, the only other person in the room, when talking about his own feelings. Throughout the encounter, the researcher told Student C that his feelings and experiences are valid, and should be expressed if he is willing to open up about them. The first comment made about being hesitant to speak his mind alluded to the theme of students feeling concerned about a

“right answer” although this was not a question centered around academia but a reflection of personal experience and memories. The later reflection made about the failing school and seeing unsettling activities take place from the view in the schoolyard implied a feeling of empathy towards several groups of people (teachers, young students, homeless people) that was disconnected from agency (“How do you even change that for the next generation?”)

The next question in the interview was based around resilience: “Resilience is defined as ‘the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties’ – what do you think it means in your life to recover quickly from difficulties?” Student C began to respond by saying, “I guess like on the surface level you fall down you get back up.” Before continuing on a deeper level to say that, “I always knew I was adopted obviously, I am Asian and my parents are white. I don't think I recovered quickly from that, so maybe I am not resilient.” He spoke about accepting adoption but also acknowledging the “what ifs about [his] birth family.” Without interrupting, the researcher let Student C continue to speak and he revealed, “I dont know..It's just weird to think about but I can't dwell on that every day. I just have to be happy with where I'm at now. I guess I have learned that I am a lucky one.” Student C embodied a sense of moderate to high levels of resilient traits according to the researcher’s observation over more than five months. He was able to acknowledge the adversities of his life and provide ways in which he has coped with trauma in the past and in the present. It was interesting to note the style of Student C’s response as he expressed his first comment made with a strong tone of sarcasm, “I guess on the surface level you fall down you get back up”..taking the question slowly before offering the story of his own resilience and owning the value of his own voice.

Knowing about his adoption from previous encounters with Student C, and hearing him speak further about it in the interview, the researcher moved the conversation along to ask about

the importance of trusted adults in a young person's life and if a trusted adult who can talk to exists for him. The participant said it is important for people to have a trusted adult in their life – although he said:

There is a person who does exist for me, but it's not an adult. It is my sister, I can open up to her and she helps me work through things. With us both being adopted we have that bond and understanding. We have both been through the same thing and even though she's older than me it's kind of interesting because I can help her overcome some of the doubts that she has.

For student C, he finds a surprising system of support in talking to his older sister who is also adopted. He also identifies the role he plays for her, as someone who can help her to overcome doubts she may have, which signifies his responsiveness to the value of his voice and empathy. It was interesting to the researcher to hear that Student C did not acknowledge his adoptive parents – people who the researcher knows personally and has seen play an active role in his life.

For the last question of the interview, the researcher asked Student C, “If you could help people who do not have a voice in this world, what would you do for them?” Student C answered the question from a place of passion yet self-doubt:

I would love to help orphans. But I don't know how I could because I'm only an eighth grader, I could send out flyers or something, but would that even work? No one is going to listen to me because I'm just a kid. I would like to donate to orphanages but I don't even have money to do that so I'm helpless.

He had great ideas and a solid vision to help orphans but felt doubtful that adults and people in positions of power would not listen to his ideas simply because of his age.

Interview Four

The fourth and final interview and findings discussed in this research was with an eighth grade female student. This student is also in the researchers History class and Global Studies class. She identifies as African-American, and is thirteen years old. The student will be referred to as “Student D” in this thesis. English is this student's first language, and she lives with her mother and four siblings. This student receives free lunch under the Free and Reduced Lunch Policy. She is not considered an at-risk student by the school site, but she is reading two to three grade levels below her current grade in school.

The researcher began by asking Student D to “Define what strength is for you.” When the student heard the question, she got nervous to answer and asked if we could pause the recording. While she collected her thoughts and calmed her jitters, the researcher comforted her by stating that her responses did not need to be “rehearsed.” While the researcher and her paused the interview, Student D was reminded that although this is a research project, and that the researcher valued her authenticity above anything else.

Once the student felt she could speak her mind without rehearsing each response, she still seemed shy to open up..she spoke with softness, making no eye contact when she began to speak to the question. She responded to the question by saying: “ For me, it is when you have this hope in something and you like you keep it and you don't just like let it go and you just don't give up.” The researcher felt that this was a statement she did rehearse before the interview began, so a follow up question was asked, stemming from personal observations about Student D’s social encounters in the classroom if she could recall a time where she was strong around her peers. The student responded that she would need time to think about that question and asked if we could return to it at a later time.

From the researcher's observations over more than five months of classroom interaction, Student D is a quiet, introverted student, who keeps to herself in most social settings. She is often alone during breaks, at recess and during lunch. She eats her lunch in the researcher's classroom on most days where she engages enthusiastically with the researcher one-on-one, but rarely engages at that level among her peers.

Question two in the research asked Student D to speak about the people in her life who can help her with her homework. Still speaking in a soft tone, Student D responded looking straight across the room, reflecting:

Definitely my mom. Even though sometimes I don't get the best grades, my mom still supports me and she helps me get through it. She helps me study every night, she helps me do all my homework, double checks it. My mom is a single parent, so she goes through YouTube videos to find out how to do it because she has not done this stuff in a long time, like since she was in high school.

The researcher found several important findings embedded in this response. First, the researcher acknowledged and felt a sense of guilt coming from Student D that she did not receive the "best grades" indicating that she was motivated to bring it home by succeeding in school. Despite this, Student D clarified to the researcher that her mom, who is a single parent of five children, does homework with her nightly. The researcher experienced a sense of joy in hearing that Student D's takes the time to double check her homework (and seemingly the work of all of her siblings) for correctness. The fact that her mom does not hold a degree in higher education past the high school level is somewhat indicative of the socioeconomics at play at this school site. Student D's mother uses YouTube to learn the content that her children are expected to meet the standards of

at the elementary and middle school level, thus illustrating that her primary system of support (mother) has high expectations for Student D and her other children.

The following question in the interview asked, “How do your friends contribute to your life?” The researcher expected Student D to be quite hesitant when answering this question, but she instead said that, “Sometimes I feel sad or like I don't have confidence and then they would give me pep talks and they did encourage me and give me even more confidence to just believe in myself.” The researcher found it peculiar that Student D spoke in the past tense about friends who support her, and wondered: Does she still have access to supportive friend groups? Did moving schools within the district limit her ability to connect on a substantial level with her peers?

It seems to the researcher that it is significant to the findings of this thesis to note here that this research site is heavily divided between African American and Caucasian students and has a predominately Caucasian staff. Student D transferred from the other middle school in the district that has a majority of African American students. Knowing this, the researcher made a connection that maybe her experience with making friends at a school that had more African American students was easier than it has been for her here.

In a follow up question, Student D was asked if she felt her school was a “friendly environment?” The student responded, “Yes, definitely. I like how it is a diverse environment... but it does get frustrating sometimes.” The researcher picked up on her last statement which was delivered with a tone of frustration that matched what she was saying. Another follow up question was asked so that Student D could explain her frustration. Student D spoke in what ifs as she said, “Like for example, what if you're the new kid and you're different? You can be judged by all those people. You can get tired of people being the same person instead of being

their own true self. You can feel pressure to act the same way or like the same exact thing that everybody else likes. You feel like a completely different person in the world.”

While Student D spoke from the perspective of a hypothetical student, the researcher inferred that she was actually speaking about herself. Student D is a relatively “new kid” who is different (racially and in respect to her personality) than a lot of her peers. She has shown to the researcher that she doesn’t fit in, partially by choice because in some cases she happily marches to the beat of her own drum, but other times she has been observed to be “judged” by her peers and identified as being that “different person in the world” that she spoke about. From the researcher’s observations outside of this interview, Student D does not personify the characteristics often generalized by students as common African-American culture. She finds joy in listening to K-Pop, she draws at a desk in her free time, she follows a unique religion that is sometimes the brunt of jokes in social circles, she loathes talking about sports, and finds comfort in journaling to soft music. Some students who are African American have told Student D that they view her interests as “nerdy”, and that of “a white person.” Other students have accused Student D of not being “actually black, but like an Oreo...white on the inside.” Although Student D has not expressed this explicitly in the interview, the researcher hypothesizes that Student D feels a sense of ostracization from African-American peers in the community. Her unique individuality is not entirely accepted from Caucasian students either by observation. There appears to be a racial separation between her and her White peers as well as the fact that she is still a newer member at the school site.

Question four of the interview asked, “Who can you talk to?” Student D replied, while looking down at her hands resting above the blanket in the comfy chair, “Definitely the teachers, the principal, my mom, and a bunch of other family members that I can talk to openly.” Once

again, Student D did not recognize friends or peers her age as people who she could talk to about her life and experiences. Seeking to keep this conversation further afloat, the researcher recalled that Student D has spent a substantial amount of time with student support staff. This led the researcher to ask her about her connections to the support staff at the school. Staff members who are people of color who work with students as mediators through the school restorative justice program. Now, Student D has never (in the researcher's experience), done an action that warranted a trip to speak with a student support specialist, because being "sent there" is often associated with having committed a negative action. In contrast, Student D sought out the companionship of several of the student support specialists. When asked about her relationship with some of the specialists, Student D said,

I had some things I was going through and I would talk to some of the support staff and they were always able to help me out like that. I could be honest and true to myself without having to change the story and lie about some things, I feel like I can be completely honest. Yeah, I swear to God.

Student D repeatedly spoke about wanting to be her "true self"- a note to the theme of students recognizing the value of their own voice in taking it slow. Additionally, a surprising system of support was acknowledged as Student D sought out student support staff that is usually referred for students with misbehavior.

The following question asked Student D to think about the people in her life who she is inspired by. She responded gleefully that the people who inspire her are,

Definitely my mom and some of these teachers as well. For example, you're like an awesome teacher!! I would love to be a History teacher when I grow up, that's always been my dream. I love History.

The researcher was somewhat surprised to hear her say this, especially without being prompted without a follow up question. In response, the researcher asked in a joking manner, “How kind..you’re not just saying that right?” Student D blushed, sinking in her chair at the researcher’s comment. She gave out a sharp, “No! I would honestly be a History teacher. And also, for example, *Ms. Kelly (name has been changed to protect anonymity). She’s awesome too. I love the subject she teaches –science. She teaches it so well. I would love to be a teacher when I grow up. Being a teacher is cool.”

This was interesting for the researcher to absorb. Student D and the researcher have established a strong relationship that expands outside of the daily 50-minute class period in which Student D is a classroom student of the researcher. Student D often eats her lunch in the researcher’s classroom where the two of them will engage in casual conversations or expand on class learning together. Student D struggles academically in all of her core classes, with standardized test scores that fall in the “low” category. For the researcher, it was interesting to hear her speak about being inspired by teachers, and even wanting to become a teacher herself. The researcher has observed from in class experiences and this interview that Student D has a strong moral compass, is highly empathetic, and seeks to help others before herself.

In the final question of the interview, Student D was asked about how she would help less fortunate people in the world. The researcher asked her, “If you could help people who do not have a voice in this world, what would you do for them? Student D answered the question,

I would actually help them realize they have a voice. I used to feel like I did not have a voice, people would talk smack to me and I just wouldn’t do anything about it. My friend made me feel like I had a voice. She gave me the confidence to stand up to people who

would take advantage of me. I would want to make other people feel like that because I used to be so shy and so quiet. It took me awhile to be confident in my skin.

The researcher was interested by how Student D approached this question. Instead of offering to help people “without a voice” with material items or advocating on their behalf, she chose to help them realize that they can help themselves. The personal narrative she shared about how her friend helped her find strength and her voice was empowering to hear and reaffirmed the theme of student responsiveness to feeling their voice is valued as a main theme of the research.

Conclusion

The following themes emerged as top-level findings for this research project. Based on a review of all writing prompt responses and four interviews collectively, the researcher identified the following as themes that were consistent across conversations with students, or indicated by more than one student when interviewed. The three themes were easily noted in each of the findings of the writing prompt responses and interviews despite showing up in different contexts, relevant to each individual. Upon further reflection, the researcher noted that the themes of taking it slow, bringing it home, and surprising systems of support were identifiable in past experiences with each student and continued to be ongoing themes after the research was conducted.

Taking It Slow

Before the interview process began, there was a fear from the researcher’s standpoint that students had been hesitant to offer their authentic responses to the questions in the context of class or previous conversations. Per the protocol, before the research process began, the researcher offered a preview of the questions that would be asked so that students felt more

comfortable taking it slow. The researcher observed how all students had a sort of weight lifted off their shoulders after they got over the nervousness that comes with answering the first question of an interview intended for research purposes. As the interviews progressed, all students became more open about their responses, and provided depth in self reflection while revealing new information to the researcher. The researcher noted a positive shift in enthusiasm and tone. Voices collectively becoming more animated and authentic as each question was answered. Student responsiveness to feeling their voice as valued was evident in the way that participants opened up to the researcher.

The results of students' feeling seen, heard, and appreciated manifested itself in daily activities, participation, willingness to do the learning when a relationship was created between the teacher and student was heightened as a result of this research. Students who are encouraged to slow down and immerse themselves in learning were observed to bring it home as a result of taking it slow. In some ways, students may need to feel that they can take it slow in order for them to bring it home because students need to feel that their voice is valued and that they are seen as the human beings that they are before they can fully connect with the subject matter being taught in schools.

A student confidentially wrote in their weekly writing response as a reflection of the prompt, "feel most empowered when...", that, "I feel most empowered when a door of comfort is opened for me. I can hear my friends there for me to help keep me steady." This student, despite being unaware of the interview questions and the process that their peers participated in, answered the prompt in a way that reinforces the theme of taking it slow. Extending the door of comfort to all students so that they can enter a room where they feel steady and excited to learn is the optimal goal of educator's practicing techniques of taking it slow.

Student participants found value in the experience of being interviewed as it was expressed inexplicably through their tone and body language and verbally after the interviews were conducted. Two out of the four students involved in the research, (Student B and Student C) asked the researcher several times if they could “do another interview.” Student C said to the researcher after the interview was over, “that was so much fun!! Can we do another one?” These series of statements after the research was conducted revealed to the researcher that students were highly responsive to feeling their voice as valued. Student C even reached out to the researcher to ask if she would be interviewed by his sister for a school project, and if he could listen in because he found the process so enjoyable.

Bringing it Home

The first standout moment in the research regarding student motivation involved Student A talking about loving social studies and bringing what he learned home to discuss it with his Dad. Before the study, Student A was observed in class to be some-what interested in the subject of social studies, but not particularly outspoken or actively engaging with the material. The researcher was surprised to hear Student A speak about his love for history and to hear him be able to recall small details about subject matter that were covered in class. During the interview, Student A reminisced about learning battle strategies of the Revolutionary War, a class lesson in which the researcher organized an activity on the basketball court to create a simulation of a Revolutionary battle. The basketball court is a place where Student A’s talents truly shine so the researcher was not shocked to hear that Student A enjoyed that activity, however, the researcher was pleasantly surprised when Student A was able to describe the exact military strategies his team employed during the simulation. This top level finding not only provided insight into the fact that Student A was motivated to succeed academically, but also reaffirmed that teaching

strategies that highlight student interests and multiple-intelligences creates confidence in a student's further ability to motivate themselves and see themselves as successful.

After the interviews were completed, Student A transformed into a new student, becoming forthright in voicing his academic curiosity in the classroom. For example Student A demonstrated a newfound willingness to take a risk to ask a challenging question in front of his peers with the purpose of hoping to expand his learning. During an class introduction on a unit about the slave trade, Student A showcased his motivation as he raised his hand in class to ask, "was there ever a time in history when the slaves killed their masters?"

Student B also revealed a strong motivation to succeed in academics. From the first question, she defined strength as, "building skills [to make her] stronger" and that it was important for her to be "strong mentally". The theme of student motivation was evident for Student B as she emphasized the significance in mental health as a priority needed to allow her to progress at building skills. Student B's motivation largely derives from the support she receives from her mother and Auntie, who work together to help her understand school work and complete homework. Her mother is her constant backbone who helps with reading and writing, while her Auntie Facetimes her every night to make sure she understands her math homework. Student B has harnessed this motivation from her support system and carries it with her in the classroom. A significant finding for Student B's motivation to succeed academically was that she and her friend group made a pact, unbeknown to the researcher, to "push each other academically." This "pact" that the girls made was an unanticipated discovery that emerged from the conversation. The girls who Student B mentioned are all students who are high risk and appear to not be motivated academically in class. The researcher was pleasantly surprised to discover this unanticipated finding.

Student C's motivation to succeed academically was also apparent to the researcher from the beginning of the interview. Although Student C did need some prompting for the research to inquire about his academic strengths, he did open up about his ability to remember important details. Student C's motivation to succeed academically is, in the researcher's perspective, derived from his family's expectations and pressures placed on him. A standout moment during the research process was when Student C expressed with a tone of frustration that his parents urged him to apply his memory in school. Student C's motivation to succeed academically was present, however, it appeared to the researcher that motivation to do well was mainly caused by outside factors. Student C did add that he likes Ancient Egypt, a topic that is not covered in the eighth grade history curriculum. He added in the interview that he reads about Ancient Egypt on his own, doing extra work on his own initiative with no "graded" benefit for him. Student C showed an interest in connecting learning to his own life- wanting to know more about the Philippines, where he was born. This is an important find for educators to understand that even the students who many teachers may presume are not motivated to succeed academically, do in fact have intellectual curiosity and want for subject materials that they connect with on a personal level.

Student D showed self-motivation in her statement of wanting to be a teacher, clearly observing her environment. Her motivation to succeed appeared genuine to the researcher, although noted that Student D was concerned with impressing people in her life who she admired. Student D's motivation for academic success was not an aspect that the researcher would have tapped into if she was not a part of this study.

Student motivation also appeared in the writing exercises for several prompts. When students were asked to write about what makes them feel successful, one student wrote, "I feel

successful when I finally finish a project and I sense the A+ coming. The rhythm of a good report card is what keeps me going”. Another student responded to the same question by stating, “I feel successful when I believe in myself. When I can achieve the impossible and help people do the thing they can’t do. I feel my most successful.” Students expressed clear desires to succeed academically and hold high standards for themselves in the writing responses. In a question that asked students to think about their own dreams, a student responded that, “In my dreams I imagine reaching my goals and making people proud of the person I have become.”

Privileging Textbook Definition

A sub-theme under Bringing it Home is referred to as, *Privileging “Textbook” Definition* which involves students’ concern over having the right answers. When the researcher explained to the students that a weekly writing exercise would ensue over the course of ten weeks, many students experienced initial confusion. Several questions were asked to validate that their responses were “acceptable” or meeting the approval of the researcher. As the interviews were beginning, all four students expressed to the researcher that they felt “overwhelmed,” “nervous to sound stupid,” or concerned that the researcher “would not be pleased” by what they had to say. The research unveiled that students became concerned during the writing response and interview process about definitions and language of their responses. This finding is indicative of teaching pedagogy and asks the further question of what does traditional curriculum value? How are student life experiences of value in the classroom? Why do students feel pressure about giving a “right” answer to an open-ended question?

This concern about “right answers” was especially clear when Student A heard the question about “resilience,” and hesitated before asking if the researcher was being “literal” with the question and was seeking “a textbook definition.” Student A had to be reassured that his own

sentiments were of value and despite his response, his authenticity was a valid answer. Student A further added to the concept of students being concerned about always being right as he spoke about knowing the correct answer in class but being too afraid to share it out loud.

Once all students were explained and reassured that the researcher valued their voice and authentic opinions, participant tone and body language appeared more open. For example, Student C exhibited outright nervousness as he commented before the interview that he “always sounds stupid when he speaks into a video or recording device” and that he “hates listening to his voice play back”. His attitude changed dramatically when the conversation deepened, and Student C disclosed information and details about his personal life that was not previously known to the researcher. Additionally, Student D displayed a concern for having the “right answers” in the beginning stages of the interview process. Although she did not explicitly address anxiety or unease about feeling the need to always be “right”, she did appear to be rehearsing her answers before the interview began. During the preview that the researcher provided of the questions, Student D was observed to be mentally preparing to respond before the interview officially began. Then, once the researcher began the process, Student D tripped over her words and wanted to start over and give a “better answer”.

Surprising Systems of Support

This research affirmed the obvious importance of a strong support network for students that includes teachers, family, peers, and the broader community, and also supported that there is more opportunity to strengthen teacher-students relationships that educators can do. It is not new knowledge that support systems are vital for student wellbeing and success, however, the intricate and unexpected systems of support networks that operate under the noses of educators is what is the surprising factor of this theme.

Through this process, the researcher re-discovered the value of being aware of student's home lives and living situations. While it is true that educators do not get paid to hang around after class, attend sports games, or hold after school tutoring groups, it is in their own best interest to do so if they truly care about the wellbeing of some of their most vulnerable students. In this study, students showcased their desire for strong support systems throughout the interview process- repeatedly divulging on their desires to be a part of a community and to feel protected. In response to the writing prompt exercise, a student wrote that, "a classroom environment where I have felt empowered was when I had most of my friends in the classroom. That year was so much fun and it was way less stressful to read in front of the class or do a project because I had all my people there who I felt comfortable around."

It is easy for some educators, especially those who have been burnt out over the years, to brush off a student who is perceived as "acting up" in class without taking the time to understand some of the adversities they have faced. For example, when students were asked during the writing prompt activity to write about what they imagined in their dreams, one student wrote, "in my dreams I imagine a world without poverty" and another student answered the same question by expressing, "in my dreams I imagine a way that me and my family could always be happy for the rest of our lives." Furthermore, the girls' pact that was made in the social group of Student B was an unexpected gem of this project. Student B offered insight into an un-seen role of a student whom most teachers and administrators deem as the "troublemaker". What Student B offered in this dialogue was that her friend actually undertakes a mother-like role within their social group and provides support for the other girls despite what adults in power may assume about that particular group of friends.

Connected to the theme of Taking it Slow, the researcher also recognized the value of learning the backgrounds of students is transformative for the educator and the students in the classroom. By opening classrooms for lunch/recess, students who are in need of escape can find refuge and comfort in a safe space including, and importantly, in their own networks of support. The research found that students rejoiced in an environment where they could decompress, be themselves, and have a trusted adult who is there to listen or offer advice if the student needed it.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrated that the essence of students taught in a manner to take it slow is seen in their ability to connect with learning and bring it home within themselves. The evolution of students who are able to slow down and dive into learning in a way that is meaningful to them is seen in their responsiveness in the classroom. The research discovered that student support systems expand far beyond the traditional realms of immediate family and teachers, and may surprise educators in the different forms that they appear. In this study, students find some of their main sources of support from adopted siblings, school friends who are classified as “high risk”, and support staff who are school employees of color. The results of the study have concluded that students empower themselves through unconventional means that educators have traditionally overlooked.

In the following discussion of this thesis, frameworks and theories presented in the literature will be purposed to demonstrate some of the ways teachers and the larger systems of education can best serve the many needs of students. This thesis asserts that the findings in the study coincide with many of the principles vested in the literature of humanizing students, minimizing the positions of power traditionally granted to teachers, and teaching relevant and interesting curriculum that coincides with the lived experiences of students. This discussion will also advise that theories and frameworks must be applied to educational policy and practice through a reconsideration of systemic and structural priorities. An outstanding priority must be placed on creating effective curricula that focuses less on learning outcomes and state standards and more on relevant and interesting lessons to connect students’ lives to learning in the classroom. This chapter will speak to the limitations of the research conducted in this thesis and propose suggestions for future research in the educational area of student empowerment, racially

diverse learning environments, and innovative curriculum. Finally, this thesis will conclude by reinforcing the essential arguments that student voices should be given greater consideration when analyzing issues in education and proposing new policy.

The student responses analyzed in this study conveyed similarities with the major frameworks and theories addressed in the literature review. Freire's (1970) framework of students' understanding of their own social, economic, and racial backgrounds was identified through various points in student interviews as participants spoke about their own identity in each avenue. Findings from the study also addressed the teacher student relationship that is a quintessential aspect of Freire's approach to pedagogy. Student attitudes lead the researcher to discover that students are highly responsive when feeling their voice as valued, which is a key element in Freire's work. The research discovered a similarity with Freire's framework that students convey more openness and willingness to partake in school activities when the power positions of the educator are minimized and the student feels their position as more empowered. Findings from the study also coincided with Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, which addresses how change happens during learning so that a learner can integrate a different perspective, or grow in the ability to understand greater nuance and complexity (Mezirow, 1994). Additionally, student data also affirmed some of the work of bell hooks, specifically her theory on engaged pedagogy. According to hooks, teachers' excessive use of power and ultimate authority over students minimizes the students' enthusiasm for learning and only teaches mindless obedience to authority, which does the opposite in hook's activism against oppression (hooks, 1994). The student data in the study clearly demonstrated how students want an outlet to speak about their lived experiences in an educational setting, which is precisely the argument for which Freire, Mezirow, and hooks all advocate.

The frameworks and theories described in the literature review have provided this thesis with the foundation of humanizing teaching approaches that can be incorporated into a classroom. Each of the theories vested in transforming education examined in the literature review, rejects the conventional standards based methods of classroom teaching and heavily emphasizes the incorporation of real world and lived experiences into daily classroom learning. The findings of the research held the same sentiments expressed by Freire, Mezirow, and hooks in their ideas that teacher-student relationships are of utmost importance and should be reexamined in a practical sense. The study found it conclusive that teacher-student relationships thrive when the educator takes the time to know the lives of their students both inside and outside of an educational setting. The experiences, interests, and commonalities that students have should be incorporated into every day learning to the best of the educator's capabilities. Learning should be full of fun, passion, and relevance

Implications for the Literature

This thesis argues that active measures to minimize the positions of powers that educators have and build up the roles of students should be put into action instead of merely being vocalized. The argument was clearly made in the study that students have great ideas and the willingness to participate and contribute their inputs in a classroom, but are rarely given the opportunity. The findings in this study also go beyond the literature in the sense that they shed light on the importance of students feeling positive about not being rushed in the classroom.

Taking is slow is a way for students to feel in control of their own learning. In many ways, the finding of taking it slow answers the initial research question, "how do students empower themselves in a racially and economically segregated school district?" While the literature reviewed did speak to the importance of flipping the script of power in the classroom, it

did not suggest the concept of allowing students autonomy to slow down the fast paced-ness of everyday learning. Furthermore, the researcher believes that the concept of transformative learning, which is described as the process of constructing new ideas as one gains experience in the world can be better aided if taking it slow was integrated as a consideration of the process itself (Mezirow, 2001). A point for reflection at an individual pace and in a comfortable environment allows humans to develop their new perspectives into actual world views.

This study also drew new knowledge and insight into the intricate systems of support that students are a part of in their everyday lives. The study conducted in this research displayed little opposition to the foundational works put forth in the literature, but it did have a significant new finding to add to the body of research, the importance and existence of surprising networks of supports. For example, Freire's work never mentioned the support systems in which some students rely on that do not include their immediate family or educators (Freire, 1970). For students of non-traditional two parent households especially, surprising systems of support are common networks that students rely on and associate with. Prior to the research being conducted, the researcher never gave the importance of these networks much thought. However, the gap in this knowledge lies in the fact that in some cases, perhaps the biological mother or father of the child is not the best person to contact for support, furthermore, the educator cannot guarantee that there will be a biological mother or father to rely on anyhow.

This new knowledge presents that siblings, adopted relatives, peers, community members, and even non-academically successful (presenting) classmates provide some of our students main sources of support. This finding was a game changer in the sense that it was not addressed directly in the literature and provided students interviewed a tremendous amount of assistance in their everyday lives. How could such important networks never been

acknowledged? How were these systems of support overlooked? How can educators use this new found information to aid them in supporting their students? For one, educators can gather insight into the surprising systems of support that students rely on and are a part of by keeping a close eye on students- who do they hang out with while walking to class? What member of their family do they write about in their class assignments time and time again? What sports or extracurricular organizations are they a part of? The question educators need to ask themselves is, how can we better support our students and what surprising support systems exist for that student who are we trying to support?

In addition to the gap in the knowledge being that the findings suggest new additions to the literature, another significant addition to this work lies in the fact of where the research study was conducted. It is extremely relevant that this study is the first piece of graduate level research to be conducted at a school in California that is currently going through a mandated desegregation process. For the first time in over fifty years, a research study has been done by a teacher who works in a segregated school district that is the subject of an ongoing lawsuit spearheaded from the state's Attorney General. This piece of research is the first of its kind to come out of this specific situation in California. What is being explained in national news about our school district is only one small sliver of the truth. What national news chooses to report disregards student input of the situation and how they cope and feel the repercussions of decisions made at the local and state level. In the end, many students are hurt by the process even though they are not responsible for the wrongdoings of others. A child is never responsible or at fault for situations that they cannot control- so why are essential aspects of their learning being taken away for the actions that people in power took? Once again, the bigger systems at play

bear no consequences yet students, who are the innocent beings in this situation are faced with the burden.

Implications for Practice and Policy

In this study, the three most significant findings were students feeling more connected to learning in environments where pressure was reduced (taking it slow), students more engaged in learning when the material was presented in a fun and relatable way (bringing it home), and the intricate social networks in which students rely (surprising systems of support). In order for educators to allow the opportunity for their students to take it slow, they could be served by the liberty of teaching classes that are longer than the typical 50 minutes reserved for their classes or receive greater flexibility within what is mandated over the course of a week. Far too often, teachers feel rushed to craft the “perfect” lesson where students enter, sit down as expected, and get straight to work.

Efforts to humanize our students need to be actually put into practice. We can no longer afford to conform to the formulaic approach of the perceived “best way” of teaching and expect students to engage in learning. Students showed their expressed interest in taking things slow, so imagine a classroom where educators did not feel rushed to have students seated with their pencils ready in one minute so they could begin to cram that day’s agenda of learning with the remaining 49 minutes? How often do educators face frustration when they attempt to start their class and students are talking amongst themselves and they feel as if they cannot get a word in edgewise? Has anyone entertained the possibility that their conversations might be meaningful for socioemotional development? Has anyone ever considered their “mindless chatter” to not be a sign of disrespect, but rather an opportunity where students can communicate with peers of their age in a way that they cannot at home? Now, imagine a classroom where students could

come in, have meaningful conversations with their peers and educators, and ease into the learning of the day in a way that was not rushed? Students in this situation are likely to feel more connected to the lessons. As a direct result, students may feel safer and more valued as humans. Since content and learning objectives are extremely important for all students, the research argues that allowing educators and students the space and time needed to make this imaginary classroom into a reality is a major barrier.

An additional barrier to this visionary classroom where students guide themselves into the learning, largely has to do with the attitudes of educators and their own unwillingness to change or renounce this power. Many educators have been conditioned with the mindset that if you allow students to talk amongst themselves in the class, then the educator has lost power over the classroom. While every classroom needs to function in a way to serve an educational purpose, educators still feel a sense of awkwardness or outright unwillingness to relinquish their power even if it creates a sense of comfort for students. That being said, this research challenges educators and administrators to deeply reconsider the positive probabilities of what a classroom could feel like if students are given an opportunity to take it slow before bringing home the learning. This study argues that by taking it slow in the class, not only will students feel more comfortable and at ease in the class, but they will be more engaged and willing to immerse themselves into learning over the long run. That being said, benefits of the findings vested in this thesis also depend upon administrators being willing to allow teachers to have the opportunity to use time in class for the purposes of giving students the opportunity to take it slow, which has been discovered in this research helps them to bring it home.

Built on the premise of previous research as well as the findings of the study, this thesis also advocates for a restructuring and reprioritization of status quo standards-based instruction.

Both the findings in this study and the literature examined have detailed the importance of students connectedness with learning taught in class. This thesis seeks to entertain the possibility that administrators and school districts will reexamine the enforcement of state learning standards and objectives instead to offer space where teachers can cater learning to their specific demographics and class interests. The backwards design approach should be fully utilized by educators with support from administrators to puzzle piece together state standards into the classroom while educators simultaneously readjust learning outcomes that are specific to their many classes. It simply does not make sense that one set of standards is the blanket approach for fifty eight California counties and thousands of public schools. The amount of diversity and intersectionality that exists within California's varying demographics cannot succumb to the outdated curriculum of the standards set forth by the state. That is not to say that the state does not have adequate standards to begin with. However, if our goal as educators is to provide education that students connect with, engage with, and fully bring home, then teaching only the standards is not enough. In addition to the standards set forth by the state, educators should also incorporate culturally responsive practices, ethnic studies, socioemotional development, and standards should be created for understanding identity and intersectionality. Having these new standards for classes would allow students of diverse backgrounds to be invited into a considerably more interesting, and “closer to home” conversation.

The research has shed new light at an inside look into the surprising systems of support that students are a part of. Educators can greatly improve their practices in the classroom by gaining the knowledge of who their students rely on for support. It would be helpful for classroom teachers to recognize that other people exist for students other than just parents. However, it is in the best interest of the student and the educator if the educator can use their

knowledge of the student's support group network to their advantage. Student engagement and attitudes may be affected greatly if the educator takes the time to speak to one of their student's surprising support persons rather than going straight to a parent or administrator. It is a reality that sometimes when a teacher calls home to a parent of one of their students, no apparent improvement is shown in that student during class. However, the vast majority of students, whether they are the highest achieving or the most struggling, have an individual in their life that they admire and will listen to if they were to be the one contacted by a teacher.

Furthermore, both educators and administrators can significantly benefit from knowing who students rely on for support. First of all, the research clarified that for students who do not have traditional two parent households, oftentimes reaching out to a parent is not the best option for support. So often is it that educators become frustrated when they attempt to reach home and get no response. Have other people in the student's life who offer them more support than the biological parent(s) or legal guardian(s) been considered? The first step in putting practices and policy into place for educators/administrators to understand the intricate networks of student support systems is to be able to look for them. Once a surprising support system has been recognized, the next step is finding a way to reach out to that person or people if the student is in need of support. Additionally, administrators should consider the legality of who an educator can include in supporting a student. This current system shows no acknowledgement for the extended family members, brothers and sisters, community members, or other adults that could play a much stronger role for support of a student than the emergency contact.

All in all, California's current model of public education needs to be desperately reimagined. Administrators, school districts, and state departments could learn a lot about the needs of public school students if they bypassed those in charge who assume they can speak on

their behalf and instead hear directly from them. As the research conducted in this thesis values the student's perspectives in the situation, the researcher urges that people in positions of power invite the voices of students to shed light on the implementation of policy for this thesis's key findings.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

This research acknowledges several limitations that could not be implemented in the study. First and foremost, the students involved in this study all had preexisting relationships with the researcher and felt comfortable speaking towards the questions that were asked in the interviews. In some cases, students had already spoken about some aspects of their life (i.e., being adopted, coming from a single parent household, attending an afterschool program, etc). Because some students already divulged these aspects of their lives to the researcher, perhaps they did not offer extensive amounts of detail under the presumption that the researcher already knew about those aspects. Second, the research had a time constriction of two months. If the research were longer, a shift in student responses could be recorded and analyzed for trends. Additionally, the student participants for the individual interviews did not fully represent the demographics of the school site itself— three out of the four student participants were African American and one identified as Asian American. The study was also limited in its approach to solely seek out the student perspective of a very unique situation, leaving out the inputs of educators, administrators, parents, and community members.

Directions for future research in this area could entail methods that are complementary to this study but directed within a broader community range and more inclusive of different perspectives. Future studies could consider what the implementation of taking it slow, bringing it home, and recognizing surprising systems of support looks like in a broader context. For this

specific study, the research found that these findings were indicative of the lived experiences of minority groups who attend school in a segregated district. A study should be conducted to uncover the surprising systems of support that manifest themselves for students of a different demographic and perhaps a different age group. Additionally, a study should be conducted for the other school in the district that this study was done in, to further understand and draw comparisons between student needs at both schools who are going through the same state level desegregation mandate. Other avenues of research that could further this study may include interviewing teachers and administrators to gauge their responsiveness to the findings of this study.

Conclusion

The research explored in this thesis expresses the value of student voice and input in terms of understanding their own empowerment. In a school district composed of significant diversity and intersectionality, student voices should be at the forefront of the conversations held in classrooms and at the state led meetings. This thesis has explained how students envision their ideal educational experience, how they connect their lives to learning, and how they seek guidance and support in unexpected places. Findings from confidential eighth grade writing responses and the interviews of four unique research participants delve into the real and raw lives of students who are living through this remarkable historical event, the desegregation of their own school. Before this study was conducted, the researcher expected students' answers to interview questions to be rather glum. To her surprise, the lens in which she saw this school district facing, was not the same lens that students spoke. At the end of the day, these participants felt upbeat, joyous, and unwilling to allow oppressive forces rain down on their hearts. The most fulfilling realization is that students will empower themselves through any situation even if odds

may be stacked against them. As adults, most of us can recognize the disparities and blatant inequities of an imperfect society and assume that others may share our same solemn sentiments, yet the research has shown that students are empowered beings who will persevere.

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Appendix A: IRB approval letter.



1/15/20

Rachel Russell
50 Acacia Ave.
San Rafael, CA 94901

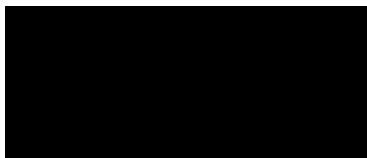
Dear Rachel,

On behalf of the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants, I am pleased to approve your proposal entitled *Empowerment of race and justice in a racially and economically segregated school site* (IRBPHP IRB Application #10827).

In your final report or paper please indicate that your project was approved by the IRBPHP and indicate the identification number.

I wish you well in your very interesting research effort.

Sincerely,



Randall Hall, Ph.D.
Chair, IRBPHP
Cc: Matthew E. Davis, Ph.D.

Appendix B: Writing Prompts

1. I feel most empowered when...(open, hear, comfort, steady)
2. I feel successful when I believe... (moment, sense, rhythm)
3. In my dreams I imagine...
4. Describe the classroom environment where you have felt the most empowered...
5. Creativity grows when... (seed, together, rhythm)
6. I have the power to transform... (turn, listen, while)
7. In the classroom of hope... (“color,” “nature,” quiet)
8. When I feel down, I know I can get back up because... (light, rooted, see)
9. If I believe in the power of change... (become, sense)
10. I find wisdom when...

Appendix C: Individual Interview Questions

1. Define what strength is for you...
2. Where do you find help when you need help with your homework?
3. How do your friends contribute to your life?
4. Who can you talk to?
5. Who are the people in your life who inspire you?
6. What would be something about the community you grew up in that you would like to see change for the next generation or a younger person?
7. In what ways do you feel supported by your classmates?
8. Resilience is defined as, “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties”, what do you think that means in your life?
9. How important is it that you have an adult who you trust in your life? Does that person exist for you?
10. If you could help people who do not have a voice in this world, what would you do for them?