

**Hope in Those Places of Struggle:
A Critical Exploration of Black Students'
Agency in One Place-based and One African-centered Elementary School**

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandfather, Gladstone Roy Stair.

My hero. Originator and sustainer of my first and forever home.

The best example of consistency, dedication and honor that I know. You saw the light and the fire and let it be so that it could grow. I hope you see in me and in this project all of the best lessons you've taught me:

*Stay busy
Work hard and ever forward
Keep your head in the books
Choose what is right always, without hesitation
Talk less, do more*

Doing my due diligence so that I can one day too not worry about anything --because I taught, worked and lived with purpose and principles.

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i believe in living.
i believe in the spectrum
of Beta days and Gamma people.
i believe in sunshine.
In windmills and waterfalls,
tricycles and rocking chairs;
And i believe that seeds grow into sprouts.
And sprouts grow into trees.
[...]

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i believe in the magic of the hands.
And in the wisdom of the eyes.
i believe in rain and tears.
And in the blood of infinity.

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And, if i know anything at all,
it's that a wall is just a wall
and nothing more at all.
It can be broken down.

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i believe in living
i believe in birth.
i believe in the sweat of love
and in the fire of truth.

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steered by tired, seasick sailors,
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Abstract

Critical emancipatory pedagogy (CEP) refers to curriculum and instruction that seeks to facilitate and inspire human agency, particularly in disenfranchised communities (Ball, 2000). In the case of African Americans, CEP has been concerned with the systematic production of citizens who hold intimate knowledge of history and the obstacles faced by Black people and yet, are poised to contend with and overcome these injustices. The theoretical literature on emancipatory approaches to education is robust and speaks substantively to the socio-emotional and political affordances of these liberatory frameworks. And yet, empirical analyses of non-academic outcomes in schools seeking to actualize a CEP remain limited. Consequently, we know little about how the theories translate into real-world practice and even less about CEP's capacity to deliver on its promise of sociopolitical development and Black student empowerment.

This project provides insight into whether and how schools function to develop political agency in urban-based, African American children. Drawing from Critical Race Theory and Holland et al's (1998) notion of *figured worlds*, I investigated the social imagination and political agency of elementary-aged Black students across two school contexts. Both schools proposed a commitment to emancipatory pedagogy. The first school's *African-centered* focus is on instilling in children a sense of pride and connectedness to the African Diaspora, with the hope that this type of affirmation will empower students to consider how their actions fit into a rich legacy of Black innovation

and self-determination. The second school, actualizes a *place-based* approach and uses the immediate context as a curricular resource. In the place-based school, Black students are afforded opportunities to think about what it might mean to have a deep appreciation for their communities, whilst still feeling responsible for improving the social and material circumstances within.

I conducted ethnographic research within these school sites across two academic years. Using student, teacher, and staff interviews, along with classroom/school observations, child drawings, and school artifacts, I explored whether and how agency manifests and, determined that the differential emphases of these two school models served to animate and cultivate Black student agency in distinct ways. Analyses and reduction of data employ grounded theory and constant comparative approaches.

In this dissertation, I argue that these schools perpetuate two distinct modes of engaging with social problems—one institution focused on individual racial *transcendence* and the other, motivated by an objective of collective *transformation*. These contrasting emphases inform how enrolled students navigate and cope in an stratified society. In my analyses, I illustrate how each school's tendency towards an individualistic or communalistic orientation is germane to Black children's understandings of the salience of racism and root causes of social issues such as poverty, mass incarceration and violence.

The findings of this dissertation suggest that when schools privilege individual or collective forms of agency within the context of school, children's' perceptions and priorities outside of school can be shaped by these institutional ideals. Schools then, serve as important sites for cultivating critical consciousness, by informing students' evolving

conceptions of what is good and what is possible for people “like them”. In short, this study rejects the framing of educational equity as defined exclusively by measures of academic achievement and serves as a window into understanding the relationship between school-based pedagogies and child positioning as citizens and change agents in a “raced” society.

Chapter I

Introduction



As one might surmise from the title of this dissertation, this project is a product of my own hopes and struggles, exemplified by the schools and dynamic Black children featured in this study. In my own experiences as an educator, the very best instruction and generative relationships with young people have always rooted in hope-- a hope that we can all be better and do better. In hope that strategic action and unrelenting determination can counteract tools of oppression and improve the social and material conditions of children's lives. But the humanity in us means that we will always struggle. We will struggle with the fight towards justice. We will fall short of our own ambitions in classrooms, as I did on countless occasions. We will become unsettled, uncertain of next steps. We will grow tired, overwhelmed and frustrated. We will make mistakes. As researchers, we will struggle to prove ourselves as worthy witnesses (Winn & Ubiles, 2011) to those who allow us to know and study them.

Within the academic community, and specifically amongst educational researchers, I've noticed a trend away from hopeful discourses. The critiques are well-warranted. Borrowing from my sisters and brothers in my hometown it is, in fact, "bad out here". And though I don't take for granted the deep pervasivity of issues within public education, I have grown more concerned, of late, with how we learn and teach from places of hope. Duncan-Andrade (2009) has furthered this idea of *critical hope*. Critical

hope is demonstrated through an understanding and command of what is real (i.e. material). It is also deeply reflective and downright audacious. In our pursuit of critical, yet hopeful pedagogies, we are better positioned for what Vizenor (1994) refers to as *survivance*. More than basic survival, survivance lends itself to the creation of “spaces of synthesis and renewal” not defined solely or rigidly by discourses of deficiency or damage (Tuck, 2009).

In the drawings and articulations of 4th and 5th grade African American children seen in the table below, I note the hopefulness in their expressions. Across their illustrations, they portray school as sites of social and intellectual stimulation, of affirmation and contentment. As they think about what it means to be Black, they make associations to cultural dynamism, strength and community. These students demonstrate in their articulations that they are already beginning to imagine how they might act and engage with the broader society with a sense of possibility. But those clustered on the right and the left do not tell the same stories. Though they are all located in the city of Riverview, they do not construct the same narratives around constraints or their own agency. *What then accounts for the differences?*

Figure 1.1: Comparison Overview Matrix

	
<p><i>"The words in our academy creed really do mean something....Like I will define myself, I will speak for myself, I'll name myself and I'll have faith in myself...I can just speak up and be- be brave to say who I am"</i> -Angelique</p> <p><i>"But this school don't play---Because they want you to grow up and they want you to just- like grow up and get your education so that you all could have a better life than what is"</i> -Dante</p>	<p><i>"..what I've heard about is that [we are supposed to find] solutions to every problem. So I'm thinking so much about that and how I could be -- well, I'm already a solutionary, but how I can be a better solutionary on how to fix things around this state and the city"</i> -Juliana</p> <p><i>" ..they teach us like different things like not just about like learning things, they teach us about like life too-- They teach us like life tools like you have to show integrity...you have to follow the habits"</i> -Kisha</p>

This project provides insight into whether and how schools function to develop political agency in urban-based, African American children. Via a critical ethnographic approach, I investigated two distinct schools whose missions make evident a commitment to producing Black students and citizens who, despite perceived challenges, are willing and able to contend with the social problems afflicting their communities¹ and society writ large. Interestingly, these two schools, while united in this quest to increase Black students' capacity as change agents, differ in their understandings of how best to achieve

¹ E.g. neighborhood, city

the ultimate goal. The first school's substantive focus is on instilling a sense of cultural pride and connectedness to the African Diaspora, with the hope that this type of affirmation will empower students to consider how their actions (now and in the future) fit into a rich legacy of Black innovation and self-determination. The second elementary school, employs a curriculum where neighborhood and community are key resources and central topics of inquiry. In this school, students are afforded opportunities to think about what it might mean to have a deep appreciation for their immediate context, whilst still feeling responsible for improving the social and material circumstances situated within. In this text, I describe my dissertation study which compares the manner, perceptions, visions and self-efficacy of Black children attending these two schools, with the intent of tracing the relationship(s), between each schools' liberatory model and mission, and Black students' development as citizens poised to contend with and respond to society's most pressing issues.

Statement of the Problem

Decades of research make evident enduring disparities across our nation's schools on the bases of race, social class status and zip code. In particular, African American children, have been uniquely and unjustly situated within the U.S. public education system leaving many to question whether Black lives and Black minds truly matter, in classrooms and urban public schools across the nation. For low-income, African American communities² the inequities and inadequacies of public schools are often

² Often doubly disadvantaged due to their racial and class status. There is overwhelming supporting evidence towards this end, dating back this country's inception and the "African Holocaust of Enslavement" (Lee, 2005)

increasingly pronounced. Urban-based Black children too-frequently contend with cultural alienation/disparagement (Carter, 2005; King, 1991, 2005; Lee, 2005), low-intellectual expectations (Ferguson, 2003; Lee, 1995; Rist, 1970), authoritarian classrooms (Ferguson, 2001, Fine, 1991; Skiba et al, 2002; Tyson; 2003) and a host of other potentially repressive circumstances. What King (2005) refers to as “patterns of material, cultural and spiritual deprivation” have been found to have a detrimental effect on the development of African American students (p. xxiv).

Numerous studies have stressed the importance of agency, i.e. deliberate action towards a specified end, finding that one’s sense of agency has a positive association with achievement (Sanders, 1997), engaged learning (Conchas, 2001; Deyhle, 1995; O’Connor, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2001), resiliency (O’Connor, 1997) and civic participation for minoritized students. Nonetheless, much of the literature positions urban schools as sites which *discourage* the growth of agency (Fine, 1991; Miron & Lauria, 1998). So, while we know a great deal about what disempowers Black³ students as learners and leaders in traditional city schools, there remains many questions about the potentiality and nuances of alternative approaches, i.e. those that seek to empower students as engaged learners and citizens.

Yet, a review of pertinent literature suggests that there may be a counterstory⁴ (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) of Black education and school socialization which remains understudied. A growing body of scholarship draws upon social, critical and critical race

³ The identifiers “Black” and “African American” are used interchangeably in this analysis. With that being said, I respectfully acknowledge scholars/scholarship wherein these terms are not used as synonyms for personal, socio-historical and/or political reasons.

⁴ Or many counter-stories

theories to elucidate what an alternative, holistic and justice-oriented approach to Black education might entail. Jointly, these contributions constitute what I refer to as a Critical Emancipatory Pedagogical (CEP) Framework, given their overlapping goals of learner empowerment and social change. In the case of CEP, the social and political aims are explicit⁵. Critical emancipatory pedagogues and advocates agree that learning should “facilitate or encourage human action and agency”, such that students from oppressed groups begin to see themselves as efficacious intellectuals who can lead the charge in solving the social problems which afflict their communities (Ball, 2000).

Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy, although distinguishable by core tenants, is not monolithic in its application. There are various models which have been applied in a variety of contexts. Of particular interest to this study are place-based and African-centered models, which, in addition to being understudied relative to traditional public schools, provide a provocative point of comparison in thinking about the development of agency in urban-based Black children. African-centered education is premised on the assumption that all people of African descent share broad cultural continuities which were disrupted by the African Holocaust of enslavement (Ginwright, 2004; King, 2005, Lee, 2005). African-centered education therefore endeavors to support Black children in understanding who they are, where they’re from and their own vast potential (Hilliard, 1985). The pedagogical approach, in theory, works to develop a sense of self-determination in Black students, along with a commitment to combating white supremacy in all forms (Caruthers, 1994; King, 2005; Woodson, 1933). Place-based approaches, in

⁵ Although not monolithic, as evidenced by the range of sub-models with distinct features.

concept, allow for “intensified focus”, and provide a “...sense of direction and identity that might power individuals to struggle and to endure” (Kincheloe & Pinar). Critical place-based models generally do not make salient issues of race, but do prompt Black youth to think about how their actions impact their community and the future world.

The existence of these two schooling models raises interesting questions about the consequences for Black student’s political development. *What does it mean to foreground race versus “place” in curriculum intended to empower urban-based Black children? Do students differ in perceptions of what problems/barriers confront the Black community, or, in how they believe these problems may be resolved? Does the differential foci of each school have bearing on where and how Black students believe that they can act in the world in relation to apparent constraints?* Curiously, the literature provides insufficient insight into these queries. Although the theoretical literature around CEP prioritizes the development of critical capacity and change agency in Black students, the empirical focus has been largely on capturing student achievement gains as a result of liberatory curricular and co-curricular practices (Durden, 2007; Lee, 1992; Lomotey & Brookins, 1988). Previous studies fall in line with the prevailing discourses in their preoccupation with the (closing of) Black-white achievement gap, which, while important, contradicts the very premise by which critical emancipatory models were conceived. So, while the tenets and rationale for CEP are ever-clear, we know little about how the theories translate into real-world practice and even less about CEP’s capacity to deliver on its promise of sociopolitical development and Black student empowerment.

Research Design

Given the preceding context, this dissertation study is driven by the following questions:

- 1) How do 4/5th grade Black students in one Place-based and one Afrocentric school differ in their conceptions of the opportunities and constraints faced by Black people in their (1) immediate geographic context, (2) nation and (3) internationally?
 - a. How might they differ in their imagining of the social landscape, to include understandings of morality, root causes (of problems) and freedom?
- 2) To what extent and in what ways do these students perceive that they can engage with and navigate these opportunities and constraints?
- 3) What relationships can be traced among students' aforementioned perceptions and actions, and curricular and co-curricular content, practices, and/or school instruction?

Theoretical Framework

I draw from critical and critical race theory in conceptualizing this dissertation. Critical theories of education assume the ubiquity of hegemony in society and schools. *Hegemony*, a term most often credited to neo-Marxist sociologist Gramsci (1971), describes a process wherein the dominant class⁶ of society retains and reproduces its own power and privilege, thus ensuring the alienation, exploitation and/or oppression of

⁶ white, male, affluent and heterosexual are examples of identity markers which have historically held privileged status in societies.

“others”. With hegemony, people unwittingly consent to and rationalize injustices by endorsing the economic, political, intellectual and/or moral preferences of an elite group (Gramsci, 1971). The privileged status of the “elite” group is not leveraged through violence or coercion, but instead; via a system of taken-for-granted logics wherein select traits, behaviors and knowledge (i.e. those associated with the dominant class) come to be regarded as normal, optimal and/or common-sense by the general public, as are the means and mechanisms by which individuals experience selection into particular statuses and opportunities. Social hierarchies and differential treatment become so deeply rooted, that most citizens come to see the status quo as natural features of a diverse society wherein merit dictates opportunities, rather than a myth which perpetuates the marginalization of those who cannot or will not assimilate into the dominant culture (Giroux, 1981).

Moreover, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and scholars hold that we live in a “raced” society which perpetually positions African American students at a disadvantage. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) emphasize, race continues to be a significant predictor of inequity in schools and society. Consequently, any critical, emancipatory educational program for Black students must acknowledge and seek to counteract the problems of racism and white supremacy. In this study, I begin with the theoretical premise that racism and hegemony are real, important factors to the academic, emotional and sociopolitical development of Black, urban-based youth. What’s more, I make the argument that just as schools have historically played a role in the reproduction of the status quo, they also hold the capacity for disrupting it in the service of educational equity. By investigating only schools explicitly committed to disrupting cycles of

inequality and developing critical capacity in Black students, I am also arguing for these schools as viable sites of learning which, although understudied, warrant thorough consideration in research.

Holland et al's (1998) conceptualization of *figured worlds* is also integral to this project. Figured worlds are understood as socially and culturally constructed "realm(s) of interpretation" characterized by a unique set of activities, politics and norms which provide the actors situated therein with a sense of what is possible. In this dissertation, I frame CEP schools as examples of figured worlds couched within the broader society. These institutions are designed to impact how Black students see and position themselves in school, with the hope that this will ultimately translate into increased agency, empowerment and transformation in the world writ large. This dissertation explores the extent to which the figured school world has bearing on young students' conceptions of self, efficacy and society.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation is organized as follows: In Chapter 2, I provide further detail around the broad CEP framework and its key features. Next, I highlight two popular variations of CEP (place-based and critical race/afrocentric) as the subject of my analysis, which are both thought to be effective means of nurturing Black youth as scholars and political agents. I situate the prominence of placed-based and afrocentric schools in the discourses on Black emancipatory pedagogical practice. The emergence of critical race and critical place-based pedagogies have sparked a vibrant theoretical debate around Black education which I describe at length in my literature review. In Chapter 2, I also

explore the concept of agency and youth's sociopolitical development, and, I employ the frame of figured worlds (Holland et al, 1998) in the service of understanding the relationship between schools and society more broadly. Chapter 3 outlines the broader research context, study design, key actors and modes of analysis. For Chapters 4 and 5, I analyze the pedagogical emphases, norms and practices and of John Hope Franklin School of Excellence (african-centered) and Mission City School(s) (place-based), incorporating student and educator accounts throughout. Black children's expressions of opportunity, constraints and their own agency are taken up substantively in Chapters 6 and 7. Finally, Chapter 8 reduces the content from the preceding empirical chapters. In this last portion of the dissertation, I synthesize the areas of contrast at the level of the school, and discuss how the differential emphases of JHF and MCS inform children's perceptions, positioning and sense of possibility.

Chapter II Foundations in the Literature

To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity. (Freire 1970, 2000, p. 47)

Scholars have long argued that that an equitable, high-quality educational program for African American children cannot rest solely on the promise of traditional academic achievement; explicit attempts must also be made to support the sociopolitical⁷ and socioemotional development of Black youth (Caruthers, 1994; Durden; 2007; Ginwright; 2004; Shujaa, 1993). In the interest of thinking about Black students' critical capacity and political activism in particular, scholars have advanced pedagogical models aimed at producing young people who are equipped to assess and dismantle the very forces contributing to their own oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Giroux, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Potts, 2003). These models constitute what I classify as examples of *Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy* (CEP), and are designed to disrupt the cycle of inequality via transformative work in schools (McLaren, 2003). Critical emancipatory pedagogues hold that learning should “facilitate or encourage human action

⁷ I borrow from Watts, Williams & Jagers (2003) in defining sociopolitical development. Sociopolitical development (SPD) “emphasizes an understanding of the cultural and political forces that shape one’s status in society”. It is a term used to describe a process of growth in knowledge and skills, all of which increases a person’s capacity to take action within political and social systems (including the classroom). SPD is not solely about resisting oppression; it also takes into account an individual’s ability to imagine and help to achieve a more just world.

and agency”, such that students from oppressed groups begin to see themselves as efficacious intellectuals who can lead the charge in solving the problems which afflict their communities (Ball, 2000; Friere, 1970, 2000). More precisely, in the case of African Americans, CEP has been concerned with the systematic production of citizens who hold intimate knowledge of history and the obstacles faced by Black people and yet, are poised to excel and lead in spite of apparent injustices.

Naming Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy

The purpose of this introductory section is to clarify and contextualize what is meant by Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy (CEP) and analyze scholars’ treatment of the concept across bodies of literature. Above, I introduced the notion of CEP in very general terms. Such generality masks the complexity of the concept and its theoretical underpinnings. Consequently, a more precise definition is essential to comprehending my overarching research goals, questions and methodology. To be clear, the compound term “Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy” was developed by me, the principle investigator, for the purposes of this analysis. When I refer to CEP, I use it as an umbrella term, interpretive frame, and organizational device. Moreover, my usage of the language of “CEP” demonstrates an attempt to move towards greater coherence in education discourses. Across the literature, I’ve encountered numerous discussions of “liberatory” and/or liberation pedagogies (e.g. Friere; Gordon, 1993), “emancipatory” pedagogy (e.g. Arce, 2004; Murrell, 1997; Swartz, 1996), and most commonly, “critical pedagogy” (e.g.

Giroux, Ball, Ellsworth, Jennings & Lynn)⁸. Despite variations in diction, my finding is that these discussed frameworks/models are not wholly distinct. Rather, they converge along central dimensions by sharing in logic and a particular set of tenets. The commonalities are summarized as follows:

Tenets of CEP

1. Hegemony and oppression are ubiquitous within society. Schools have played an active role in producing and sustaining inequities.
2. There is no neutral education. All education is political. Critical emancipatory pedagogues take the stance of being justice oriented, anti-oppressive and anti-hegemonic. The aim is to eliminate subordination in schools and society (scholars are doubtful that this goal will be fully actualized)
3. Teachers are regarded as transformative intellectuals (i.e., key actors/facilitators in shifting paradigms in relation to tenets 1 & 2). Schools (and school officials) are obligated to reflect upon and challenge the status quo when it works to systematically disenfranchise individuals and/or groups.
4. All students hold viable intellectual and cultural resources that warrant equitable respect and public recognition in classrooms and beyond.
5. Education is to be a freeing and empowering practice. It should provide persons (e.g. teacher, student) with the tools to critically examine their world and pursue/solidify their own social-emotional, intellectual, cultural and political and economic well-being⁹.

Each of the aforementioned tenets will be considered in greater detail. What should become evident via textual examples and analyses, is that a diverse group of scholars have advocated for the application of critical emancipatory pedagogies in U.S. schools. While their discussions of these alternative models for education may reflect important nuances, the core aims and assumptions are virtually identical. I turn now to a substantive discussion of the tenets of Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy.

⁸ To name a few of the most prevalent terms encountered. My analyses are not limited to these designations and also include other, less common renderings i.e. “Education for Black-Self Reliance” (Lee, 2005)

⁹ This component of CEP is often discussed in relation to “praxis”, a five step pedagogical and reflective process that culminates with strategic action. I return to the concept of praxis in a later section.

Unpacking and Illustrating CEP

Tenets 1& 3: Persistent Inequities and the Politicality of School

Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy represents a response to entrenched problems in school and society. The very existence of CEP, indicates that scholars and educators have identified pressing needs to which curriculum and instruction might readily attend. Tenet one, “ubiquity of hegemony” provides insight into the core issue(s) driving the literature on Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy. *Hegemony*, a term often credited to neo-Marxist sociologist Gramsci (1971), describes a process wherein the dominant class¹⁰ of society retains and reproduces its own power and privilege, thus ensuring the alienation, exploitation and/or oppression of “others”. With hegemony, people unwittingly consent to and rationalize injustices by endorsing the economic, political, intellectual and/or moral preferences of an elite group (Gramsci, 1971). The privileged status of the “elite” group is not leveraged through violence or coercion, but instead; via a system of taken-for-granted logics wherein select traits, behaviors and knowledge (i.e. those associated with the dominant class) come to be regarded as normal, optimal and/or common-sense by the general public, as are the means and mechanisms by which individuals experience selection into particular statuses and opportunities. Social hierarchies and differential treatment become so deeply rooted, that most citizens come to see the status quo as natural features of a diverse society wherein merit dictates opportunities, rather than a myth which perpetuates the marginalization of those who cannot or will not assimilate into the dominant culture (Giroux, 1981).

¹⁰ white, male, affluent and heterosexual are examples of identity markers which have historically held privileged status in societies.

It may come as no surprise then that the view that hegemony is omnipresent is often assumed and therefore not taken up explicitly in CEP scholars' analyses. However, they are operating under the presumption that hegemony exists, and that it has been a fixture of schools and society. To be clear, while the terminology of hegemony may not be referenced explicitly, critical emancipatory pedagogues offer referents, frameworks and analyses that are wholly consist with the concept of hegemony. We can draw inferences from scholars' phrasing and framing which speak to hegemony and oppression as recurrent themes palpable in the U.S. and the world. For example, Burbles and Berk (1999) write that critical pedagogues are specifically concerned with the influences that, "perpetuate or legitimate and unjust status quo". Critical pedagogues take the "side" of disenfranchised groups to enact a pedagogy that raises questions about inequalities of power and, ".....the false myths of opportunity and merit for many students" (Burbles & Berk, 1999). Upon close examination, it becomes evident that Burbles and Berk (1999) understand the status quo in society to be marked with biases which work to the detriment of some and the benefit of others. People of color and those of low- SES tend to be most vulnerable to exploitation and least privy to opportunities and privilege¹¹. Note the use of the term "myth" which is a direct challenge to illusion of universality that hegemony supports. Joyce King (2000), an African American scholar, similarly references a disdain towards the perpetuation of "America's myths". Like Burbles & Berk, King argues that America's concern with maintaining an illusion of equality constrains educators and leaders' in their ability to actually pursue social justice. Instead,

¹¹ Hence, the need for allies. This follows from Burbles & Berk's (1999) description of critical pedagogy as requiring individuals to "take a side".

King (2000) encourages citizens to accept that hegemony is a part of the fabric of this nation. This acknowledgement will better position us to contend with educational and social injustices. King (2000) frames this as a “moral choice”: to question what is deemed “normal” and dare to challenge hegemonic views and practices.

Although not the subject of Gramsci’s (1971) analyses, scholars have written substantively about schools and their vital role in (re)producing and sustaining inequities (see for example: Apple, 1982; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977; Woodson, 1933). A comprehensive overview of the sources of inequality in schools is beyond the scope of this analysis. What is important though, is that critical emancipatory educational theorists are deeply concerned about the ways that schools have functioned, and therefore; are committed to disrupting the cycle of oppression via work in educational spaces. In the following excerpt, Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008) reiterate this orientation: [Critical pedagogues] challenge the assumption that schools function as major sites of social and economic mobility...[they] disclose and challenge the reproductive roles schools play in political and cultural life (p.23). Similarly, Potts (2003) explains, “Although mainstream schooling may serve to reproduce social asymmetries, emancipatory education challenges these asymmetries”. The work, according to critical emancipatory pedagogues, is political not unlike the maintenance of the status quo¹². Freire (1994) speaks to this point in *Pedagogy of Hope*. According to Freire (1994) “There is no neutral education. All education is directive” (p. 394). What Freire means, is that all attempts to educate are driven by goals predetermined by individuals and/or

¹² Propagated via a myth of meritocracy and guise of equality

institutions. These are human choices, based on notions of what knowledge is valuable and who should have access to this knowledge within a given context¹³. The only difference here is that in the case of CEP, the political nature of schooling is embraced and leveraged instead of cloaked and/or distorted (Burbles & Berk, 1999; King, 2000). In an earlier text, Freire (1970) outlines a “liberatory” pedagogy for oppressed people(s), one that would prepare them to “...take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (p. 35). In this example, Freire (1970) also demonstrates a heightened awareness of hegemony. Embedded in this statement is the assumption that the “real world” includes examples of inequity. Such injustices, although wrong, are normative and a way of life. What’s more, Paulo Freire (1970) situates pedagogy as a means of pushing back against the current conditions of society. In this instance, liberatory pedagogy is a tool which should work to the benefit of “oppressed people”, in part by building capacity and social change agency. Freire’s work during this era was based in Brazil. However, later discussions and interviews evoke similar language in reference to the United States, Africa and other localities.

I conclude this discussion of tenets one and two with an excerpt from Peter McLaren (2003), a well- known proponent of critical pedagogy, because it speaks to 1) the assumption that the status quo of schools is unequal and unsatisfactory, and 2) provides insight into the role of school-based critical pedagogy in addressing said problems. McLaren (2003) situates critical pedagogy thusly:

¹³ The exclusion of African American children from the public education system is a prime example of the politics of education. Furthermore, a survey of the deliberations of *how* African Americans were to be educated once access was granted, further demonstrates that educational/curricular decisions are subjective and mediated by a number of forces. See Kharem (2009) for an extensive discussion of the African Free Schools and political ideologies impacting Black education in the United States.

...a way of thinking about, negotiating and transforming the relationship among classroom-teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society and nation-state (p. 35)

This excerpt demonstrates the theorized relationship between schooling practices and the broader society. It is evident that McLaren (2003) sees classrooms as sites where social, institutional and materials circumstances can be rethought and transformed. He makes apparent his stance that the relationship between classroom-teaching, the construction of knowledge and broader institutional/social arrangements require disruption and reform. Although, the directionality of change is not clear from this excerpt, a full review of McLaren's analyses indicates a commitment to empowering the powerless via curriculum and instruction. In the next segment, I transition to discuss those held responsible for initiating such transformation in classrooms and in the social world more broadly.

Tenets 3-5: Education as freedom, Educators as facilitators

Advocating equity and social justice and becoming active community-building agents for social change are educational and moral missions that good teachers of all colors and ethnicities need to embrace for the sake of their own humanity. (King, 2000)

In the previous section, I show how an awareness of the persistence of hegemony (and of schools' roles in maintaining inequities) have prompted scholars to develop and advocate for critical, anti-oppressive educational alternatives. The purpose of this section, is to discuss the role of teachers, who are thought to be vital to the success of CEP.

Additionally, I look across the literature, to illustrate the key characteristics of a critical

emancipatory pedagogy. *What does it mean to enact such an educational program? What is the criteria for success?* Ultimately, I find that critical emancipatory educational theorists agree that equity and empowerment are fundamental to transformative learning. The treatment of students, their schooling experiences and their developed capacity all provide insight in determining whether (or not) the goals of CEP have been actualized. As alluded to above¹⁴, critical emancipatory pedagogues are characterized by a focus on educational contexts and teachers. The theory of change begins in schools and classrooms, and, in the hearts and minds of educators. Joyce King's (2000) message to teachers (excerpted above) is especially illustrative and representative of the CEP scholarship as a whole. In this example, King (2000) asserts that anti-hegemonic, justice-oriented teaching is simply good teaching. And, it is the responsibility of all teachers, regardless of background, to embrace social change as a necessary component of their teaching philosophies. bell hooks¹⁵, Black feminist, educator and activist, provides complimentary commentary on the role of teachers. In her conceptualization of a freeing education, hooks (1994) describes teaching as a "sacred" process, wherein teachers share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of students. According to hooks (1994), teachers ought to take advantage of the opportunity to make demands of themselves and their colleagues. Only then will educators possess, "an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress" (p.207). Teachers are facilitators of CEP. The burden of realizing and enacting a

¹⁴ Many of the aforementioned quotes specifically reference schools and/or teachers. But, in an effort to limit my analysis to include only what was most relevant to tenets 1 and 2, I may have neglected to fully discuss other key topics/themes.

¹⁵ hooks' generally does not capitalize her name is both a personal preference and a political act. I respect this convention in my writing, hence the use of lower case.

pedagogy for liberation begins with educators, who then begin to share this responsibility with their students.

Also in accordance with CEP tenet #3, Hilliard (1985) refers to the teacher as a “selfless healer intent on inspiring, transforming and propelling students to a higher spiritual level” (p, 15 in King, 2005). While some may regard Hilliard’s (1985) phrasing as overly religious, his message comes across abundantly clear. Educators have a social responsibility which, ideally, would transcend personal inclinations. Because teachers are by default, arbiters of power and knowledge in the classroom, enacting a program of CEP might require them to sacrifice ego for a greater good of student empowerment and social action. To return to Hilliard (1985), *healing*, then refers to a shift away from hegemony. And, *spirituality*, is synonymous with sociopolitical and/or individual awareness. So, it appears that scholars are in agreement about the role of the classroom teacher. They are essential to the success of Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy, and are expected to work to establish and sustain a classroom space where learning is “deep”, “intimate” and empowering (hooks, 1994).

What do critical emancipatory pedagogues mean by learner empowerment? If critical pedagogy is indeed conceived as a political, moral and pedagogical project rather than a set of rules or techniques¹⁶, how does one recognize it in action? The literature highlights two primary markers for evaluating CEP in practice. The first (i.e. tenet #4), relates to the treatment and positioning of students, particularly students’ holding minoritized and/or marginalized identities. The second (i.e. tenet #5), speaks to

¹⁶ See for example, Giroux (2013, interview)

the dynamic end goal of CEP: learners should be empowered as agents, capable of advocating for their own well-being and that of their communities. I further examine each of these curricular facets in the paragraphs which follow.

Untapped Potential: CEP & Student Development

[...] doing critical pedagogy is a strategic, practical task, not a scientific one. It arises not against a background of psychological, sociological, or anthropological universals, but from such questions as: “How is human possibility being diminished here?”...critical pedagogy always strives to incorporate student experience as “official” curriculum content” (Giroux & McLaren, 1989, p.248-50)

It is not possible to be an advocate of CEP without first being an advocate of students. Critical emancipatory pedagogy is theorized as having the potential to transform schools and society, but fulfillment of this goal is contingent upon students (i.e. their ability and willingness to carry the torch and participate in the counterhegemonic movement). The question Giroux & McLaren (1989) pose above is an important one, because it suggests that educators need to be concerned about maximizing human potential within their classroom spaces. According to the literature, the success of the movement is contingent upon teachers’ ability to draw from the unique resources of students and the surrounding communities. CEP (see tenet #4) asks that educators develop curriculum such that the lived realities of students *matter*, and have a place in classroom dialogue. Perlstein (2002) argues that this student-centered approach was central to the liberation pedagogy enacted by the Black Panther Party during the Freedom movement of the 1960’s. During that time, Panther-run schools utilized a “developmental” curriculum that began on the level of students’ everyday lives and then continued until students gained a more “realistic” perception of American society (Perlstein, 2002).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) writes that, “No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors.” (p.54). Herein, it becomes evident that an emancipatory pedagogy is, in part, distinguished by its ability to set a new precedent. Teachers must not use the status quo as the model, or perceive their work as an effort to help minoritized students to be more like the dominant class. This is not to say that intellectual rigor isn’t prioritized. Yet, critical emancipatory pedagogues would question and interrogate our preconceived notions about “rigor”, all in an effort to define a space where all students have an opportunity to impact learning. Similarly, Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008) and McLaren (2003) argue that an assets-based perspective is a non-negotiable component of emancipatory pedagogy. The cultures, communities and identities of students are not to be viewed as deficiencies to be replaced, because this perspective would only reinforce the (existing) unequal standard. McLaren (2003) states definitively that, “No emancipatory pedagogy will ever be built out of theories of behavior which view students as lazy, defiant, lacking in ambition, or genetically inferior” (p. 93). If students are to feel efficacious as intellectuals and change agents, they must first be affirmed as students and people.

The last core tenet of critical emancipatory pedagogy states that “education should be a “freeing and empowering practice” which equips students with the tools to critically examine the world and solidify their own well-being. Aronowitz (2009) refers to this feature as preparation for a “well-managed” life. He identifies three goals of critical pedagogy, all of which speak to student empowerment and agency which begins with self and concludes with social change:

- i. Self-reflection: Students should possess and awareness of self.
- ii. Critical Consciousness: Learners should develop deep knowledge of how social forces have ruled and impacted their lives.
- iii. Re-imagination: Students should begin to conceive of and set the conditions for a better life.

Aronowitz's (2009) set of goals is complementary to Freire's (1970, 1994) cycle of praxis. According to Freire, liberatory pedagogy guides students through a cyclical process of reflection, action and evaluation. The pedagogy depends on both the internalized ideologies of students *and* their ability¹⁷ to translate their skills and knowledge into positive life changes for themselves and others (Shockley & Frederick, 2010).

Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008) further illustrate this point. They conceive of urban critical pedagogy as a strategy which works to “break the cycle of disinvestment of human capital...by creating graduates who recognize their potential agency to improve urban centers” (p. 7). And so, the investment in marginalized communities is multifaceted. On the one hand, critical pedagogues aim to facilitate personal growth in students, and, to spark curiosity about society, power and inequalities (Shor, 1992). Yet, this empowerment and curiosity isn't enough. As Giroux (2003) puts it, critical pedagogy must be ultimately compelling enough to move students beyond critique and into actions that “explode the reifications of the existing society” (p. 50).

CEP and its multiplicity

It is worth noting that critical (emancipatory) pedagogy has garnered its fair share of criticism. An in-depth discussion of these critiques is beyond the scope of this project. However, it should be acknowledged that assessments of the perceived shortcomings of

¹⁷ And, willingness

critical pedagogy have encouraged the proliferation and application of various spin-off approaches, which scholars argue are better suited to the needs of particular communities¹⁸. One of the most common critiques, is the argument that critical pedagogy has fallen short in attending to issues of race and intersectionality (Ginwright, 2004; Gordon, 1995; Lynn, 2004). Consequently, we find examples in the literature of works which seek to elucidate what a more context appropriate curriculum might entail. Ginwright's (2004) study of a school-based critical intervention program in Oakland, California is one such example. In his book, Ginwright (2004) argues for a critical pedagogy for students which incorporates hip hop, issues of class, and race/ethnicity into the classroom curriculum. Without an intellectual space to think deeply about all of these facets of life, Ginwright (2004) claims that student empowerment (as desired) is unlikely to happen. Similarly, Trinidad (2011) theorizes around a critical pedagogy specifically for native Hawaiian students. Her version of critical emancipatory pedagogy, is enriched by analyses of native epistemology and an attachment to the surrounding land. In each of these cases, the overarching tenets of critical emancipatory pedagogy still hold true, even as pedagogues overlay new themes and priorities.

Black urban education, is a topical space wherein discussions of CEP have been especially vibrant. Given the traumatic histories of enslavement and disenfranchisement, to include but not limited to the delayed access to public schooling, African Americans represent a special and important case in education discourses. Consequently, a robust

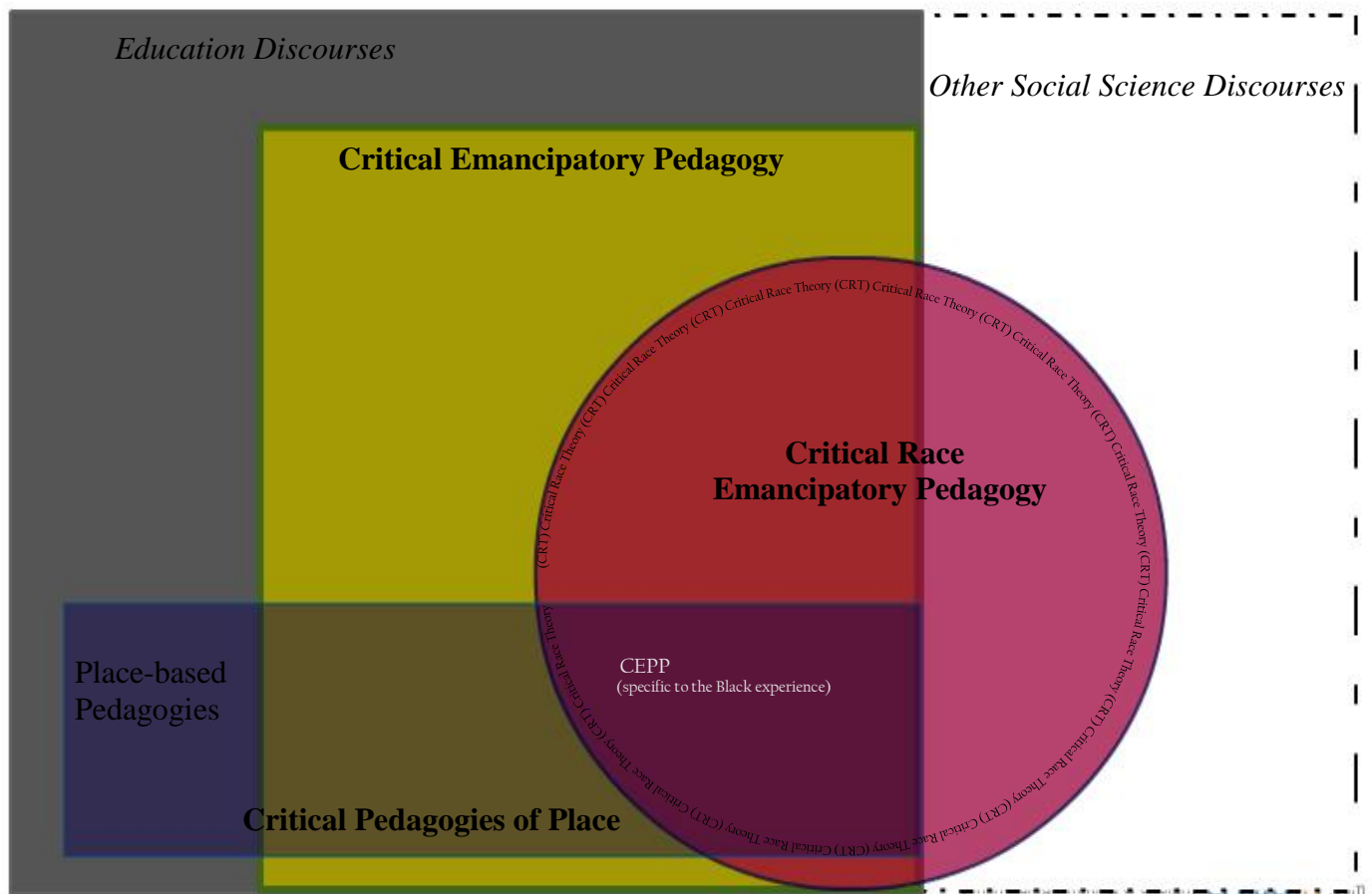
¹⁸ This is not to say that the development of all derivatives of critical emancipatory pedagogy were inspired by recent criticisms. For instance, Carter G. Woodson's (1933) *Miseducation of the Negro* is an example of a critical race pedagogical stance that predates Neo-Marxist and Freirian theories of hegemony in education and its critiques.

theoretical debate is evident across the literature, wherein scholars have discussed complex issues specific to the Black experience. More precisely, theorists pose the question of whether issues of *race* or *place* are most salient for Black students, and offer suggestions for an emancipatory curriculum in light of these perceived priorities. Some scholars feel that a racial/ethnic focus in school is limiting in that there are assumptions made about identity and culture which may further relegate some Black students (i.e. those who don't fit the mold) to a state of perpetual marginalization. On the other hand, a critical place-based model might further perpetuate the myth of post-racialism, while also denying Black students vital opportunities to learn about their ancestry.

In the next substantive section of this analysis, I provide further insight into the varying renderings of CEP, as pertinent to the African American community in particular. I further narrow my analysis, to discuss what I have termed *Critical Race Emancipatory Pedagogies* (CREP) and *Critical Emancipatory Pedagogies of Place* (CEPP), as they are most popular and speak to contested notions of Black identity, racial/ethnic solidarity and theories of change¹⁹. Figure 1, depicts the relationship between critical emancipatory pedagogy and its more specialized iterations (see below). I use this illustration to highlight points of convergence and divergence. CREP and CEPP have important theoretical distinctions. It remains unclear though, whether or not these distinctions serve to produce differential outcomes within the context of urban classrooms.

¹⁹ In other words, a discussion of race-based and place-based models fits into broader discourses and bodies of scholarship which have recently begun to push back against static, monolithic notions of Blackness and the Black experience.

Figure 2.1: Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy and its Relationship to CREP & CEPP



Race Matters: Towards a Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy of Race

Critical Race Emancipatory Pedagogy (CREP) represents the intersection between the broad construct of CEP & Critical Race Theory. While CEP does make explicit its commitment to combating hegemony of all forms to include advocating for oppressed racial/ethnic groups, it does not require that race/ethnicity hold priority over other marginalized identities. However, it is important to recognize the scholarly tradition of race-based theories of education and empowerment wherein the experiences of individuals as members of racial/ethnic groups are of primary concern. The literature responding to issues of Black education are especially robust, and predate the writings of

Paulo Freire & Henry Giroux, whom many regard as the founding fathers of critical pedagogy. In fact, this tendency to link the origins of critical/liberation pedagogies to intellectuals like Habermas, Gramsci, Marx, McLaren, Giroux and other white men²⁰ further speaks to the Eurocentric biases that CREP scholars seek to counter-act through curriculum, activism and analyses authored by Black scholar-educators²¹.

CREP scholars hold that we live in a “raced” society which perpetually positions African American students at a disadvantage. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) emphasize, race continues to be a significant predictor of inequity in schools and society. Consequently, any critical emancipatory education for Black students begins by attending first to the problems of racism and white supremacy. Recall Joyce King’s (2000) reference to America’s “myths”. While King alludes to a number of issues which constrain educators in their ability to pursue social justice, her most pressing concerns pertain to white supremacy and its impact on education. King (2000) describes her experiences working with white educators as they “struggled with the realization that...White supremacy racism denies equitable education to the poor and students of color” (p. 1). Moreover, King (2000) problematizes the portrayal of the African Holocaust of Enslavement in U.S. textbooks as the heinous act of a few greedy men, rather than a system consistent with the long tradition of enslavement in many European nations.

²⁰ As opposed to say, Carter G. Woodson or W.E.B. Dubois, two African American scholars who are less often recognized in mainstream education discourses.

²¹ e.g. Carruthers (1994) argues that the issues of Black education are, “...directly attributable to schooling founded on European-centered constructions of knowledge. The crisis in Black education will not be resolved until Black intellectuals achieve intellectual freedom and re-construct Black education on an African-centered foundation. These are the pre-conditions to the real liberation of the African race all over the world” p. 41

The landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court decision, which declared the legal segregation of whites and Blacks in public schools to unconstitutional, is another compelling example of the salience of race in the U.S. context and a referent for CREP scholars. *Brown v. Board* set in motion a series of desegregation efforts which were ineffective at best. Even with incentives bordering bribery, many white families have been reluctant to send their children to schools with high populations of African American children (Epps, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The stigma associated with Black and Brown people, continues to pervade. Now, U.S. schools are more segregated than ever before. And, those serving low-income African American children struggle to meet the needs of its constituency, for reasons related to cultural incongruence (Carter, 2005; Gay, 2000; Kohl, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995), limited resources (Ladson-Billings, 2006) curricular biases (Apple, 1992/3, Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008 and low teacher expectations (Rist, 2000; Weinstein et al, 2004). Yet, despite the poor track record of schools, CREP scholars believe that Black culture(s) and history can be used to both empower African American students and leverage their academic and intellectual development. I discuss this race-based pedagogical approach in the section which follows.

Elements of a Critical Race Emancipatory Pedagogy for Black Students

It is argued, that the circumstances which have contributed to the persistent marginalization of African American students in urban contexts necessitate the implementation of a specific, counteractive educational program. Carter G. Woodson (1933), notable African American scholar and CREP trailblazer, offered this perspective on “mainstream” education:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (xiii)

Above, Woodson (1933) makes evident a perceived conflict of interest within public education. He too, alludes to the pervasiveness of America's myths around meritocracy and race-based hegemony. Woodson's (1933) commentary implies that a truly emancipatory pedagogy for African Americans would facilitate increased racial/ethnic pride, perhaps in addition to analyses of power and privilege writ large. The curricular goals of CREP, while upholding the tenets of CEP, include a commitment to igniting and protecting the "spark of genius" housed within the Black child. And, just as importantly, a critical race emancipatory pedagogy would set in place a system for evaluation and merit created for and by Black people (Carruthers, 1994). Potts (2003) reiterates CREP's added emphases on cultural affirmation and healing. According to Potts (2003), an emancipatory education should work to affirm identity and agency, restore a sense of history/heritage, and provide opportunities for social activism (p. 175).

The most common empirical example of CREP for African Americans is the African-centered school and/or Afrocentric curriculum. African-centered education is based on the assumption that all people of African descent share broad cultural continuities which were disrupted by the African Holocaust of enslavement (Ginwright, 2004; King, 2005). Because the slave trade (and other factors) dislocated many people/families of the diaspora, proponents of CREP and African-centered education

argue that Black students need added support in making connections to their “rich history” (Ginwright, 2004, p. 25). African-centered education serves in this capacity, by helping Black children to understand who they are, where they’re from and their own vast potential. Carol Lee’s (2005) words are compelling in this regard. Lee (2005) poetically summarizes the educational dilemmas and questions to which African-centered education responds:

Our children have no idea who they are. How can we tell them? How can we make them understand who they are before the ocean became a furnace incinerating every pedestal from which the ancient black muses had offered inspiration? What can we say to the black man on death row? The black mother alone, bitter, overburdened and spent? Who tells them that their fate washed ashore at Jamestown with twenty slaves in 1619?” (p. 45)

Lee’s (2005) commentary speaks to the profound ramifications of the slave trade and other modes of oppression for Black people(s). She maintains that children must be told “who they are”, to “attack the roots of [their] miseducation (King, 2005). The classroom is a site where some of this work²² can be done.

African-centered schools and curriculum often emphasize the Nguzo Saba²³, a set of Kiswahili principles developed by pan-Africanist Dr. Maulana Karenga (1966) during the Black Freedom Movement. Karenga argued for a need for cultural groundedness in thought and action, and determined that upholding the values of the Nguzo Saba was one viable strategy for achieving a heightened level of Black consciousness. The Nguzo Saba

²² i.e. socialization and instruction which enables students to look at the world with Africa at the center (Lomotey, 1992)

²³ Colloquially known as the Seven Principles of Kwanzaa

emphasizes unity, cooperative economics, faith and self-determination, among other things. It is not uncommon for African-centered schools to organize lessons and/or celebrations geared towards increasing student competency around each of the seven principles.

The virtues of Ma-at are also an integral component of many African-centered educational programs. *Ma-at* is an Egyptian/Kemetic concept representing truth, order, balance, justice and harmony. Many afrocentric educators believe that via pursuit of Ma'at, a native concept, black students can become more empowered as thinkers and leaders (Ginwright,2004). Even though homage to Ma'at and the Nguzo Saba are rather common in Afrocentric schools, they are not a requirement. Individuals and institutions can still enact a CREP for African American students without inclusion of these principles²⁴.

There is a sizable amount of literature outlining the theory behind African-centered education, however; the empirical research is minimal and incongruous. Lomotey & Brookins (1988) found that students in African-centered schools achieved at higher levels and held more positive attitudes towards school than their traditionally-enrolled counterparts. Similarly, others (e.g. Durden, 2007; Lee, 1992) have also demonstrated the promise of African-centered education in facilitating increased academic achievement and intellectualism for low-income, Black youth. But, not all research findings suggest that African-centered schools support academic prowess. A study of 5th grade boys in an Afrocentric, cultural immersion school found a relationship

²⁴ Black Islamic schools are a specialized example of CREP. See (Muhammad, 2005) for more examples of race-based Islamic education. Themes of resistance, self-reliance and holistic empowerment are common to both African-centered and Black Islamic schools.

between the curriculum and students' sense of responsibility. However, they discerned no significant relationship between CREP, as enacted, and achievement (Sanders & Reed, 1995). Hudley (1997), in her study of an African-centered history program, presents evidence of increased academic self-concept but not achievement for middle school boys. Hudley's (1997) conclusions were based off of student surveys and self-reports from teachers. Across all of these cases, the voices of Black children remain obscured. It is less than clear what impact, if any, CREP/African-centered schooling has on the sociopolitical development of its constituents. The relationship(s) between critical race theory, instructional practice and Black student development are abstruse. Specifically, we have little insight into how the racial/ethnic affirmation received in school impacts (or not) students' worldview and/or self-perception. We can't make sense of if, how and what specific aspects of CREP pedagogy create increased opportunities for knowledge construction and critical analyses.

The utmost priority??: Critical considerations and Alternatives to CREP

African-centered schools, despite their relative popularity and long-standing presence in virtually every urban center, represent just one of many approaches to Black education/empowerment. A study conducted by Ginwright (2004) provides a useful transition here, because it speaks to a larger debate evident within education discourses, one that questions of aptness of African-centered schools. Ginwright's (2004) assessment of Afrocentric reform movement in an Oakland, California High school reveals a slew of challenges and barriers. Ultimately, he concludes that the reform program "failed" and argues that gaps in the logic of Afrocentrism were the primary cause of its demise.

Ginwright (2004) writes, African-centered education reform, with "...its single-minded focus on ethnic and cultural identity, fails to confront the complex economic challenges young people face" (p.25). To be clear, Ginwright does not take issue with the core tenets of Afrocentrism. Rather, he finds it to be insufficient in meeting the needs of all African American youth. The following commentary is worth quoting at length:

I learned from years of work with poor and working class parents and youth that the term *afrocentric* has little or no meaning for blacks who remain on the bottom of America's economic ladder..... I am concerned that the black middle class have defined the plight of blacks without adequately including the voices of the poor and working class. In doing so, the issues that poor and working-class blacks define are often marginalized and given less priority in the development of public and educational policy" (p. 2)

Ginwright's analyses are important, because they introduce economic class and context into the conversation. McCarthy (1988), similarly cautions against a solely race-based emancipatory program, because it disregards how social class and other contextual factors interact with racial identity in complicated ways. Darder & Torres (1999) offers a complementary critique of critical pedagogy as overemphasizing and oversimplifying race, while being inattentive to context.

The tensions around Afrocentrism and its assumptions, have prompted scholars to push back against static notions of culture and identity often propagated by curricula. Paris' (2012) and Ladson-Billings' (2014) recent works are two examples of efforts to complicate educators' conceptions of cultural and curricular relevancy. African Americans, like all other ethnic groups, represent a range of identities and orientations.

Ties to the Diaspora do indeed vary, both as a result of socialization and individual preference. Critical emancipatory pedagogies of place (CEPP) take this variation into consideration, and do not take for granted the salience of race for students of color. Instead, a critical pedagogy of place grounds students in the local context. Because school children generally attend schools within close proximity to their homes, CEPP advocates argue that a place-based focus will provide increased leverage in facilitating student engagement, emancipation and development (Haymes, 1995). The next section will describe in greater depth what is meant by CEPP, as well as what is known about the viability of this approach.

Place-matters: Towards a critical pedagogy of place for African American students

...place infuses events with values that transcend their capricious distribution in space....The endurance of place perpetuates hope, not in the static, conservative sense that romanticizes and mythologizes, but in an emancipatory, hopeful sense that accentuates significance, and tragedy” (Kinchloe & Pinar, 1991, p. 7)

Place, and its significance, has been assessed time and time again in social science literature. By place, I mean the spatial and social forces which serve as the playing field for action. A sense of place denotes one’s circumstances and the contextual features which influence everyday life. Quoted above, Kinchloe & Pinar (1991) describe place as facilitative of meaning-making. For example, the classroom *space*, could be described simply as a collection of tools and artifacts. But conceived of as a *place*, the classroom is a microcosm of culture²⁵ which evokes meanings for those who occupy it.

²⁵ inextricably linked to social, historical and political circumstance

In the educational sphere, place is often discussed in relation to engagement and cultural relevancy. It has been demonstrated, that teachers who infuse the curriculum with content derived from students' lived experiences, are more successful in educating minoritized youth [cite]. Similarly, Kincheloe & Pinar (1991) argue that a sense of place allows for "intensified focus", providing a "...sense of direction and identity that might power individuals to struggle and to endure" (p. 21). Place-based pedagogies use the immediate, physical and social-cultural context as the starting place of instruction.

As illustrated in Figure 1, place-based pedagogies are not always critical (and conscious-raising) in nature. Grunewald (2003), however; describes in great detail the intersection between place-based models and critical emancipatory pedagogy²⁶. According to Grunewald (2003), a critical pedagogy of place, "(a)...aims to identify, recover and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (reinhabitation) and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization) (p. 8). Notice the dual emphases on knowing/understanding the environment²⁷ and, on taking action. The focus of CEPP is on what should be conserved and appreciated within the community. But, it is just as much concerned with the transformation of that community.

Tedla's (1995) writings on community-mindfulness are helpful in further illustrating the emphases of CEPP. Tedla (1995), lists the following questions as integral to the education of Black children in particular:

²⁶ This fusion is termed as CEPP, or Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy of Place

²⁷ Physical and social

...we need to ask regularly ask ourselves, “Are my actions/thoughts/motives beneficial?If the community knew my thoughts/actions/motives, what would they say? If the earth, the plants, animals, birds, fish and insects could speak, what would they say about our/my relation with them? Have our/my actions been beneficial to them? (p. 23)

A critical pedagogy of place would support students in asking these questions of themselves and others. CEPP emphasizes the interconnectedness of the physical/spatial, social, political and academic realms. It represents an effort to bring the outside into the classroom, breaking down the barriers which inhibit students’ ability to engage with and transform their context(s)

The topical area of critical emancipatory pedagogies of place constitute a small, yet compelling body of literature. The theoretical scholarship which takes up issues of place/context in Black education is sufficient, however; most of the available empirical research investigates other historically marginalized groups²⁸. For example, Trinidad’s (2011) work conceptualizes a critical indigenous pedagogy of place for Native Hawaiian students. Critical indigenous pedagogies of place are rooted in native epistemologies and nurtured by a sense of community. Trinidad (2011) found that the enacted curriculum supported the sociopolitical development of young adults in her study, prompting students to engage in local activist movements. Trinidad’s research is not based in schools²⁹. As such, her work raises questions about how the principles of a critical place-based pedagogy are taken up by students in a classroom context. A second study

²⁸ Namely, Native American/indigenous peoples

²⁹ It is conducted on a local farm supported by a community-based organization

conducted by Lee (2006) also analyzes the effects of CEPP on Native Hawaiian and Native Canadian students. Lee (2006) concludes that the seven week program offered to young adults had a profound impact. Students showed signs of heightened motivation and critical reflection which grew over the course of the place-based program. Finally, Garcia & Shirley (2012) offer insights into their experiences working with Native tribal communities in Arizona. They argue for the treatment of schools as a sacred space, wherein curriculum is shaped by indigenous knowledge and culture. Garcia & Shirley's (2012) research similarly suggests the promise of CEPP. In their research, introduction to a place-based indigenous curriculum prompted students to seek out additional cultural knowledge and skill sets (e.g. life histories of elders, language). Students also began to verbalize their questions and concerns around hegemony.

The available empirical literature on place-based liberation pedagogies does not adequately account for the experiences of African Americans. So, while in theory, such a pedagogical stance is both appropriate and necessary, the consequences of such pedagogy are unknown. Moreover, questions remain about the viability of CEPP in formalized classroom contexts.

Returning to the “why”: CEP and the Question of Agency in Schools

As discussed above, CEP and its derivatives all prioritize the development of youth agency in both academic and (eventually) political contexts. The empirical literature, albeit minimal, suggests a possible positive relationship between emancipatory curriculum and academic success. Furthermore, students engaged in a CEP have been found to feel a greater sense of connectedness and liking for school. These findings are encouraging. However, neither school enjoyment nor achievement are outcomes

expressly linked to the core tenets of critical emancipatory pedagogy. It is curious that though the theoretical literature around Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy prioritizes the development of critical capacity and change agency (political aims) in Black students, the empirical focus has been largely on capturing student achievement gains as a result of liberatory curricular and co-curricular practices (Durden, 2007; Lee, 1992; Lomotey & Brookins, 1988). Previous studies fall in line with the prevailing discourses in their preoccupation with the (closing of) Black-white achievement gap, which, while important, contradicts the very premise by which critical emancipatory models were conceived. So, while the tenets and rationale for CEP are ever-clear, we know little about how the theories translate into real-world practice and even less about CEP's capacity to deliver on its promise of sociopolitical development and Black student empowerment. Future studies, such as the one outlined here, must investigate agency in schools and the aims foregrounded by critical pedagogues. In this next section, I offer insights on the topic of youth agency (inside and outside of schools) as presented in the literature and conceptualized for the purposes of this project.

Agency is defined here as, "deliberate action towards a specified end which shows evidence of intentionality, forethought and/or self-reflectiveness" (Bandura, 2001). Students can be empowered as agents in the classroom via increased opportunities to shape the learning environment. Youth may raise questions, propose solutions, engage in debate, innovate, resist or accommodate teachers and peers. All of these actions, wherein students are actively participating in the development and implementation of learning experiences (McIntyre, 2006), are examples of how student agency might manifest.

Political agency, central to this project, is likened to one's willingness and capacity to engage in social action. Shockley & Frederick (2010) frame political agency as the "...ability, empowerment and entitlement to control and mandate the areas of life around them", in ways that positively change the socio-material circumstances therein". Youth could demonstrate heightened political agency by staging a protest to dissolve zero tolerance policies, or by speaking out against police brutality in the community. These are tangible, observable actions geared towards a political end. But, students may also show their agency via analyses of social problems. While their participation as activists are constrained (in part) by the adults/systems around them, youth can opt to talk about their future selves and their aspirations related to social change. Such talk would constitute their perceived, as opposed to their enacted political agency.

Discussions of political agency³⁰ are most prevalent amongst scholars of community psychology, wherein political agency becomes one dimension of sociopolitical development. Watts, Williams and Jagers (2003) describe sociopolitical development (SPD) as a process where individuals acquire the necessary knowledge, emotional tools, critical analysis skills and capacity to assess and resist oppressive forces. The SPD framework acknowledges that an individual's growth along these dimensions *could* result in different ideological conclusions. Yet, in accordance with the theory, the conclusions reached *must* be oriented (actively and ideologically) in opposition to social and/or economic inequities. Critical consciousness, as referenced in prior sections, is central to SPD and the notion of political agency. But, as Watts and Hipolito-Delgado

³⁰ Also referred to as political activism, political efficacy, civic engagement. There may, in some cases, be analytical distinctions between these terms though they are frequently used interchangeably.

(2015) offer, liberation necessitates more than critical social analyses (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Ultimately, people must be driven to act strategically as individuals, in a group, or, in alignment with social movements (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

There is a sizable body of scholarship on youth civic development and activism that further delineates the concept of agency and specifies inputs that facilitate its growth in young people. Kirshner (2007) frames the development of critical civic potential in youth as shifting the focus from “‘what I can do alone’ to ‘what we can do together’”. Through this logic, Kirshner (2007) differentiates between individual and collective types of agency, while maintaining that the latter and collective problem solving are especially powerful. In his review, Kirshner (2007) provides examples of adolescents undertaking complex tasks and accomplishing goals that would be less achievable through individual pursuits. Additionally, he asserts that collective organizing opportunities for young people often result in products that “defy predictions” about their developmental capacity.

Akom, Cammarota & Ginwright (2008) introduce the notion of “*Youthtopias*” i.e. educational spaces where young people, “generate original, multi-textual, youth-driven cultural products that embody a critique of oppression, a desire for social justice, and ultimately lay the foundation for community empowerment and social change” (p. 3). Akom et al (2008) characterize youthtopias as sites where critical analyses of race/racism are normal and expected. Where much of the literature on youth civic development does not privilege racism over consideration of other sources of oppression, youthtopias hold closely to the assumptions of CRT. The goal, is to push back against colorblind portrayals

of inequality while also encouraging young people to acknowledge the nuanced and complex ways that race may or may not be germane to particular social problems.

The tenets of CEP are consistent with Akom et al's (2008) framing of youthtopias and their utility. In theory, schools designed to be models of CEP should privilege the experiential knowledge of Black students and challenge existing deficit paradigms used to explain the conditions of their worlds. In the classroom, project-based learning opportunities, collaborative activities, evidenced-based argumentation and creative storytelling are suggested as pedagogical means that support youth's sociopolitical development in educational spaces. Still, the literature provides insufficient evidence of schools that effectively operate as youthtopias. To this point, the exemplar cases provided by Akom et al's (2008), are set up, in part, separately and in opposition to schools. Herein, adolescent participants engage in critiques of the existing school curriculum. This implies that the schools themselves were not youthtopias, though they have the potential for improvement through young-driven advocacy and organizing.

My assessment of the literature, is that while there is a growing body of scholarship which explores civic development and political agency at the high school and collegiate levels (Ehman, 1980; Noguera & Cannella, 2006; McIntyre, 2006, Seider et al, 2016), agency in Black, elementary-aged children has been understudied. The lack of research might lead one to conclude that young children are not acting as agents³¹, that their developing sense of political agency is inconsequential and/or disconnected from their experiences in school. Furthermore, the emphasis in the literature on Barton &

³¹ Or perhaps even, that they don't (given their age) have the capacity to do so

Tan's (2010) study of science learning represents an important point of departure. Their analyses suggest that youth, ages 10-14, can, under the right circumstances, act as social critics and producers of knowledge. Whether or not this happens, depends on who students are, the constraints of their environment and the new learning opportunities created via curriculum and instruction. Barton and Tan (2010) argue that the role of identity and social constraints (both real and imagined) are essential to understanding agency. Put another way, the critical science curriculum highlighted in their study was successful because it helped the students to see themselves and the world differently. This shift from layperson to critical scientist is exemplified by the following excerpt. Barton & Tan (2010) take notes from a radio broadcast that students conducted after a lesson on urban heat islands³²:

I am surprised that people don't think this is an urban heat island. Right now you can actually see the beads of heat-induced sweat. Do you see it? [Ron points to his forehead, where he is visibly sweating.] They are beads. Not little droplets. Beads! ... The people around here are so unknowledged...[drawn out]. We should really do something about this. Have a heat island awareness day. Yah. This is Ron Brown, from Boys and Girls Club News signing off.

Ron's commentary demonstrates a shift from passive observer to critical scientist and political agent. Now that he has new information, his perception of the world (and those in it) changes. Ron feels compelled to act in response to his new understandings. From

³² Many metropolitan cities are referred to as "urban heat islands". Urban heat islands have an average temperature that is significantly higher than the surrounding areas due to land manipulation and a lack of vegetation. Heat islands have lower quality air and negatively impact the natural ecosystem.

Barton & Tan (2010), we begin to see how political agency might be captured via the voices of elementary-aged students, even in cases where no action takes place.

Other scholars, such as McGrail & Davis (2011) have attempted to measure agency in relation to a classroom blogging activity. In this study, McGrail & Davis (2011) documented the process of online blogging in an elementary writing classroom. Students' posts and responses were coded and analyzed, to discern any relevant themes. Students were also interviewed and asked questions about their school writing and blogging experiences. McGrail and Davis (2011) found that students became more engaged, proactive writers over time. The blog helped to establish community in the classroom and diminished the teachers' role as the sole arbiter of correctness. Moreover, the researchers noted a shift in positioning, as children came to see themselves as writers with important contributions to make. One student wrote, "In blogging no one runs circles around other people. We are equal in brain power" (p. 428). In this instance, the words and responses of students served as window into their developing sense of agency.

Agency and the Figured Worlds of School

In the preceding discussions of agency and emancipatory education, the presumption has been that schools (with their norms and practices) can constitute sites when students engage in processes of understanding and becoming. Pedagogy, values, and interactions are based on a particular set of assumptions that extend beyond the walls of school and are made applicable to (Black) student's participation in the broader society. I would also add, that implicit in these discussions of agency and pedagogy is the notion that educational institutions are spaces where children begin to understand opportunity structures, constraints, and their own social positioning. Critical educational

models suppose a form of radical imagining or reimagining on the part of both educators and children to think beyond the status quo to a place of possibility. Keeping with this idea, Holland et al's (1998) conceptualization of *figured worlds* becomes integral to this project. Figured worlds are understood as socially and culturally constructed "realm(s) of interpretation" characterized by a unique set of activities, politics and norms which provide the actors situated therein with a sense of what is possible. In this dissertation, I frame CEP schools as examples of figured worlds couched within the broader society. These institutions are designed to impact how Black students see and how they position themselves in school, with the hope that this will ultimately translate into increased agency, empowerment and transformation in the world writ large.

I would add that CEP schools, as figured worlds, seek to establish what Ginwright (2007) refers to as *critical social capital* in Black youth. For young people who grapple with issues like, "homelessness, crime, and violence" in their lived worlds, critical social capital becomes a resource in helping them to contribute to the production of something new. As described by Ginwright (2007), schools can develop and sustain critical social capital in Black students via three pathways. First, they must actively challenge deficit preconceptions of Black youth as civic problems and instead, affirm them as important political actors. Next, they must emphasize solidarity by affirming collective racial and cultural identities. Finally, pedagogy must support young people in reframing personal challenges as political issues, i.e. leaving open the possibility of "political explanations" for problems experienced by individuals (p. 409). When all of these things happen within the context of youth-serving institutions, young people are better positioned to contest the status quo and inform the creation of new and increasingly-just possibilities.

Visions –Of Morality, Blackness & Freedom

In the previous section, I stated that in conceptualizing CEP schools as figured worlds, we assume the role that educational institutions play in shaping students' social/political imaginations. Farmer (2010) offers that these imaginings, or visions of a possible, more equitable future, are inextricably linked to morality. As young people consider how the actions of others have (and continue to) contribute to the dehumanization and disenfranchisement of people, they grow in their capacity to be empathetic in their own actions. This type of social perspective-taking, according to developmental psychologists, is central to moral formation (Gibbs, 2003). Consistent with Farmer's (2010) framing and much of the literature on moral development, I assert that as youth become more orientated towards change agency, their sense of what is ethical, right and good is also evolving in ways that fuel these critical and political dispositions. Consequently, young people's moral imaginations are not disassociated from their sociopolitical ones. Farmer (2010) succinctly describes this relationship between the moral and political and speaks to the role that schools can play in shaping students imaginations:

Moral imagination enables young people to envision themselves within a concrete situation as change agents. Schools have an opportunity to provide a space where youth can actively envision their future while simultaneously changing their present. (p.378)

Though Farmer's (2010) analyses of moral and sociopolitical development in schools is applicable to all children, she specifically takes up the issue of morality as related to the public's conception of Black youth. Increasingly likely to be criminalized within the

context of school and in society writ-large, educators must be hyper-attentive to how pedagogical practices support or impede Black youth in their ability to imagine themselves (and other Blacks) as capable and good. If Black youth's impressions of themselves and those around them are distorted by racist assumptions and/or default to pathologizing those from marginalized groups, it is unlikely that they will be inclined to disrupt cycles of oppression.

As a final note on the relationship between critical emancipatory educational models and imagining in African American students, I draw from the work of political scientist Michael Dawson (2001). Dawson (2001), in his work on Black political ideologies, advances the idea that there are different and sometimes competing visions of freedom within the African American community. Far from a monolith, Black people and leaders have always defined freedom in ways that are diverse, complex and contextually-specific. And, as a consequence, they envision different means by which freedom can and should be achieved. Here, I consider how place-based (CEPP) and African-centered (CREP) pedagogies may privilege different interpretations of what it means and looks like to be free. The lack of empirical literature delineating these models and their impact still leaves open the question of Black visions (e.g. of freedom, of pathways to freedom, of morality) and their relationship to varied iterations of emancipatory pedagogy.

Current Study

I conducted research over two academic years in an effort to understand the prospective effects of African-centered and place-based educational models on the development of political agency in African American children. Given the differential foci

of the two aforementioned schools, I presumed that there may be differences in student perceptions across contexts that warrant additional consideration. *Is it that Black children in an African-centered school feel more compelled to act in solidarity with other Black people³³ and/or in response to racialized issues? Are students in the place-based school more aware of local problems and confident with their ability to enact changes in their neighborhood or communities?* To date, empirical scholarship has not been conducted in the interest of discerning how political agency might manifest differently as a consequence of the curriculum and instruction provided by the school. Thusly, scholars have inadequately attended to the fact that although CEP schools are bound by a common set of assumptions, they have nuanced distinctions which lead to differences in objectives and therefore in practice, leaving open the question of their effect on non-academic outcomes (i.e. agency). My dissertation was designed to provide insight into this understudied area of inquiry.

With this preceding context, this study is driven by the following primary research questions:

- 1) **How do 4/5th grade Black students in one Place-based and one Afrocentric school differ in their conceptions of the opportunities and constraints faced by Black people in their (1) immediate geographic context (i.e. neighborhood, community, city), (2) nation and (3) internationally?**
 - *How might they differ in their imagining of the social landscape, to include understandings of morality, root causes (of problems) and freedom?*
- 2) **To what extent and in what ways do these students perceive that they can, either individually or as part of a collective, engage with and navigate these opportunities and constraints?**

³³ Across the globe; not limited to Black people locally

3) What relationships can be traced among students' aforementioned perceptions and actions and curricular and co-curricular content, practices, and/or school instruction?

These questions foreground students (their perceptions, expressions, (inter)actions) as the primary unit(s) of data collection and work in the service of investigating the differential effect of the two aforementioned CEP models. The focus on upper elementary students here is intentional and important. Most of the available research on efficacy development features adolescent and collegiate students, which raises the question(s) of "How did these students get here? García Coll and Szalacha (2004) identify the middle ages (ages 6-12) as a crucial, yet understudied point for child development, especially for children of color. More research is needed to understand the role of contextual, racial and cultural factors in identity development for elementary-aged children (Garcia Coll & Szalacha, 2004). Tyson's (2002) study of Black student engagement further supports my decision to concentrate on pre-adolescent children. Tyson (2002) finds that the existing theories around Black student engagement do not adequately describe the behaviors and perspectives of elementary school children. As such, she argues for more systematic study of younger students, and for research which focus on the educational transition from elementary school to the upper grades.

Finally, to clarify what is meant by opportunities and constraints in this context, I draw from O'Connor's (2002) designations. *Constraints* herein refer to the practical, ideological and/or physical barriers that limit the life chances of individuals or groups (of people). I extend this definition of constraints to include factors that serve to repress one's individual (or collective) ability to express themselves and/or attend to their own best interests. Similarly, *opportunities* are understood as available resources that

empower or support students as they navigate constraints (O'Connor, 2002). Chapter III will describe in greater detail the research context, participants and methods employed in response to these inquiries.

Chapter III

Research Methods and Design

The primary aim of this project is to analyze the relationship between school-based, liberatory pedagogies and Black students' political agency within and across two varying educational contexts. Because the ultimate goal of critical emancipatory pedagogues is to transform society writ large, it is important to understand the role of the school in informing the critical consciousness and positioning of its' young learners. In this work, I analyze the ways that schools shape and are shaped by the young people who populate them. And, for many of the very reasons outlined in the preceding literature review, I maintain that this research is especially prudent for African American children in this current era.

Unapologetically, this project is for and about Black children³⁴. The study was designed to capture, vividly and accurately, Black children's lived experiences, moral/sociopolitical imaginings and understandings in a raced society. I assume first, that the young people attending all schools, but specifically those children enrolled in CEP-inspired schools, are able to be reflective and speak honestly and intelligently on the circumstances of their own lives (Akom, Cammarota & Ginwright, 2008). They know

³⁴ Throughout this dissertation, I use "student" and "child/children" interchangeably. I do so with intention, as a reminder that these 9/10 years olds are in fact children with a right to love, adult care, and an enriching education. What's more, I default to this humanizing convention as a means of pushing back against the public discourses that too-often position Black children as deviant, mature, less-than human and/or superhuman- capable of demonstrating resilience against all odds.

what their schools and communities signify for children more intimately than any adult presence. They have much to teach us (as educators, scholars and citizens) about justice, inclusivity and opportunity. They can show us where there is “hope in these places of struggle”, and illuminate for us where there is much more important work to be done (hooks 2003).

Theoretical Foundations

In conceptualizing and actualizing this project, I rely on a critical research perspective which allows for both deep analyses of research subjects *and* researcher reflexivity. Critical education research, is defined here as systematic study with the goal of understanding the relationship between educational aims, tensions and/or dilemmas, and broader social divisions and asymmetries (Cannella & Lincoln, 2009). Ultimately, critical research³⁵ is concerned with contributing to a more equitable society via scientific study and individual reflection (Carspecken, 1996; Cushman, 1998; Kinchelow & McLaren, 1998). Cannella and Lincoln (2009) identify the following questions as central to critical social science research:

- *Who/what is being helped/privileged/legitimized?*
- *Who what is being harmed/opposed/disqualified?*

The design described herein responds to both of these inquiries. I opted to study schools attempting to employ a critical emancipatory educational program because these institutions are often hastily regarded as radical, impractical and/or periphery in discussions of urban education reform. My stance is that these institutions are viable sites

³⁵ Bears similarities to emancipatory research for African American students, as described in Tillman (2002)

of learning and student development which warrant rigorous analyses and consideration. Consequently, this study brings to light the various affordances (and limitations) engendered by these alternative models. Although my analysis has foregrounded the extent to which two models (as described above) impact child visioning, political agency and learner empowerment in classrooms writ large, I have also considered how individual students, with their own unique circumstances, take up the pedagogy in varied ways. When such variation was evidenced, I investigated how individual student characteristics interact with the school environment to produce differential outcomes.

More specifically, I utilize a critical ethnographic approach (Carspecken, 1996) to frame this research. Critical ethnography is conceived as a methodology for conducting research focused around participatory critique/analyses, empowerment and social justice (Trueba, 1999). While traditional ethnography aims to describe the complexity of what is, critical ethnographers also consider what *could be* as a means of disrupting conventional ideologies (Thomas, 2003). With critical ethnography, the goal is to examine phenomena from multiple perspectives, and in particular, from the perspective(s) of the oppressed (Trueba, 1999). In line with this methodology, I have gathered data from a variety of sources, to include investigations of my own reflections and participation. Yet, the words and actions of students constitute the primary focus of this analysis. Moreover, although the proposed project is not fully participatory in nature, I have taken steps to ensure that the study addresses mutually beneficial goals (as determined via conversations between myself and the school staff).

In my establishment of mutually beneficial goals, regard for participants as resources and careful consideration of privilege and/or vulnerabilities, I intend for this

dissertation study to embody a humanizing research design. Paris (2011) describes humanizing research as a methodological stance that is “consciousness-raising”, while also prioritizing the building of dignified, loving relationships between researchers and participants. In my work, I committed to getting to know those I sought to study, and worked actively as an advocate and support-person during my time on site. Put another way, I took initiative in working *with* educational partners, not in isolation from them. This participation was not supplemental; it is an essential component of the research design. I believe that my involvement within the school community enabled more robust analyses, and helped to facilitate deeper access to insights that outsiders would not be privy to.

This designation of humanizing research is not wholly distinct from critical ethnography. Both are premised on a commitment to balanced reflection, advocacy, representation and social justice. I employ the language of humanizing research because it further underscores the humanity of all who engage in the research process. It is a reminder that the knowledge, experiences, perspectives and emotions of participants and investigators do matter. It is my obligation, as a scholar and a human being, to prove myself *worthy* of *witnessing* those that, with an openness that I certainly wasn’t entitled to, allowed me to share in their complex lives (Paris & Winn, 2014)

Researcher Positionality

As is customary in critical ethnographic study, I discuss, in brief, my own background and positionality as a researcher. In ways that I make evident in this and subsequent chapters, my engagement with each school community had bearing on the data collected. I shaped and was shaped by people and sites featured in this work. Here, I

devote some space to discussing, in brief, who I am and how I enter into this project. I am an African American woman who will have just turned 30 upon completion of this work. I grew up in Riverview³⁶, the city where this dissertation project will take place. I attended large public schools wherein teachers varied in both capacity and commitment to ensuring that their students', mainly Black, were learning and thriving in classrooms. Despite this, I experienced a great deal of academic success and gained entry into an elite, private university. As I transitioned from under-resourced urban schools into a predominately-white private institution, my questions and concerns about educational access, opportunity and my own self-worth only grew in number and intensity. I pursued a degree in social justice pedagogy, and ultimately found myself teaching in an African-centered elementary school. And so, I enter into this work as someone who did not always feel empowered in her own education, and, who recognizes the immense challenges that Black students face in schools that prioritize behavioral compliance over critical, engaged learning. I also have first-hand knowledge of the difficult work of teaching, as educators grapple with the seemingly intractable problems of schools and society while also trying to sustain themselves personally as people and professionals. I have felt the very real tensions. The work can be enervating and perplexing, perhaps even more trying in schools that are wholly committed to culturally- sustaining, critical and unapologetically pedagogy. And yet here I am, optimistic that with time, teachers and schools can grow in their capacity to support Black students' intellectual, political and emotional development. And, even in my keen awareness that it'll required downright

³⁶ Pseudonym- a comprehensive discussion of the city of Riverview is forthcoming

scrappiness and radical imagination, I remain hopeful that this study might help to facilitate the types of understandings necessary to reach this end.

Overview of Research Context

Riverside, a city once regarded as a bustling Midwestern metropolis and epicenter of Black culture and life, is now in the process of rebuilding and recovering from enduring social, educational and economic challenges. Riverview has a demographic make-up that is approximately 82% Black and a median household income of \$27,000. Although recent gentrification trends and the growth of industry have been said to constitute an urban “revitalization”, many of the associated opportunities are less accessible to Riverview’s African American residents. Still, the “soul of Riverside” is palpable. Black residents balance a level of criticality with unwavering hometown pride. *We*³⁷ believe, that what makes Riverview special is the tenacity of its people and ability to “bounce back” and unify in times of crisis.

The Riverview Public Schools has a history not dissimilar from many urban school districts in the U.S. The strides made during the Civil Rights Movement opened up new pathways and possibilities for African Americans. Between the 1950’s and 1970’s, Blacks from the South and West Indies transitioned to cities like Riverview to work and put down roots. At once, racial tensions in schools and at work surfaced. School desegregation efforts ensued. It became evident to most all living there that

³⁷ As a Riverview native who, despite living elsewhere, still identifies as a part of the city community, I speak in a collective “we” here and at other points in this dissertation. I take this liberty because often, those who partnered with me in this work affirmed my position as a product, representative and advocate of Riverside. I recognize both my position of privilege and the implications of claiming a city that I am no longer a resident of. Consequently, I will also specify times when I exist outside of the realm of “we” and draw attention to moments of inclusion and exclusion in my analyses.

racism was alive and well. In the 60s and 70s, many whites fled the city, taking with them resources and prompting a propagation of distant suburban schools. Since then, RPS system has struggled to provide adequate resources, retain highly-qualified teachers and consistently meet state benchmarks for achievement. In the last ten years, new reform mandates, the charter boom, and low enrollment has resulted in the closure of many neighborhood schools. Most recently, Riverview and its Public Schools has been implicated in various political (state and local) and administrative scandals.

Two schools, both located on the eastside of Riverview, were identified as potential sites for this project. The first, John Hope Franklin School of Excellence³⁸ (also JHFSE, JHF or Hope School) is a K-8 African-centered magnet school, which primarily serves low to middle income Black families. Named after an influential Black scholar, John Hope Franklin, the school seeks to provide a rigorous, culturally-affirming curriculum to all students. JHFSE has been in operation since 1991. With its long-standing focus on heritage and racial/ethnic empowerment, this institution was identified as an example of CREP in action. The second school, Mission City School (also MCS, City School), employs a critical place-based educational model. With a philosophy inspired by the works of two local activists, the K-8 public charter seeks to establish a strong connection between classroom learning and the surrounding community. Although the student body is ~85% Black, there is no explicit focus on race/ethnicity. Instead,

³⁸ In accordance with human subjects' protection standards and, to maintain the confidentiality of participants, school names and actors have been assigned pseudonyms. In the case of children, most students selected their own pseudonyms at my prompting.

children are regarded as “luminaries”³⁹ with the potential to impact local and global change. Students are prompted to “shine a light” on problems and “shine bright” in their communities. MCS was established in 2013. I identified this second school as an empirical example of CEPP.

These schools are optimal sites for the study of two varying iterations of CEP. The African-centered school, JHFSE, afforded an opportunity to assess Black youth agency within an environment where race/heritage is presumed to be salient. Theoretically, this school is most concerned about student empowerment via cultural affirmation. The second, critical place-based school does not emphasize race/ethnicity, and thus becomes an interesting comparison case. The design of this study provides an opportunity to think about how the differential emphases on locality and racial identity are articulated via school organization, curriculum, instruction and micro-dynamics and, how these characteristics might afford or constrain youth in their ability to grow as intellectuals and change agents. I now turn to an in-depth discussion of these sites (and my integration into them), methods and analysis techniques.

Initial Phases of Study- Site Entry & Early Engagement

Educators in Riverview proceed with an air of caution that can be sensed but is difficult to describe. I liken their stance as a version of “street smarts”, a condition of always being “on” and vigilant as it relates to outsiders. Riverview schools, both neighborhood publics and public charters alike, are under constant scrutiny, with a

³⁹ This is not the precise terminology used by the school. Throughout this dissertation, I sometimes replace words and reword statements that could otherwise be used to identify sites and participants. In revising language, I have made every effort to retain meaning and evoke the “spirit” of the original text.

pressure to perform or risk closure⁴⁰. Consequently, teachers and staff have become aware of the fact that although many (district leaders, independent evaluators, university researchers, politicians) may claim to have the best interest of children at heart, their actions often don't coincide with initiatives and practices that are good for students. The feeling of needing to be protective of Black children and skeptical of "others" resonates with me. Even as one who is neither employed nor residing in the city at the present moment, I have often found myself questioning the intentions of those interested in studying or collaborating with Riverview schools.

I initiated this project with trepidation, uncertain that the schools of interest would allow my entry as an ethnographer and university-based researcher. Ultimately, I believe that this hesitation worked to my benefit, because I did not assume that I was entitled to anything, from anyone. Practically though, this also meant that most things took longer than would be ideal. In the following sections, I outline entry and early impressions for two research sites. Additionally, I provide insight into my agreed upon role and responsibilities at the earliest stages of this project.

Entry into John Hope Franklin School of Excellence

I contacted Mr. Henderson, principal of JHFSE⁴¹, in April of 2015. He replied via email quickly, but it took until August 2015 for us to meet. After repeated emails and

⁴⁰ In addition to closures, some Riverview public schools have been dissolved and reopened under state management. Charter schools, such as Mission City, face the prospect of non-renewal by their university authorizers.

⁴¹ John Hope Franklin School of Excellence was my second choice for an African-centered institution. Upon meeting with the school principal for the first choice site, the principal admitted that the school was falling short of its ideals and in many ways, not embodying African-centeredness to the extent that he would prefer. This prompted me to explore other options, which resulted in my interest in Hope School.

calls to the school office that resulted in no response, I visited the school without an appointment and waited. On the second attempt, I was able to catch Mr. Henderson and set up an appointment. The encounter was friendly, but also rushed and awkward. It took several moments of my jogging his memory before he seemed to realize who I was. Mr. Henderson, a tall and slender African American man in his late forties, had a face that was difficult to read. Although he smiled often and walked briskly, he conveyed seriousness via his gaze and with long pauses during conversation. I printed off a project summary page with a short biographical sketch for his review that I left with him after the initial encounter. I did not expect him to read it. We made arrangements to chat formally the next week.

I returned the following week for our appointment. Mr. H's desk was cluttered, filled with notices and other documents requiring his approval. Although the desk and sitting area were quite messy, the entire office felt regal. There were framed photos of past principals, cultural art work (African masks, illustrations of Black leaders), and various awards and school artifacts displayed on the walls. Mr. Henderson's desk chair was a large, brown tufted leather, which also conveyed a formal tone.

In this first scheduled meeting, I responded to Mr. H's prompt "How can I help you?", with a lengthy overview of my background and research interests. I led with my connection to the city of Riverview and experience teaching in an African-centered school. Mr. H nodded on occasion, but did not lessen the intensity of his expression. By the time I concluded the description of my study, Mr. Henderson had asked two questions: "Are you comparing African-centered education and what we do to other schools?" and "What is your theoretical framework?". The former question was important

and anticipated. I communicated to Mr. Henderson that I was not enlisting a “normal” or “traditional” school to serve as a comparison. This was intentional in the design. African-centered schools exist as a means of rejecting prevailing conceptions of what is normal for Black children. I respect and affirm this stance. In response to Mr. Henderson’s second inquiry, I was a bit taken aback. I fumbled through a modest discussion of critical pedagogies and its assumptions. I spoke in brief about my methodological approach. Mr. Henderson seemed satisfied with my responses, as evidenced by the nodding and occasional half-smiles, I learned that Mr. H was also working towards a doctorate in education (EdD), and so, we established a point of connection.

At this first meeting, I did not leave with Mr. Henderson’s permission to conduct ethnographic research at John Hope Franklin School of Excellence. We agreed that I would obtain volunteer clearance through the Riverview Public School district, and schedule a follow-up meeting with Mrs. Parks, another administrator. Mrs. Parks would then put me in communication with classroom teachers in grades 4-5. Provided that I developed rapport with teachers and students, we would then discuss the logistics of the project. For now, I would volunteer in the classrooms and offer support as needed. I could also begin participating in school activities.

The layers of formality at John Hope Franklin raised many questions for me in terms of access. This school was more like those I had attended and less like the school where I taught. I began to think intently about how to best integrate myself into the space. I noticed that teachers dressed in business casual and business attire. I did not notice volunteers milling about, perhaps because many of the classrooms had support staff (aides, paraprofessionals). John Hope was an established institution, with defined norms.

They had a long history of promoting academic excellence and African-centeredness in a structured environment. Down the road, Mission City embodies a newness and flexibility that is markedly different. Next, I provide context for my entry into the MCS community.

Entry into Mission City School

I found Mission City School on the internet. When I discovered their website, I hadn't yet fully conceived of this dissertation project. There was no proposal, only disjointed memos. I didn't have research questions. My interest in Mission City School came about in an effort to be connected with educational institutions in the city of Riverview that were doing brave and necessary work. Having been a graduate student in Ann Arbor for 4+ years, I began to feel restless. I missed teaching terribly. And so, while it may have been in the back of my mind that Mission City could become a research site, I was most interested in learning more about what they were doing and finding ways to be involved.

I emailed Ms. Lauren, one of three women founders at Mission City. She quickly replied and set up a meeting. Within two weeks, I was navigating to the school in preparation for our conversation. I pressed the doorbell and a buzzing noise indicated that the door was now open. My first impression of the school was that it hardly looked like a school at all. The color scheme was bolder and there was essentially no hallway, only a bit of open space and doors around the perimeter. The office was the first door to the right of the entrance. The space was cramped, with barely enough room for a single desk, a few chairs, and bookshelves. The art on the wall was a mix of student art, posters and quirky illustrations/objects that were reminiscent of things you might buy from a local art

fair. The administrative staff person was an African American woman in her mid-thirties, with a nose ring, whose natural hair had been partially dyed an emerald green. She was fly. Despite feeling awkward coming in to the school, I couldn't help but compliment her style. She complimented me on my large, Afrocentric earrings (shaped like the continent of Africa) and we spent the next couple of minutes discussing Black hair and accessories. Ms. Lauren walked into the office swiftly, as if in a rush. Lauren is a white woman, around 40, who upon our first meeting, exuded what I think of as "cool teacher energy". She was friendly, funny, relaxed and animated, but also conveyed seriousness and command that she could turn on or off in an instance.

This first meeting was very encouraging. After I shared my background, both as a teacher, graduate student and Riverview resident, we realized that there were many points of connection. Lauren told me a little bit about the history of the school and what they learned in their first year of operation as a public charter (this was year two). I communicated that I was interested in volunteering and maybe somewhere down the line, partnering in research. I shared that I missed teaching, and was happy to support academic instruction in any way that they needed. Ms. Lauren was enthusiastic, she seemed to appreciate that I was a product of Riverview Public Schools. She shared in this first meeting (paraphrased), "You are an example of what we are trying to do here at Mission City. You left to be excellent, but you came back. In Riverside, the measure of success is leaving the city, going somewhere else and taking your gifts with you. You get out. We want our students to explore and travel and pursue their dreams. But, we hope that they'll come back to the city. We are looking to shift their perspectives so they see

success as making a contribution at home, as participating in movements within their communities”.

Lauren promised to connect me with the other school founders, Ms. Adriana (Ana) and Mrs. Nikki. They’d also check in with Ms. Jamie, the 3rd-5th grade science and math teacher, to determine her interest in having a volunteer. Lauren then took me on a tour of the school. We sat in on an all-school meeting where Mrs. Nikki was lecturing the children about the ideals of the school and the local activists whose work informed the schools’ mission. Within two days, I was connected with Ms. Jamie and all set to begin working in the classroom. We decided that I’d observe and sit in for a week or so, and then I’d begin to work more formally with the students in her classroom.

Role as Researcher & Volunteer

Taking the proceeding context into account, my role in both schools began as a volunteer with the aspiration of conducting research. At John Hope, I initially rotated to the (1) 5th grade and (2) 4th grade classrooms. A couple of things happened that prompted a natural prioritization of the 4th grade classrooms. First, as the prospect of data collection became likely, I was concerned about the number of participating teachers and likely differences in their practice. It was already obvious to me that the experiences varied considerably across the grades, and with multiple sites, I wanted to limit contributing factors as much as possible within schools. Also, I felt very disconnected from the 5th graders and their primary teacher. The class was overfull (close to 40 children), and I got the sense that the teacher was overwhelmed by the number of children. When I would arrive, she would quickly assign me a group of students to work with in a remote location

(typically, an empty classroom). I had very little insight into the flow of instruction, and did not feel comfortable asking to remain posted in the classroom. In Mrs. Taylor and Mrs. Gerald's classrooms, none of these issues were a factor. Particularly, with Mrs. Taylor, as she took an early liking to me because I looked like (and shared commonalities) with one of daughters, this transition into the classroom felt natural. Mrs. Taylor, very early on, expressed being proud of me. Within the first couple of weeks, we were spending time chatting in the morning or during the lunch break about life and education. Mrs. Taylor appreciated my presence as a "young" teacher because she "was always trying to learn something new". She often asked me to troubleshoot technology issues and we would exchange ideas about how best to teach concepts. Mrs. Taylor taught ELA and writing. She loved literature, although she taught science for many years. Mrs. Taylor also "filled in the gaps" as necessary, meaning she had the flexibility to do supplementary activities to reinforce concepts. The two 4th grade classes were so small that they could often be combined for the purposes of instruction. This was the 2nd year that Mrs. Gerald and Mrs. Taylor were working with this particular group of children. They had the luxury of "looping". Mrs. Gerald taught math, science and social studies. The emphasis was clearly on mathematics and guiding students through the curriculum efficiently, as if there were no time to waste.

At JHF, I began working with small groups of students, helping them to complete problems or reinforcing specific concepts. Sometimes, we'd transition to a private (empty) classroom, but more often we'd convene at a table somewhere in either Mrs. Taylor's or Mrs. Gerald's classrooms (across the hall from one another, in wing almost secluded from the rest of the school). Over time, I began circulating around the room and

asserting myself as a resource for students. As the students' began to know me and I became familiar with their routines, I also started helping with bathroom breaks and making trips to the office for copies. I generally spent 2-3 half days at Hope per week during the 2015-2016 school year

Having volunteered at Mission City School for an entire year prior to entering JHFSE, I had plenty of time to become acclimated and integrated. In the very beginning, I mostly observed and would help students in the vicinity. But Ms. Jamie and I bonded very quickly over our love of science and disposition towards teaching. We discovered that we were practically the same age, and also started to connect informally about life in our late 20's. Within weeks, I began facilitating math groups independently, usually on the floor in the hallway, right outside of the door. Ms. Jamie would quickly update me on the concept for the day, and my experience teaching allowed me to think on my feet and facilitate a mini-lesson on the topic. Students knew that they'd be with me on particular days. This was normal, and MCS had multiple volunteers with experience teaching. By year two, I had grown in friendship with Ms. Jamie. We shared ideas. I helped her set up her classroom at the start of the year. I was invited on all fieldtrips. She texted me when she was going to be sick. We complained and commiserated together during the prep period. Jamie referred to me, jokingly, as her unpaid classroom "assistant" (the one that she needed but otherwise wouldn't have had).

Similarly, the school administration grew to trust me (my impression). I was greeted with warmth and engaged in personal conversations. I became privy to information about events and people. I received hugs and notes of thank you. On occasion, they would take me up on my offer to substitute teach. I received no

compensation for this work. After I began to serve in the after-school program, I think it became increasingly clear that I shared in a sincere commitment to the school, outside of collecting data. There were some days when I'd cover for a teacher for multiple days, and then also fulfill my responsibility to the girls in my after-school group. I began volunteering at Mission City for two half days a week. By the second year, this often looked more like 4 half days each week, not including field trip days or substitute teaching.

In both schools, the research generally took a back seat to the practical work of teaching. There were times that participating teachers would urge and/or remind me to complete interviews, trying to support me in getting as many accomplished in a day as possible. As the spring approached and the year was winding down, Ms. Jamie began to greet me in the mornings with "Did you want to do some interviews?" or "Who do you need to interview today?". They all wanted me to complete the work and were invaluable in helping me to stay on task. The teachers advocated for me. Later in this chapter, I outline the practical research components. The design and enactment of the research should be understood as happening concurrently with the volunteer work outlined in this section. Refer to the table below for a summary of the volunteer tasks and commitments relevant to this project.

Table 3.1: *Summary of Typical Volunteer Responsibilities across School Contexts*

Description of Task	John Hope Franklin School of Excellence	Mission City School
Small Group Instruction (e.g. leading math groups, reviewing fundamentals, guided reading support) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ JHFSE- variable responsibilities on as needed basis ▫ MCS- consistent, recurring groups of students on a weekly to bi-weekly basis 	X	X
Individual Student Support (within the classroom)	X	X
General Classroom Resource Activities (circulating in classroom, promoting on-task behavior, answering child questions, supervising bathroom breaks)	X	X
Grading Papers/Assessment of Student Work	X	X
Substitute Teaching ⁴²		X
Chaperoning Fieldtrips		X
Participating in Culminating Celebrations & Community Events <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ JHFSE- field day, movie days ▫ MCS- annual block party, field day 	X	X
Attending & Participating in School Rituals/Meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ JHFSE- Harambee, Rites of Passage ▫ MCS- morning meeting, Winter Camp 	X	X
After-School Facilitation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▫ MCS- “Sister Circle”, pilot girls’ empowerment and sisterhood group⁴³ 		X

⁴² While I was not asked to act as the formal substitute teacher at JHFSE, I did sometimes cover for teachers for brief periods of time throughout the day (typically between 10 and 30 minute intervals). When teachers were absent, I would usually be prepped on the day’s plan beforehand or via text and, given my familiarity with the students and classroom context, would act unofficially in the capacity of substitute teacher along with another person.

⁴³ The “sister circle” is comprised of ten girls ranging in age from 8-11 years old. As part of the schools’ rigorous after-school programming schedule, “sister circle” is a meeting group designed for and by girls. As the sole facilitator, I supported the girls in engaging in dialogue about relevant issues, team-building, leadership development, self-reflection and conflict resolution. The idea for this group came out of a meeting with school admin and informal discussions about the need to cultivate increased solidarity amongst the girls. At the time, the bickering and “mean girl” behavior was at an all-time high.

Confirmation of Each Schools' Reasonable Alignment with Model

As one might imagine, my role as volunteer in John Hope Franklin and Mission City Schools allowed me to quickly immerse myself in each site's happenings. Although not a substitute for a comprehensive evaluation, this early participation worked to confirm⁴⁴ that the schools selected demonstrated reasonable fidelity to their advertised missions. There was evidence that these schools were distinct in values, culture and practice. Most relevant to the study design, they had contrasting features that were consistent with the theoretical discussions of critical emancipatory race and place-based pedagogical frameworks. Before I outline the formal research methods and analysis techniques, I foreshadow features observed within each school that provided preliminary insight into their differences. My knowledge of these characteristics informed the development of study protocols, and became a resource during participant interviews⁴⁵.

The principal and staff at John Hope Franklin School of Excellence utilized talk that suggested a commitment to communalism and Black children's holistic empowerment. Mrs. Taylor, in an informal conversation, stressed the importance of "keeping the children whole" and uplifting students even as you discipline them. John Hope staff often referred to the school as a "village", which follows from English translations of indigenous African proverbs of varied origins commonly understood to mean, "It takes a village to raise a child". Within the school environment, there were overt representations and symbols of Black liberation, African American ingenuity, Black

⁴⁴ In a very general sense

⁴⁵ I was able to engage in conversation in a way that signaled an understanding and appreciation for each school's institutional identity.

excellence and the continent of Africa. Examples include, but are not limited to, the Black Liberation Flag⁴⁶ and its' colors, banners from historically-black colleges and universities (HBCUs), pictures of innovators and leaders like Mary McCloud Bethune, illustrations of black panthers, maps of Africa, etc. Finally, John Hope School acknowledged the rituals of Harambee (“all pull together” in Kiswahili), to include the pouring of libations, a practice that reinforces indigenous African languages and cultural traditions of paying respect to the ancestors.

Mission City School, as anticipated, did not make such explicit racial and diasporic connections. School leaders and most staff became acquainted through experiences organizing locally, or through affiliations with various community-based organizations. Art around the school was either created by students, or took the form of murals or pieces developed by community artists. Their after-school program was facilitated, almost entirely, by local volunteers (artists, writers, educators). Additionally, the centering of place was emphasized through events such as the community block party and curricular offerings such as “Exploration”⁴⁷, wherein students were directed in various walking tours and discovery projects around the school neighborhood. Finally, staff and students within the school frequently employ language of community/friendship, personal responsibility and activism. As an example, teachers often refer to students as “friends” and have used restorative justice techniques to help children identify the ways that behaviors/events may impact self and others.

⁴⁶ Also, Afro-American or Pan-African Flag, where the color red represents the blood shed for redemption and liberty, black represents the people of a distinguished race and green represents the natural abundance of the Motherland of Africa.

⁴⁷ Pseudonym for course title. “Exploration” was a required special course often set outside on and around school grounds.

I expound on the dynamic contrasts evident between Mission City and John Hope in subsequent chapters, with more focused attention to specific norms, educative priorities, and, curricular and co-curricular practices evident therein. But first, I complete the process of describing the tools and techniques utilized in an effort to investigate the relationship between these two schools and Black students' agency.

Core Research Design

Although the phases of this study unfolded differently and to an extent, non-linearly within each school context, I describe core elements of the research design in a linear manner. I do this in order to make key aspects of research most accessible to the reader. In the event that differences or dynamics within and/or across sites are thought to have direct consequences for the character⁴⁸ of data collected, I do my best to make this evident. Later (See Figure 3.4), I summarize data collection graphically. Data for this project was conducted in the interest of learning, with depth, about the institutional practices and experiences of students enrolled in MCS and JHFSE. I was also interested in children's conceptions of racialized opportunity, constraint and their own capacity to critically engage at the local, national and global scale(s).

Study Participants

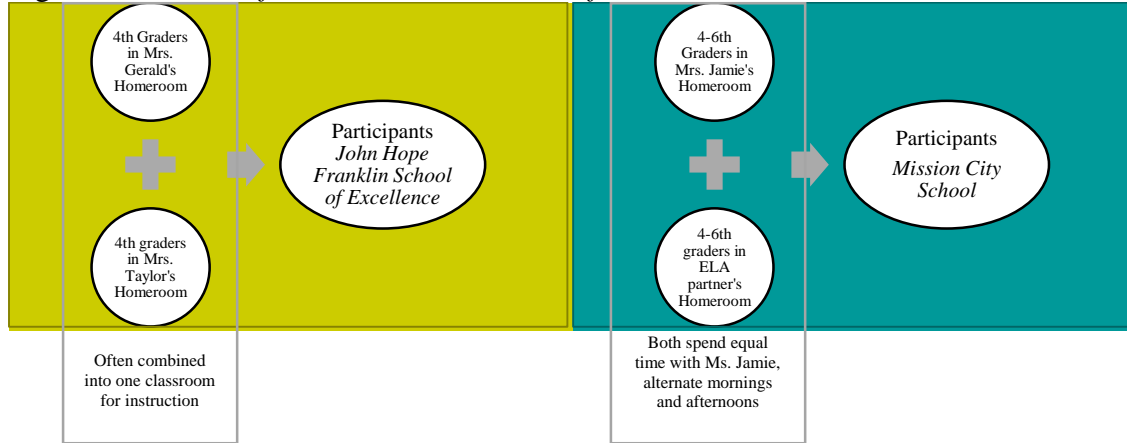
Both John Hope Franklin School of Excellence and Mission City School serve predominately African-American populations, as is typical in Riverview. The schools are a short 5-6 minute drive from one another, with easy access to local freeways. Most

⁴⁸ i.e. texture, quality, contours of datas

families live closer to the east side of the city. Students either walk to school or are dropped off by a family member, guardian or trusted friend. To recruit children and adults into the study, I identified teachers within each school that were (1) amenable to the study, (2) teaching students primary subjects in grades 4-5, (3) seasoned professionals, with at least 5 years of classroom experience and, (4) representative of the typical educator within that school. On the last point, I did take into consideration the principals' impressions of the focal classroom (+ educator) and their presumed alignment with the school mission. Yet, the small size of MCS and mixed age classrooms limited my options-- Ms. Jamie and the ELA teacher at the time became primary candidates by default. When the ELA teacher exited early-year⁴⁹, Jamie's science and mathematics classroom became my sole focus. Jamie taught two groups, and I recruited from each class. At John Hope, I followed students as they transitioned back and forth from Mrs. Taylor to Mrs. Gerald's classrooms (more on this in the section on data collection). Although they were technically two distinct classes sometimes merged for convenience, I recruited from both as if they were one group. Figure 3.1 depicts the focal recruitment pool for students across sites.

⁴⁹ By October of 2015, the ELA teacher quit and left her position at MCS. Although she had previous experience, she often seemed stressed and overwhelmed by the demands of the school. She also had a newborn baby, which she specified as informing her decision to exit.

Figure 3.1: Visual of Child Recruitment Pool for JHFSE & MCS



Upon confirming with classroom teachers that they would be willing participants in the study, I announced the project for students and distributed permission slips. At Mission City, I made a preliminary announcement during their semester Parent Night in October of 2015, and distributed permission slips to attendees during this time. The distributed consent form also allowed parents to indicate their potential interest in also taking part in the project. Out of a total of 26 consenting students, seventeen parents from MCS indicated that they could be contacted for a follow-up. At John Hope, sixteen students consented to the project, with four parents opting for the follow-up. The difference in response rates across schools are likely attributed to a few factors. First, the additional time spent at Mission City School meant that I had increased opportunities to interact with parents more frequently, in passing, during school hours and on field trips. I suspect that this, coupled with the fact that some of the students' parents worked for or volunteered at MCS, worked in the favor of participation. Next, MCS distributes noticeably more consent forms. Mission City students attend more fieldtrips, co-curricular opportunities, and receive offers for donations from community partners. Quite

frankly, when compared to John Hope SE, MCS students are more accustomed to the process of receiving and returning permission slips. Finally, with the mixed age classrooms, Mission City has many more groups of siblings or relatives who share teachers. In my conversation with students, I know that siblings would often remind one another about the permission slips. And, when they returned, forms came back in doubles, with only one parent signature needed to grant permission for two children.

I employed purposeful sampling with a criterion, opting to not interview, in general, non-Black students⁵⁰ (Patton, 1990). My intent here was not to devalue the perspectives of other students. Yet, the research questions driving this analysis privilege the experiences and agency of African American children. If time was permitting, I might have interviewed all consenting children. I interviewed Black students in grades 3-6 but focused my analyses on the children in grades 4 or 5. I did this because John Hope Franklin students were exclusively, 4th graders in a single-age classroom. In setting up a viable comparison, I hoped to minimize the likelihood that participating students' would be in drastically different places developmentally. I recognize that grade level and age can both be cursory indicators of a child's development and maturity, but these were the most practical and standard measures available to me. Additionally, my experience as a classroom teacher and volunteer informed these decisions about reasonable criterion for inclusion or exclusion. Table 3.2 provides a demographic summary of the participant information for John Hope Franklin and Mission City School(s).

⁵⁰ Students identifying as Black or Biracial (with Black) were prioritized. Emma, a white student from MCS is the only exception.

Table 3.2: Study Participant Demographics

School Site/Type	Pseudonym	Race (self-identified)	Gender (assumed) ⁵¹	Role or Grade Level	Interviewed?
John Hope Franklin School of Excellence – African-Centered	Mr. Henderson	Black	Male	Principal	
	Mrs. Brown	Black	Female	Assistant Principal	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Mrs. Parks	Black	Female	Administrator & Literacy Coach	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Mrs. Taylor	Black	Female	4 th grade ELA + supplementary classroom teacher	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Mrs. Gerald	Black	Female	4 th grade Math/SS/Science classroom teacher	
	Andre	Black	Male	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Andrew	Black	Male	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Angel	Black	Female	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Angelique	Black	Female	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Brittany	Black	Female	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Chase	Black	Male	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Dante	Black	Male	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Emery	Black	Female	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Heaven	Black	Female	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Jamie	Black	Female	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Kayla	Black	Female	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Kevin	Black	Male	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Paris	Black	Female	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Mission City School – Place-based	Mrs. Nikki	Black	Female	Principal, Founder	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Ms. Lauren	White	Female	School Operations, Administrator, Founder	
	Ms. Jamie	White	Female	4-6 th grade Math/Science classroom teacher	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Akena* ⁵²	Black	Female	6 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Allura *	Black	Female	6 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	August*	Biracial w/Black	Male	6 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Craig	Black	Male	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Darui	Black	Male	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Diamond	Black	Female	5 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	DeShawn*	Black	Male	6 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Emma	White	Female	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Gabby	Black	Female	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Iris	Black	Female	5 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Jack	Black	Male	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Jeff	Black	Male	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Juliana	Black	Female	5 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Kisha	Biracial w/Black	Female	6 th (promoted, aged as 5 th grader)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Lisa	Black	Female	5 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Mackenzie	Black	Female	5 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Marcus	Black	Male	5 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Sean*	Black	Male	6 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
Starr	Black	Female	4 th	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

⁵¹ There is at least one known participant identifies as a non-binary person and has recently opted into the pronouns “they/them/their”. Because this would jeopardize the confidentiality that they are entitled to, I did not specify their gender designation accurately in this table. I make clear that although I have misrepresented their identity throughout this dissertation, I stand with them and respect their preferred identifiers. They are brilliant and brave in demanding to be named according to their own terms.

⁵² As mentioned previously, some 6th graders were interviewed. For this project, I used their words to inform my analyses of MCS in practice. In thinking about the development of agency, I did not compare their articulations to those of students in the 4th grade at JHFSE.

Data Sources & Collection

I utilized the following methods of data collection across institutional contexts: (1) preliminary observations for the purpose of establishing rapport and refining study instruments, (2) classroom/school observations documented via ethnographic field notes and supplemented with photographs, (3) interviews with school staff, (4) individual student interviews and drawings and (6) open-response questionnaires from parents. I now discuss each of these elements in greater depth.

Preliminary & Pilot Data Collection: Preliminary classroom observations began in Winter 2015 for Mission City School and the Fall of 2015 for John Hope Franklin School of Excellence. My early experiences at MCS were used as context to inform the initial development of study protocols. I continued to refine these protocols post-entry into the John Hope School community. Observations were relatively informal and generally undocumented. However, they set a precedent for my sustained presence in the classroom. During this time, I focused on integration into the site environment(s). I noted cultural norms within each school, and began to try to embody them. I calibrated language and dress as part of my efforts to “blend in”. For example, MCS has a more casual dress policy. Teachers often wear jeans and are referred to as “Ms. /Mr. [FIRST NAME]”. Supplementary courses (i.e. Art, Gym, Spanish, Exploration, etc.) are referred to as “Specials”. Staff speaks in “we” form and tries to frame redirections in the positive (e.g. “We’re listening” as opposed to “Do not talk”). At John Hope School, teachers are referred to as Ms. /Mr. [LAST NAME]. Dress for teachers is typically business casual. Supplementary courses are called “electives”. When only at MCS, I dressed according to

my own personal inclinations, casual but put-together and alternating between sneakers, flats and wedge booties. As I began to visit both schools at once, I tried to strike a balance that was somewhere between business casual and casual chic, so as not to look out of place at either site.

Classroom/School Observations & Artifact Collection: In an effort to obtain the “richest possible data” (Lofland & Lofland, 1994), I solidified a role as participant observer in both of the classrooms studied. In both schools, my position fluctuated between that of a “complete member” and “active or peripheral member” (Adler & Adler, 1987). When I was stationed in the classroom, my membership was most complete. This was especially true at Mission City School. On days when I facilitated math groups, students would be more likely to comment on my absence than my presence. In both Mrs. Taylor and Ms. Jamie’s classrooms, I could arrive unannounced without causing disruption. I generally did not do this, except on occasion upon leaving something behind or wanting to ask a quick question easier done in person.

Time in the classroom varied from 2 half days a week to sometimes as many as 5 partial days per week. In the beginning at MCS, I agreed to two half days for volunteer work which increased to three 2 hour periods, with the start of the after-school term. Similarly, I began at JHFSE with a commitment of two half-days (one morning and one afternoon). As I became more integrated into the school context, I began to adjust my time according to the week’s happenings. If a field trip was occurring, or the start of a unit, I would take these things into consideration when confirming the schedule. Alternatively, on standardized testing weeks for one school, I might spend increased time at the non-testing

school and observe students during different periods of the day. My total time spent volunteering, observing and collecting data is estimated at over 540 hours⁵³.

Classroom observations were an essential component of this study, providing necessary insight into how teachers and students were participating in the school space. This is important, given that CEP has the ultimate goal of inspiring action. Students' thoughts and reflections are integral indicators, but so are their observable behaviors. Freire (1987) underscores this point in the following excerpt:

Even though they can feel and perceive themselves after the semester as first rate students, more critical thinkers, better scientists and better people, it is still not enough for the transformation of society, this *feeling* of being free....The critical development of these students is absolutely fundamental for the radical transformation of society. Their curiosity, their critical perception of reality, is fundamental for social transformation, but it is not enough by itself.” (Freire & Shor, 1987, p.109-10)

Consequently, classroom & school observations were conducted in the interest of understanding how the curriculum and teacher practice in each school is articulated. Moreover, observations were used to gain insight into how curricular, co-curricular and/or instructional contexts may have bearing on student perceptions around racial opportunities, constraints and children's sense of efficacy in light of perceived barriers/pathways. While in the classroom, I prioritized documenting

⁵³ Although MCS hours makes up about 70% of this total, time spent in both schools were closer to equivalent during the 2015-2016 school year.

lessons/activities/content flagged by teachers as exemplary or instrumental to developing a strong sense of individual or collective agency in students. I also collected curricular artifacts from the classroom and school, as well as samples of student work. Lessons or discussions which specifically highlight themes around race/ethnicity, place, and/or the experiences of African Americans were documented in great(er) detail.

Documentation of the classroom environment took the form of ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2011). I made quick jottings, as appropriate, during the classroom observations. This permitted me to capture some of the precise language of the participants. I would also take occasional and inconspicuous photos to further cement details and/or obtain a visual reference. When necessary, I supplemented jottings with more detailed fieldnotes during the lunch hours or after school. I took note of my own impressions and recollections of the school/classroom to supplement descriptive notes. When I commenced student interviews, field notes and observations became less consistent.

Staff Interviews: As a means of further capturing the pedagogy in each school and classroom, I conducted in-depth interviews with the classroom teacher and school principal/assistant principal or each site. At John Hope Franklin School of Excellence, I also interviewed an additional administrative staff person upon entry. Mrs. Parks, was an instructional coach and, as such, was familiar with all of the teaching staff and classroom contexts. I knew that an early conversation with Mrs. Parks would support my acclimation into the school environment. She was also more readily available than Mr. Henderson.

For the school leader, the interview became an opportunity to collect data relevant to the school history, background and the meaning ascribed to either a CREP or CEPP-related model(s). School leader interviews helped me to contextualize the data collected in the classrooms, thus providing further insight into their mission and enactment of CEP. I used also used this conversation as an opportunity to discuss and solidify mutually-beneficial goals for the project. See Appendix A for a copy of the instrument used to guide the school leader interviews.

With the classroom teacher(s), the primary goal of the interview (Appendix B) was to delineate their personal and educational commitments in relation to the schools' mission. In addition to prompting discussion about their professional backgrounds, I asked classroom teachers to discuss their beliefs around empowering and/or educating Black students as thinkers and change agents in their immediate context(s), nation and internationally. I also asked educators to comment on how they coordinate instruction in light of their teaching philosophy and the school's mission. All adult interviews were recorded. The articulations of teachers helped to guide classroom observations by highlighting how and when instructors were attempting to facilitate the growth of agency in students.

Student Interviews & Drawings: Student interviews took place across two session, each lasting between 35 minutes and 1 hour. Given the age of the participants, I opted to conduct the interviews over two shorter periods, in an effort to not exhaust respondents

and to be respectful of instructional time⁵⁴. As was the case with all interviews, I relied on a semi-structured interview guide to ensure consistency in data across subjects (Patton, 1990). Although students were generally asked the same questions, the order and flow of the conversation varied based on students' responses. If a student naturally began to discuss an idea that was related to a later prompt, I would probe on that topic and then return to my original line of questioning.

Protocols were designed to guide students in a series of reflections and analyses that increasingly broadened the scope. The interview questions (See Appendices C, D) clustered around three domains of interest. Interview #1 covered the first and second domains. Interview #2 focused substantively on the final domain.

- *Self, Independent of School*- I asked students to provide background information around personal interests, racial identity/meanings, family, talk about race at home, future aspirations, etc. I also asked children to define and discuss the “good life”, to include prompting students to provide examples of indicators that serve as evidence of a “good life”.
- *Self + School*- These questions focused on students' histories of participation (Nasir & Saxe, 2003) within the context of school. I asked students to discuss their previous school, sometimes relative to their current institution. Focusing on their current school and classroom context, I prompted students to describe their current educational circumstances, general likes, dislikes and the

⁵⁴ Interviews were designed to last for 30 minutes. The pilot interview iterations were consistent with this timeframe. For the actual interviews, I was often struck by how freely the children spoke, and the level of detail that they provided. Their willingness to engage in conversation over an extended period of time was invaluable and speak to the relevancy of the topics covered therein.

perceived pedagogical emphases within the institution. Participants were also asked to connect particular sentiments (i.e. freedom, feeling of being free) with their schooling experiences.

- *Self + community, nation and world*- This final domain includes questions around the topics of community, social issues (racialized or not) and agency. Children were asked to define community and speak to community assets. Participants were then asked to be critical and identify major problems at the levels of community, nation and world, with particular emphases on those issues most relevant to African American people. I prompted children to reflect on modes of attending to the issues that they identified, to include them thinking about their own role as a political actor, resident and/or citizen. Finally, I will also ask students about their prior experiences with service and community engagement.

Each student interview included a drawing component related to the domains of interest. Koh (2010) and others found this “Write and Draw” strategy to be particularly useful in helping young students articulate abstract ideas. Similarly, Grover (2004) describes the use of drawings in research as a means of allowing children/people to tell their own stories (p. 84). In the first drawing activity, students responded visually to the prompt, “What is it like *here* in school?”. I gave students an assortment of color pencils to work with and allotted approximately five minutes for this task. If a child wanted to make adjustments to their illustrations while we debriefed, this was generally permitted. For the second drawing, students explored the prompt, “What does being [Black/African American] mean to you?”. For biracial and non-black children, this prompt was edited to

include the most appropriate racial/ethnic identifier⁵⁵. Once students completed drawings, I asked the children to describe their pictures out-loud. I probed with questions such as, *“Can you tell me about what you drew? How does this picture tell me about school/being Black? What’s this? What are you trying to show? Are you in this picture? How do you fit into the picture you drew? Was this easy or hard to draw, or somewhere in between?”*

Child participants received snacks during and/or after each interview. They were also given access to play doh/clay for tactile engagement during the conversation. Most students made good use of this resource (See Figure 3.3). I used my prior experience teaching and studying young children to make decisions about how to best structure the interviewing environment. All 61 child interviews were recorded. Additionally, at the end of the school year, all child participants received a \$10 gift coin for use at Target® stores.

Figure 3.3: *Iris’ Model of a Snake Eating a Baby Mouse, created during interview*



Questionnaires from parents: As a means of supplementing students’ background information and gaining insight into children’s home-based racial and political socialization, I distributed an open-ended questionnaire to guardians (sealed envelope sent home with children, follow-up via email). I specifically asked parents to describe and comment on each schools’ mission. I also prompted them to identify opportunities

⁵⁵ Self-identified

and constraints at the level of community, nation and world, with particular emphasis on issues facing Black people. Parents received \$25 gift cards upon completion of the activity. The response rate for this exercise was 20%, with only 5 guardians opting in. Time and funding constraints did not allow for full interviews and transcriptions.

This research involved many components. Below, I graphically depict the various phases of data collection. Figure 3.3 is presented to further clarify how the research conducted in two schools progressed over time.

Figure 3.4: *Project Data Collection at-a-Glance*

Timeframe	Nov14-Jun15	Sept15	Oct15	Nov15-Dec15	Jan16	Feb16-Apr16	May16-Jun16
Summary of Research Activities MCS	Volunteer & Preliminary Observation		Parent/Student Consent Forms Distributed Classroom Teacher Interview	Begin 1 st Round Child Interviews	Complete 1 st Round Child Interviews (n=19). Begin 2 nd Round Interviews	Conclude 2 nd Round Interviews (n=19)	Distribute and collect Parent Forms Principal Interview
		Volunteering & Classroom Observations					
Summary of Research Activities JHFSE	Identification of Site & Initial Contact with Leadership	Confirmation of Research Collaboration School Administrator Interview	Volunteer & Preliminary Observation, Relationship-Building		Distribute Parent & Student Consent Forms	Initiate and Complete 1 st Round Interviews (n=13)	Begin and Complete 2 nd Round Child Interviews (n=10) Distribute and collect Parent Forms Classroom Teacher and Principal Interview

Analysis Procedures

The final database for this dissertation includes ethnographic fieldnotes, interview transcripts from children and adults, photos, child drawings, samples of student work and other school artifacts collected from each school site. To analyze these data, I engaged in

an iterative process that involved coding, matrix and memo development. Early observations and fieldnotes were reviewed and used to inform the refinement of interview protocols. By the time children were interviewed, I felt confident that I had begun to understand the flow of instruction, school norms, and pedagogical emphases of each school. My ability to blend in and facilitate instruction⁵⁶ in a way that was consistent with that of students' classroom teachers served as a further means of assessing my emergent understandings of the school environments.

I used the secure cloud storage program MBox to systematically store and retrieve digitized artifacts, fieldnotes (w/researcher's reflections) and transcribed interview data. I transcribed 10% of the interview data, and was able to pay for a professional service to complete the remaining work. Once the transcript documents were returned to me for processing, I reviewed and corrected them as needed. I did not "fix" students' grammar or revise their statements. At this stage, I was less concerned about the clarity of their responses and more concerned about transcripts matching the articulations captured via audio. For data reduction and thematic coding, I used a combination of Microsoft Word, Excel and the qualitative analysis software DeDoose. In approaching the data analysis, my primary phenomenological concerns were 1) capturing and contextualizing critical race/place-based CEP, as evidenced within each site and 2) investigating Black students' conceptions around opportunity, constraint and change agency.

Taking the preceding context into consideration, summative analyses began with within-group assessments of students' drawings of school. Given the volume of data, I

⁵⁶ More on this in the subsequent findings chapters.

wanted to first gain a sense of students' schooling experiences and general impressions. I was also keeping in mind how students' visual depictions of school confirmed or complicated my own working understandings of institutional practice. Initially, I looked for similarities across drawings. I also began to memo about artist perspective (narrow or wide-gaze), how students' incorporated school actors into these drawings, and what these illustrations seemed to prioritize (i.e. social interactions, academics, etc.). To the extent possible, I began to cluster similar drawings and identify descriptive categories. I represented these clusters in matrices. Figure 3.5 displays a sample screenshot of my work products from this phase of the analysis. Student names have been redacted. Once this process was complete for John Hope Franklin School of Excellence, I repeated this method for Mission City School. Now, I was concerned with within-school comparisons/contrasts while also exploring across-site distinctions. Upon completion of this first round of analysis with student drawings, I used my observation notes, publicly-available research and student drawings to develop site profiles⁵⁷. This two-column table reduced data into a more concise listing of each school's characteristics and educative goals. I continued to return to this site profile document and revise as necessary. See Figure 3.6 for an excerpt of the site profile table.

⁵⁷ Staff interviews and artifacts provided additional background context needed to understand the dynamics of schools and classrooms.

Figure 3.5: Student Illustrations of School –Matrix Depicting Clustered Analyses

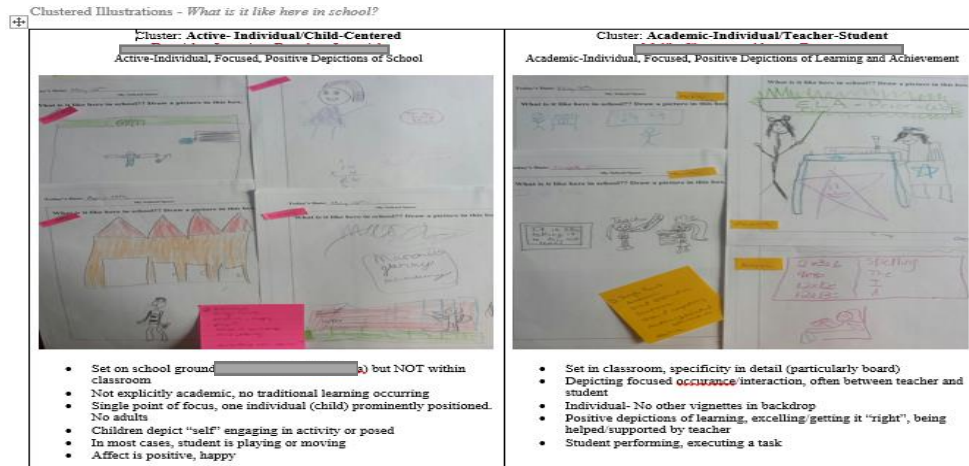




Figure 3.6: Site Profile Preliminary Comparison Table

Mission City Academy??/The City School/Community Collaborative	John Hope Franklin School of Excellence
	
<p><i>"We must believe we have the power within us to create the world anew"</i></p> <p>Energy, movement, interaction, fluidity, negotiation, chaos, friendship, creativity, tensions- School as a place not meant to look like any other school, teetering on the edge of school and community center. Here, the available programming matches the diversity of the student body- there is no one way, one form of goodness, single strategy. Students learn through both direct instruction and experiences, but the experiential piece is more characteristic. Everything is collaborative, students are always socializing, talking, working in close proximity to one another. Transitions can be difficult, despite their being routines. Critical thinking applied to solving academic problems, individual problems and problems of community. Students take pride in individuality, standing out in terms of what they see as own personal strengths, this sometimes facilitates a de-prioritization of academics. Because of the racial diversity in the school, students have a heightened sense of blackness. This creates tensions, as students work to figure out which camp they fit into. There</p>	<p><i>"I will have faith in myself. ... I can learn! I will learn! I must learn!"</i></p> <p>Structure, mother/child dynamic, achievement first, respect (for self, elders, institutions), trust, compliance, representation, focus, consistency- School is a place for work, for meeting daily objectives. Students are expected to be fully engaged in the academic learning process, no matter what. Students can socialize at school, but must be purposeful and aware of appropriateness. Confidence is instilled in students, they are encouraged to see themselves as capable, as excellent. Instruction is about 50% of direct instruction with guided practice. Students do things collectively, gradual release of teacher control. Students take pride in competition, feel competent and able to step in to help a student who is struggling with concepts. While students have leeway in offering academic help to peers, they are discouraged from policing the behavior of other students. Critical analyses skills to be applied to solving academic and individual problems. Students take pride in being recognized for excellence, want to stand out amongst peers,</p>

The next, most substantive phases of analysis involved the open and more focused coding of student interview transcripts (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). Several modes of analysis commenced at once, all prompted by the following analytical consideration--The drawings of the school context from each school were dramatically different. Students at

John Hope Franklin drew “zoomed in” pictures displaying a singular instance, while MCS children most frequently constructed “bird’s eye” illustrations of several interactions happening at once. The drawings from JHFSE also generally depicted children engaged in academic instruction, while MCS students drew a range of social and academic scenarios. I turned to the student interviews to determine if the differences apparent in the student drawings were indicative of other across-group distinctions.

Beginning with one school site, I developed a preliminary, lengthy list of categories via the open-coding process. These descriptive designations were generally consistent with the core domains of interest in the student interview. Once I completed this process for a subset of child interviews, I began to collapse line-by-line codes into larger categories containing similar articulations. Using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I moved back and forth between transcripts, using responses from individuals and groups of students to further delineate codes.

During the same time, I constructed a matrix to use as a tool to identify key areas of difference within and across the two schools. This matrix was organized into three sections: (1) Opportunities, constraints and the Black experience, (2) Agency/Modes of engagement and (3) Schooling experiences and connections. Each section contained several fields such as “Black people- easier, harder or same?”, which allowed me to check boxes or fill in short-form responses based on each student’s interview. As an example, the question above, required me to determine if a participant thought that generally, Black people encountered more, less or a comparable amount of challenges in life when compared to non-Black counterparts. I asked multiple questions related to this idea, and took children’s responses from various points in the interview into

consideration before filling in this column on the matrix. Once the matrix was complete, I was able to scan the columns and identify the most robust contrasts. I developed analytic memos to summarize emergent findings and began to write construct narratives that explored the patterns between students' expressions around opportunity/constraint, Blackness and agency within one school. Taking the school context into account, did these patterns and similarities make sense? Although I was most concerned with within-school similarities and across site-differences, I also considered the discrepant cases. Were there students' within each school who told strikingly different stories about opportunity, Blackness or social change? How could I begin to account for these differences?

The full matrix, in-process coding schema and analytic memos were utilized as I transitioned into the selective coding and refinement phase. Based on the robustness of the evidence available, I selected core properties that were representative of the practical orientation and pedagogical emphases of each school, with particular emphasis on the areas of contrast between JHFSE and MCS. I represented these properties in a data table with supporting evidence and some interpretative commentary. The tables were organized similarly for both schools, so that I could easily refer back and note the differences. I repeated this process of constructing data tables for each school that reflected the major areas of contrast in students' orientation. Finally, I developed a conceptual model (See below, Figure 3.7), to be explained in subsequent chapters, that synthesized findings related to Black student agency in one place-based and one African-centered elementary school.

Figure 3.7: *School/Agentic Child Relationship Conceptual Illustration*



As a result of my analyses, I assert the following: The less-conforming, communal emphases of Mission City School and traditionalistic, individualistic emphases of John Hope Franklin School of Excellence animate particular forms of agency in African American children. While both schools focus on self-determination, the way that “self” is conceived and reinforced becomes evident in students’ analyses of opportunity structures, constraints and change agency. At John Hope, Black children imagine a world where their individual merit, sound decision-making and determination will allow them to transcend their current circumstances. For these children, race/racism is a consideration although less consequential as a factor contributing to their ultimate success. John Hope students are oriented towards expressions of political agency that are more practical and acquiescent. On the other hand, Mission City students express agency that is comparatively more confrontational, empathetic and considerate of (less-fortunate) others. Children at MCS, demonstrate a keen awareness of enduring racism and exhibit a skepticism in relation to figures of authority. In the chapters that follow, I provide

evidence that is consistent with these understandings of MCS and JHFSE as figured worlds of school that circumscribe and extend African American students' Black and moral visions, social imagination and theories of change. I elaborate in full in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter IV

Figured World(s) of School – Tradition, Decorum and Individual Transcendence at John Hope Franklin School of Excellence

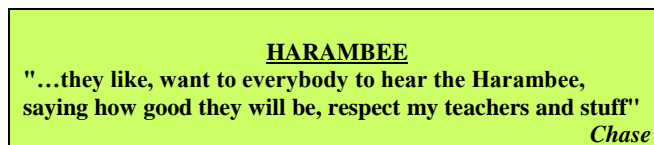
Up until this point, I have described, in brief, each school's mission and ideals. In Chapter 3, I provide evidence that establishes these two sites as (1) sufficiently distinct from one another and (2) reasonably representative of CEP models privileging either a race-based or place-based orientation. These short introductions were intended to provide context and legitimize continued inquiry within these spaces. And yet, this dissertation is a study about practice and students' experiences on the ground. Most Riverview schools, often named after trailblazers and revolutionaries, would insist that they provide Black students with an enriching and empowering curriculum. Nearly all area schools reference some form of criticality, leadership development and holistic nourishment in their published aims and mission statements. In too many cases though, the well-intentioned meanings behind these words don't quite translate into actual student learning, nor do these affirmations come to characterize children's daily lived educational experiences. And so, I turn now to a discussion of John Hope Franklin School of Excellence and Mission City School that includes the stories that leaders and educators tell about themselves and their schools, but is not limited to these characterizations. My focus necessarily shifts to prioritize how each schools' missions manifest and are experienced

by students. The subsequent portrayal of these sites is not simply aspirational. Rather, I foreground herein analyses of their work and pedagogical emphases.

Beginning with John Hope Franklin School of Excellence, the purpose of Chapters 4 and 5 is to discuss key findings related to the socio-cultural norms and pedagogical orientation that characterizes the two educational environments of interest in this project. My thick description of these learning spaces takes into account children and staff articulations, student illustrations, school artifacts and, my own informal and formal observations of the space. Here, I lay the foundation necessary for contextualizing the core areas of contrast in Black children’s expressions of agency across school sites. The narrative that I put forth about each school begins with a discussion of the rituals that preface each academic week.

Setting the Stage for Learning – Harambee at JHF

Figure 4.1: Chase on Harambee



HARAMBEE
"...they like, want to everybody to hear the Harambee,
saying how good they will be, respect my teachers and stuff"
Chase

On February 2nd, 2016, children, administrators and teachers at John Hope Franklin School of Excellence gather in the Harambee House for the ritual of Harambee. The Harambee House is a large space approximately 20ft from the side entrance of the school. The décor is minimal, walls are largely bare and the tile flooring is neutral. An elevated stage serves as the focal point for the room. Despite a bare backdrop, the presence of the school community fills the space and sets the tone. African drummers, middle-school boys and girls situated in the front of the room, play a combination of fast-

paced rhythms as groups of students proceed into their assigned spaces. The elementary classrooms are arranged in grade order, with the smallest watoto⁵⁸ situated in the front rows. Middle schools grades create an “L” shape facing the elementary students.

The beat of the drums, sometimes slightly out of sync, prompt many in the room to clap in unison, bob their heads and/or dance in place. On the stage, one classroom rotates each week to lead Harambee. They line up in their white shirts and dark bottoms, and, with their teacher’s coaching, face the front of the assembly in rank. A table is also featured on the stage that contains a plant, water, and framed pictures of various African American trailblazers (deceased figures, e.g. Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr.). A series of affirmations take place automatically, as all students know the order of the agenda⁵⁹:

- i. Libations
- ii. Black National Anthem – *Lift Every Voice and Sing*
- iii. [JHF] Creed
- iv. Code of Ma’at⁶⁰
- v. 30 Seconds of Silence
- vi. Announcements & Recognitions
- vii. Minute by Minute Affirmation
- viii. Song/“Prayer” for Mother Africa

The drums settle into an anticipatory cadence before concluding. The room quiets down, classrooms teachers redirect students and do final checks to ensure that children are positioned well. The school principal initiates a call, “Ago!”, meaning “listen” in the Akan language. The children and remaining adults, in unison, respond with “Ame”, i.e. “we are listening”.

⁵⁸ *Children*, in Kiswahili

⁵⁹ New students took an average of 2 weeks to become acclimated to the procedures and fully memorize the recited content.

⁶⁰ *Ma-at* is an Egyptian/Kemetic concept representing truth, order, balance, justice and harmony.

Libations commence⁶¹. Student leaders, in line order, shout out names like Rosa Parks, Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X and, following each proclamation, raise a container of water into the air and pour a modest amount into the designated plant. The musical accompaniment to *Lift Every Voice and Sing* is then played. “Let us fight on” is repeated thrice to the melody of the anthem, and the assembly proceeds with all three verses of the song. “The [JHF] Creed!” is shouted by the leaders and echoed back by the audience, followed by a mantra of discipline, respect and positivity. Both are worth outlining in their totality, as they speak to key components of the John Hope Franklin culture and approach. Also important, is the moment of silence that students partake in as a means of focus/meditation for a successful academic week, rather than a practice of honoring ancestors (latter consistent with how it has traditionally been exercised).

Figure 4.2: Harambee Affirmations

<p><i>The JHF Creed</i></p> <p>I will have faith in myself I will succeed and most of all I'll reach my goals. I promise to accept responsibility For my duties, and my own actions I have self-respect and self-control I CAN LEARN! I WILL LEARN! I MUST LEARN!</p> <p>I will practice self-determination As taught by the honorable [J. Hope Franklin] Expressed, I will define myself, I will speak for myself, I will name myself and I will create for myself So that others cannot define me, Speak for me; name me or create for me.</p>	<p><i>The Code of Ma'at</i></p> <p>I pledge to open my mind I will seek and learn new knowledge I will not harm, fight or disrespect my Fellow brothers and sisters My body, mind, and the words I speak Are clean</p> <p>I will respect my parents, my Teachers, and myself I will use my knowledge to stay In school and make a new and Better world.</p> <p>I am great! My education will Make me even greater</p> <p>Watoto Wa Africa- MA'AT, MA'AT!</p>
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⁶¹ Traditional African ritual (though not exclusive to African people) of pouring a drink of wine or water as an offering. This offering can be directed towards a particular deity, and/or, be done in honor and gratitude of one's ancestors. In the event that the choice liquid is water, the libation is often used to water a plant. African Americans also take up the practice of pouring libations in the context of African-centered schools, spiritual/religious services, and during burials/memorials.

Today, on February 2nd and most Mondays thereafter, the children in Mrs. Taylor's class comply with the norms of Harambee. Students stand reasonably still, with the exception of clapping and some choreographed hand motions⁶². Relative to what I observed in the classroom⁶³, Harambee in the Harambee House brings with it considerable excitement. On their way to and from the space, the fourth grade students could be observed skipping to and from their classrooms. Similarly, when Ms. Taylor announced that her students would be leading Harambee the following week, students' eyes grew wide and some even celebrated publicly with "yes!" and "ohhhs!"

For students, staff and leaders, Harambee is an integral part of the John Hope Franklin experience. In the next section, I unpack some of the meaning that children and adults derive from the various rituals and affirmations. I also analyze aspects of Harambee and treat it as window into the pedagogical orientation and emphases of John Hope Franklin School of Excellence.

Making Meaning: The Significance of the Ritual of Harambee

The tradition of Harambee is a hallmark of many African-centered educational institutions. At its core, it signals solidarity amongst those within the school "village". John Hope Franklin administrators, emphasize the value of tradition and necessity of

⁶² For example, the "Minute by Minute" affirmation requires students to tap their wrist as if checking a watch/asking for the time.

⁶³ Up until this day, due to a lack of functioning heat in the "Harambee House", I was only able to observe students reciting the various pledges as a call and response in their individual classrooms. Select students were appointed each week to lead the chants for the entire building via a loudspeaker and the remainder of children echo the words from their desks in their assigned classrooms. My initial impression of Harambee in this form was wrought with ambivalence. I was both intrigued by the words that the children recited (although they were muffled and difficult to hear on the loudspeaker) and disappointed by what I perceived as a lack of coordination and enthusiasm. Some children stood and completed the hand motions, while others sat and murmured the words of songs and mantras while making progress on an assignment.

upholding rituals such as Harambee. In my very first meeting with Principal Henderson, he spoke at length on this topic. I paraphrased his sentiments in my fieldnote journal:

[Mr. Henderson] goes on to talk about why African-Centered Education is important...this idea of knowing yourself and loving yourself and your culture- he remarks that a lot of our children (Black children) don't love and appreciate their culture. They don't know themselves, and allow others to disparage who they are. He gives an example, the Bar Mitzvah, and offers that Jewish people would never allow an outsider to come in and disrespect their traditions. [Principal Henderson] reminds students of this, remarking that they must respect their heritage and essentially protect it. (ND Fieldnote, 09/04/15)

Harambee becomes an opportunity for students to recognize and celebrate self. Through Harambee, JHF seeks to build capacity in Black children to preserve and persevere (so that others cannot “define”, “speak” or “create” for them). “The words in our [JHF] creed really do mean something...Like I'll have faith in myself...I can just speak up and be brave to say who I am”, Angelique explains. Another student, Kevin, describes it as a way to “represent”, i.e. proudly affirm one's identities. And, as Mrs. Brown explains, the effects are intended to remain with students as they move forth in the society. AP Brown articulates the following:

I think the different affirmations, those kids never forget it. – like the little girl I was telling you went to Harvard and I just saw her at a picnic the other day and she was standing up there teasing me, reciting all the different pledges that she had. I mean, kids never ever forget it. And so I think the affirmations, the community environment, the village type environment where we're all coming

together and sharing what's going on, what's – you know, letting the village know. (Mrs. Brown, Interview)

Mrs. Brown emphasizes on Harambee as an enduring, unifying practice. Her words indicate an understanding of the ritual as affirming, lasting and consistent with the larger conception of the school as a village collective. Student Dante echoes this understanding, defining Harambee as an instance when, “we all come together as a family and all that”. In his statement, Dante also signals the familial orientation often thought to be characteristic of African-centered educational spaces.

Though the impression of Harambee as a means of affirming and “pulling together” are validated by both JHF students and adults, this is clearly not the only function that the ritual serves. Even in analyzing the words of the various pledges, we can detect the highlighting of deference and self-control as integral to student achievement and racial empowerment. The creed offers, rather directly, the mantra, “I have self-respect and self-control”. Similarly, the Code of Ma’at prompts Black students to proclaim that they will “respect [their] parents, [their] Teachers and [themselves]”. Another stated affirmation entitled, “Minute by Minute”, concludes with the stanza:

GOOD! BETTER! BEST! Never let it rest;

Until your good is your better and your better is your best!

African people, our history is great! It shall be greater still

Lose not faith, Lose not courage. Go forward, uplift the race!

Harambee! (7x)

This takes place after a moment of silence, an exercise of self-discipline, wherein students prepare themselves mentally for the week ahead. As evidenced by these

components of the ritual, Harambee also signals order, decorum and a traditional hierarchy (i.e. from trusted elder down to child). And, in its infusion of messages about deference and self-control with personal and academic success, Harambee suggests a relationship between these constructs, one that is further evident in the articulations of students and adults.

Andre, who is playful yet generally quiet, explains Harambee as a practice that, “tells us what to do and what not to do”. Likewise, his classmate, Chase (whose words introduce this section), states, “they like, want to everybody to hear the Harambee, saying how good they will be, respect my teachers and stuff”. In Chase’s articulation, what is “good” is inclusive of demonstrated respect for teachers. Although Chase does not liken respect to compliance, my understanding is that compliance with school rules and teachers’ requests constitutes an important piece. Mrs. Brown, when asked about the role of Harambee in supporting the school’s mission offers this, “Oh, [Harambee is] so crucial. First of all, it’s teaching kid’s discipline, because nobody can believe the kids stand that long”. Again, we see that ideas of discipline, focus and order are ascribed to the practice of Harambee at John Hope Franklin School of Excellence.

In this section, I have argued that Harambee provides traditional prescriptions for behavior that include deference and self-discipline. And yet, these themes are significant not only because they are germane to our understanding of Harambee, but rather, because they permeate the figured world of JHF School more generally. I return to this idea in later sections of this chapter. Indeed, directives of order and tradition infused with diasporic symbols are apparent in Harambee, but also manifest in other ways. The signs and signals are recurrent, obvious just in looking at the school walls and configuration.

Next, I transition to an analysis of what is understood via the signage, physical procedures and interior design of John Hope Franklin School of Excellence.

In and Around John Hope Franklin- Signs and Symbols on School Walls

Figure 4.3: JHF Banner



John Hope Franklin’s school logo banner, depicted⁶⁴ above, is displayed prominently at multiple sites throughout the building. It contains a version of the Black Liberation Flag, image of the school’s namesake Dr. John Hope Franklin, and the words “committed to excellence”. This sign fits in with the overall décor, and is generally consistent with what is displayed on doors and walls within the physical space. Here, I provide examples of other visual signs and procedures that illustrate (1) JHF’s emphasis on order, decorum, and traditionally-measured academic success and, (2) represent Black excellence as individual achievement and transcendent (e.g. rising above, serving as a model). Additionally, I argue that while these physical and cultural markers most certainly uphold a standard of order, they are also seen as mechanisms for monitoring and

⁶⁴ This is a redesign of the logo that omits identifying information. I replicate the general design and fonts but replace the name and photo to maintain consistency with assigned pseudonyms.

protecting the bodies of Black children. I begin this discussion with an anecdote taken from my field note journal.

We're seated in the classroom, and students are working in their table groups on a spelling and language arts packet. In a few moments, Mrs. Thomas will soon lead the class in a fast-paced review of the handouts, but for now, she expects children to utilize their textbooks, dictionaries and each other to complete the assignment. I am seated near Raequan and Jalen at a communal table next to the door. I help them use process of elimination as a strategy for fill in the blank tasks. I note a bit of static from the loudspeaker, followed by a booming, "Get on the green line, sir!" The voice is Mr. Henderson. Half of the class group barely seems to notice. Some others, respond with facial expressions that I interpret to mean that they are amused and/or surprised. I am startled, widen my eyes and contort my face in confusion. I ask a nearby student if that happens often. With a smile, they confirm that it happens sometimes because "he"/Mr. Henderson is "watching them". (ND, fieldnote journal)

Most literally, at John Hope Franklin School of Excellence, students' steps are ordered. A wide green band is tiled along the perimeter of each corridor (see Figure 4.1), and children follow the designated pathway to their destinations at all times except dismissal. From a logistical standpoint, the green line supports the steady flow of traffic during the busiest moments of the school day. But children are expected to trace the green line even when they are walking alone (or risk being reprimanded). This means that it is nearly impossible to walk side-by-side with a peer. A hidden camera feed capturing hallway activity is directed to the principal's office. And so at any moment, the principal

or administrator can enforce the procedure of walking along the green line to success. As noted in the excerpt above, children within the school are aware of the possibility of constant surveillance.

The sign accompanying the painted line could be viewed as redundant and/or non-essential to upholding the rule in practice⁶⁵. And so, I consider how the written text, clearly visible, may also reinforce specific meaning(s). The language employed here suggests that there is only one line, both to class and possibly, to success more generally. I did not confirm with school staff that this diction was intentional, or that it signaled these dual interpretations. However, I did note that in verbal exchanges, the painted line was typically referred to as simply the “green line”, sans “to success”. And so, the signage works to reinforce the complete, formal designation. Both the banner and the physical line function as a means of maintaining order recognized by the JHF community. As expressed by Mrs. Taylor, “They set the tone, the expectations, walking that green line and the children just fell into place”



Figure 4.4 *Green Line to Success and JHF Corridor*

⁶⁵ Even kindergarten students, who I presume might be unable to read the sign, were still observed as following along the green line and seemed to be aware of this expectation.

Reading the “Rules” – Seeing Order and Black Excellence at JHF

“We can’t always be free with our work...we have to follow the rules sometimes, and we can’t always do it how we want and be free with it”, Angel, age 9

Further cementing the established order within the school, are a variety of physical signs that explicitly lay out rules and school priorities. The two most repeated rule posters, both pictured below, designate the JHF rules as “non-negotiable”, and integral to being one’s “best”. They include standard guidelines written in negative phrasing such as “no fighting” and “no truancy”⁶⁶. This language reinforces behaviors to be avoided. “Must demonstrate respect for adults” and “must wear uniform” are among the bolded phrases.

All of these signs carry on the familiar, afrocentric color scheme of red, black and green, but most do not make mention of the school’s African-centered mission. One exception to this is a poster of the Nguzo Saba/Principles of Kwanzaa⁶⁷, which is a clear reference to Black cultural traditions and values. Interestingly enough, a student Malia, once referred to this sign as depicting the “rules”, even though that precise language is not signaled on that particular placard. For Malia, Angel (above) and others, the presence and recognition of rules is a salient aspect of the JHF experience. They are, literally and figuratively, everywhere. Moreover, they are pre-established, presumably written with

⁶⁶ This contrast with Mission City is quite stark. As I will explain, MCS generally co-constructs “agreements” with students and writes the related guidelines in affirmative language, e.g. “I will be my best self”.

⁶⁷ The principles of the Nguzo Saba are as follows: umoja/unity, kujichagulia/self-determination, ujima/collective work and responsibility, ujama/cooperative economics, nia/purpose, kuumba/creativity and, Imani/faith. The Kiswahili terminology and translations are used frequently during Kwanzaa amongst African American communities, and is employed in many Afrocentric schools.

little to no input from children⁶⁸. This implies that a norm, not inconsistent with most schools, of adults establishing rules and children, without question, abiding by them.

In my observations, 4th grade students at JHF generally complied with the established rules. Overt insubordination might result in a child being sent to the principal or dean of students, but this was only in rare cases. More typically, small actions thought to be defiant and/or off-task, prompted the teacher to verbally restate the rule to the student(s). This redirection was usually enough to reconcile the perceived behavioral problem. Students perceive this level of order expected by their teachers and embodied by their peers. Chase describes his peers as well-behaved relative to children at his previous school, "... most of the kids in here are good, but at my old school it was like, all the kids like, were bad...They just do what they want. They cuss, fight, and everything"? Katelyn offers this in regard to the teachers, "they discipline us so we – so we don't grow up not knowing that much", recognizing the reasons why teachers may enforce particular rules. Child Dante perhaps summarizes this finding best, "people don't act up at this school...they already know the teachers will get down and dirty on them". My observations coincide with Dante's understandings. When Mrs. Gerald or Mrs. Taylor asked for students' attention, they received it. The room quieted almost instantly. Moreover, I never observed a 4th grade student refuse an instruction from an adult (teacher or administrator). Apparently, as indicted by Assistant Principal Brown, parents makes note of this as well. She elaborates, "even parents, after we had been [in operation] the first few months, said I can't believe I'm walking in the same school because it was

⁶⁸ The language is formal and not particularly kid-friendly. Although I did not check the Lexile level, I'm most certain that some of the vocabulary is beyond the independent reading level of many 3rd graders, and perhaps some of the children in Mrs. Taylor's classroom.

quiet, it was orderly, because that’s one of the things we had to get, you know, straight first, the culture and climate before we could do anything else”.

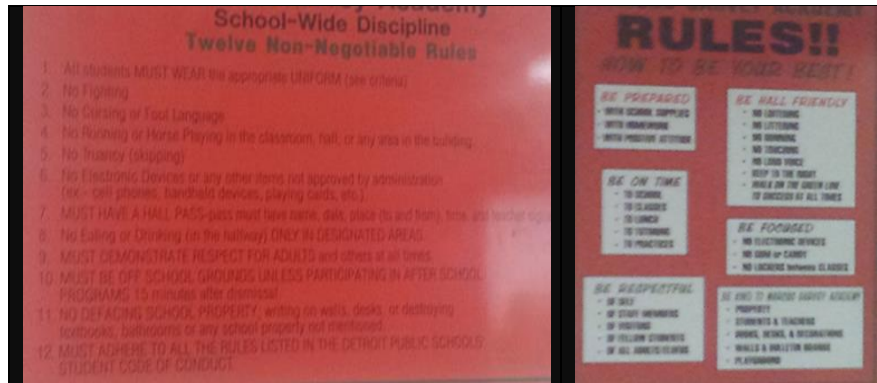


Figure 4.5 School Rule Signage

Notes on the Preservation of Black Bodies- Physical Safety and Surveillance

“Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered.” (Coates, *Between the World & Me*, 2015)

Though reminders of rules are overt and reinforce a JHF school culture where deference and decorum are paramount, these signs and signals carry with them additional significance. Elders (i.e. teachers, staff, and administrators) at John Hope School, see the rules as a means of managing behavior not for the purposes of control but rather, out of concern for the protection of children’s bodies. This concern for Black students’ physical bodies extends beyond the walls of the school and applies to their well-being within and integration into the broader society. JHF primarily African American staff recognize that Black-ness can carry with it the burden of being misunderstood, feared and/or subject to discrimination. Thusly, the ability to blend in, exercise discipline of the body and, act in accordance with written and unwritten rules of order, is thought to be increasingly vital to student success and perhaps even, survival. I interject the preceding analysis of visual

signs to discuss how Hope staff’s reading of “writing on the wall”⁶⁹ i.e. dangers as it relates to (Black) life in Riverview further prompt them to uphold standards of surveillance and order.

While students were elsewhere⁷⁰, Mrs. Taylor and I had many rich, informal conversations about the complexities of Black life and experiences of her students. “They have to go through so much”, I recall her saying, and “things are just so hard out there...many of them have to grow up too fast”. Mrs. Taylor often lamented that she and other teachers saw the Riverview community as “different” and more dangerous than “back in the day”. Although she often did not always specify race, it was always clear to me that Ms. Taylor was referring to the Black community within Riverview and perhaps, to Black people more generally. “We used to all be able to come together and keep an eye on the children--Now, everyone is struggling, fighting, and worrying about themselves”, paraphrased from my fieldnotes. Mrs. Parks adds that the merging of three schools that created the current JHF also came with it an increased focused on safety. One of the former schools, Mrs. Parks explained, “...apparently [one of the feeder schools] had a number of discipline problems--changing the culture, that was challenging because safety and security was Mr. Henderson’s #1 thing and he had to establish that”.

In light of the perceived challenges, societal, communal shifts and with the school merger, Mrs. Taylor explains that she works even harder to ensure that students feel supported and don’t have to worry while at school. She articulates, “Our children should

⁶⁹ Colloquialism thought to be influenced by the Book of Daniel in the Bible but now used more widely to signal a premonition. I employ this language to signal a relationship between what JHF students are reading on the walls, and how the teachers charged with their care read the world.

⁷⁰ Lunch, electives, across the hall with Mrs. Gerald, etc.

just be able to focus on [academic] learning”. Mrs. Taylor sees it as her duty to bring children together and minimize bullying, thus facilitating a “safe”, familial, learning environment for students. “We’re like a big family here”, Mrs. Taylor would repeat in passing.

Yet, despite Mrs. Taylor’s expressed desire to ensure that children don’t worry about what’s going on outside of the school walls, she often verbalized in the classroom linkages between what happens inside and outside of the school building. For Mrs. Taylor, there is a clear relationship between safety, academic learning, decorum and enforcing expectations for behavioral compliance. In her interview, Ms. Taylor reflects on the importance of behavior management and how “strictness” fits into her approach to teaching. She expresses:

We have a lot of serious talks with them about your behavior, your expectations, you know, you need to get it together...Because you need to be able to fit into society. And we have some really down to Earth conversations with them about things and I think they appreciate that because they know that we care about them. They had to write an essay on why they love [Riverview] – [Riverview] Public Schools and the essays turned out so nice. – I was so pleased because it validated what Mrs. [Gerald] and I had been trying to do over the years....there were statements like they’re really strict on this, but that’s because they want us to learn, you know, and things like that. And so I’m glad they get it, that we’re strict on them because, you know, we want them to learn. It’s not because we’re being mean. And I tell them all the time, it’s because we love you. (Mrs. Taylor, interview)

As evidenced by this excerpt, the presumption that students “need to get it together”, is not only about school. Students are being groomed to “fit” into society. Child Angel’s commentary indicates that the students themselves have are aware of their teachers’ stance as it pertains to regulating behavior. Student Angel explains the utility of the rules as such, “when you get older, you’re going to need it...to follow the law—the rules. That helps you stay protected so you won’t get into accidents and stuff”. This notion of discipline as future preparation and a means of protection is reinforced often at JHF, and is related to race and Blackness as experienced, especially for Black boys. To this point, Mrs. Taylor articulates the following:

Everything I do, I think about them being black, because it’s so important that we have to address that because black children are going to face different things in society than white people are and it makes us have a different – we’re going to have different challenges. And we have to give them things in the classroom to just keep them focused on you need to get it together (laughs) in the long-term

In this passage, these things that teachers “have” to give Black children because they are “different” and perceived as more vulnerable than white children, are behavioral cues, not academic knowledge. Two relevant anecdotes and a subsequent conversation come to mind. Taken together, they further contextualize the added attention to order and awareness of social norms/expectations. Recall Dante’s earlier comment that teachers “get down and dirty” with students, which is seemingly supported by Mrs. Taylor’s commentary. I was able to observe an instance that could be classified as one such example of “down and dirty” discipline.

Dante is whispering and laughing, trying to elicit a response from a student who seems to be paying him little mind. His uniform shirt is unbuttoned, as it often is. He has been reminded about his dress on many occasions. Mrs. Taylor notices Dante's actions first and says plainly, "focus". He returns to working for what seems like less than five seconds, then turns around in his chair, to ask a student a question. Mrs. Taylor is generally in high spirits and very patient, but today she seems to be short. It appears that Dante and perhaps others have been off-task all day. "Go stand by the door, Dante", Mrs. T orders. He saunters, not hiding his dissatisfaction with being asked to move. While at the door, he leans on the bulletin board (also out of compliance with classroom rules). After a few moments, he appears to be making facial expressions and students begin to look up and watch. Mrs. T tells him to stand up straight away from the board and get it together. In a very loud tone and with a serious gaze she states, "What's gotten into you? You haven't done a thing all day. And you think this is a big joke...and you really look crazy. Just crazy. Fix your shirt and look like you belong here at Hope. We are trying to teach you something, because we don't want you to go out into the world looking and acting crazy. This is not a game. Get yourself in order. (ND fieldnotes)

Also consider this example with another male student who I'll refer to as Elijah. Elijah stands comparatively taller and larger than most, if not all, children in his class. One Spring afternoon, Elijah was observed sulking after being denied the opportunity to participate in a field day activity. The previous day, Elijah was sent to the office after pushing another student. Consequently, a school administrator determined that his

punishment would involve remaining in the classroom while the other students engaged in play outside later that week. Elijah was visibly angry after receiving the news, and was observed trailing behind the other students in line with a grimace and clenched fists. He was breathing heavily but otherwise not communicative. Mrs. Gerald said, warmly and softly, “Come on along Elijah”. As he walked into the classroom, he forcibly pushed a chair blocking his path. Mrs. G said, in a tone that indicated that she was more concerned than angry, “Ok Elijah, don’t come in here like that, you have to try to calm yourself down. Go ahead and step outside of the door and get some air”.

During lunch later than month, Mrs. Taylor and I talked some about her safety concerns for all of her students but in particular, for Black boys in her classroom. “I just want them to be aware”, Mrs. Taylor explained. Mrs. T, without my prompting, reflected on Elijah specifically and expressed that he was really improving behaviorally with fewer outbursts of anger. At the beginning of the academic year, Mrs. Taylor had spoken to Elijah’s parents about his behavior and how it might be perceived as aggressive, particularly as he matures into a teenager. “I’m not afraid of him—but others may be and he could end up being arrested or hurt”. With all going on in the news with police, Mrs. T explained that Black children had to be very careful. I interpret the carefulness that Mrs. Taylor references to mean (1) awareness of the ways that Black bodies are seen, stereotypes, etc. and (2) action in accordance with these critical recognitions.

Some of Mrs. Taylor’s concerns were echoed in a spoken word performance which took place during Harambee. Three 8th grade students, introduced by Mrs. Parks as “conveying a powerful message through poetry” (paraphrased), presented a self-authored piece entitled “Only Us”. The composition touched on identity, historic memory,

racialized discrimination and violence and, hope (for Black children’s happiness, justice, peace, etc). The language is penetrating. At the conclusion of the performance, the school assembly responded with resounding applause. Some JHF teachers wiped tears from their eyes. I provide an excerpt from the piece below for reference:

I have bullet in my thoughts! I have a pain in my silence...

Do you remember when we could wake up and not worry about being shot? Do you remember when we could walk into a store and not be watched because we’re Black? ...

I want to hear that police brutality has ended.

I want to hear kids screaming out of joy and not fear...

Hear the soulful cries of my Blackness...put on the glasses of my Blackness

I see what you *don’t* see!

I see what you *won’t* see!

A hyperawareness of Black students’ physical bodies is evident at JHF. These ways of “seeing” (what outsiders don’t and won’t) and knowing inform educators’ dispositions and are inextricably-linked to school practices. Adults manage, monitor and “protect” students via posted signage, school procedures, dialogue and disciplinary practices, video surveillance and even metal detectors⁷¹. And, in Mrs. Taylor’s classroom, sometimes students are engaged in conversations about how and why following rules and being aware can be tremendously important to their safety and success. I now (re)turn to a discussion of the visual signs and the messages that they convey about student success and Black excellence.

⁷¹ The metal detectors are used for visitors and so interpreted more as measure of keeping students safe from outsiders than criminalizing those enrolled children enrolled in school.

The Next Great Hope? – Rising Above, Black Excellence and Individual Success

“We have pictures of African people on the wall, and drawings...Because it's an African-centered school”, Andre, age 10

In addition to the many messages affixed to the walls at JHF that reinforce discipline and order, another category of physical signs/symbols become apparent. Much of what is displayed supports a particular, traditional and individualized notion of Black Excellence. The mission statement (found above) offers a natural segue-way into a discussion of achievement and excellence at Hope School. The last paragraph reads, “Each student is recognized for their individual differences...We strive to transition students, from dependent learners to independent learners; challenging them to meet their highest level of success”. Here, school staff explicitly affirms what is unique to individual children, as opposed to affirming the (Black) collective. Moreover, the final paragraph states a goal of independence, rather than communalism and coalition-building. One could reasonably infer from this sign that at JHF, student achievement and ultimate success are independent, individual endeavors.



Figure 4.6 *Mission Statement Sign*

A stroll around the school building, reveals other placards consistent with this understanding. Often times, excellence at JHF is represented on the walls as African American historical figures, recognized for their noteworthy innovations and/or leadership. These names stated during Harambee: John Hope Franklin, Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Mary McCloud Bethune, George Washington Carver, and others, take new form as illustrations posted in prominent locations in classrooms and down hallways. The representations carry meaning for enrolled children. Hope students have the sense that knowledge of key Black figures and moments in history are fundamental to the curriculum. As expressed by child Jamie, the JHF school staff, "...want us to know about what happened long ago---the civil rights, or slavery- or our ancestors that lived long ago". Even the hallways are named after African American pioneers.

At JHF, accomplishments in history are represented via extraordinary, individual figures in African American history. With the exception of the former President Barack Obama (below), most of the pictured trailblazers are currently deceased. They are also pictured alone, without background context and sometimes without a label. By looking only at what can be found on the walls, one might conclude that progress and innovation are attributable to a select few who worked in isolation. What's more, the presence of few living, contemporary models might suggest that the "fight" has ended and circumstances that these figures overcame, distant relics of history.



Figure 4.7- *Bulletin board featuring prominent African Americans*

It seems that just as their pictures are dissociated from context, in some cases, names of figures are known only as famous names disassociated from their specific accomplishments. While walking with a student, Brittany, in a nearly empty hallway, I felt inclined to ask her if she knew who the historical figure was displayed a few doors down (Mary McCloud Bethune, an extremely large poster right outside of the cafeteria). Brittany was uncertain, offering a couple of incorrect guesses. I identified the person and then, out of curiosity, asked Brittany if she knew what Bethune was known for doing. She did not. This would suggest that while students know to hold these figures in high esteem theoretically, they have only superficial knowledge of what these individuals represent historically and in the present day.

How and where do JHF students fit into the narrative of Black Excellence and self-determination? How might they hope to achieve success at the level represented by Rosa Parks or el-Hajj Malik el Shabazz? The school walls again provide insight in response to these queries. In the hallway shared by Mrs. Taylor and Mrs. Gerald, a display of gold stars is accompanied by the title, "Reach for the Stars". Student Angel phrases this slightly differently. Without hesitation, she describes the JHF charge to students as follows, "To reach your highest potential- to try to do your best, no matter what". It

would appear, that reaching for the stars and reaching one's highest potential includes getting good grades and attending a 4-year college or university. Malia echoes this point and provides insights on the schools' teachings and goals: "[What's important here is that...] That you are – that you're supposed to get your college degree and learn many things that you never learned before, or like, they teach you things that you never, ever heard".

All John Hope Franklin classes are named after historically-Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). A red and black sign is displayed over the threshold of the door, indicating a select institution. Information and artifacts related to colleges can be found in every wing of the school. Sometimes, e.g. in Figure 4.3, a bulletin board has been constructed alongside a classroom door to display supplementary information about HBCUs or other local institutions of higher learning. Even at the elementary-school level, John Hope students understand excellence to be inclusive of college readiness and ultimately, attendance. While being interviewed, every student JHF student mentioned college as an expectation and/or goal. Malia, when asked to describe Hope School for someone who's never been here she offers this, "it's a perfect school to go to. You can learn everything you need to know. And I guarantee you will get your college degree." Malia speaks with a confidence that is undoubtedly reinforced within the school environment.



Figure 4.8 *Example of Décor Promoting Colleges and Universities*

Renderings from Students- Key Features & Child-centered Impressions of JHF

Though I have provided some examples from children that support the preceding analyses of school rituals, signs and norms, students' voices have been less central to the discussion. In this section, I utilize students' illustrations to respond to the prompts, "What do the children see? What is the experience of JHF like for them?" As necessary, I take into account students' discussions of these drawings and the meaning ascribed to them. Through these drawings, JHF students echo themes that consistent with my previous interpretations. They too, reflect the school's familial environment, tendency towards individual pursuits and, emphases on embodying traditionally-measured forms of academic achievement.

The African-centered environment of John Hope School of Excellence has been likened to that of a "village" or a family. Drawings from students Jamie and Katelyn, both pictured below, illustrate this sentiment with clarity. All JHF students constructed drawings that conveyed a positive affective response to school. However, these two examples especially highlight the familial culture that students and educators referenced with consistency. In Jamie's illustration, she draws herself running to greet a close friend who she's missed that day. Most days, Jamie and this particular friend would receive instruction within the same classroom (recall that the two class groups are often merged).

Apparently, the days when they separated, although few and far between, is enough to prompt feelings of longing in Jamie. Jamie’s picture signals deep connections between peers, further supported by Katelyn’s drawing and designation of school as “loving”. “It’s loving because the teachers and the staff here actually helps the children learn better, and they help them get through their problems”, Katelyn explains. The large heart further signals care and warmth. The red/black/green coloring of the lockers (Jamie, Andrew) and flag (Katelyn) demonstrate awareness of the cultural markers within the school. When asked about why she thought these colors were used so liberally within the school space, Jamie replied, “They wanted us to recognize the colors of – probably of our school or something, or because of the African Americans”.

Figure 4.9: Cluster JHF Afrocentric



Jamie



Andrew



Katelyn

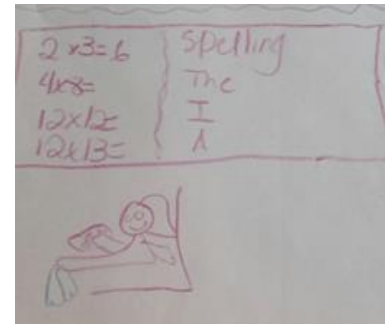
More than half the child drawings of school depict JHF students engaged in specific academic tasks. Most often, they portray themselves excelling and/or completing an assignment with accuracy. In Heaven's drawing below, she writes "It's like taking it to the next level" to describe what (learning) is like at John Hope School. Later, she classifies her academic experiences as "next level learning". In Heaven's picture, her teacher is passing back a paper and conveys the message, "you got it right". Heaven celebrates her accomplishment. In this example, next level learning is achieved by receiving a good grade or score. In Malia's illustration, happy faces and stars (which typically signal good work and/or a correct response) are utilized to convey success. Brittany's drawing shows her completing math problems with accuracy. In her interview, Brittany also added that her favorite moment as school was being recognized for the Honor Roll in an assembly in front of her family and peers. In my observations, Hope students covet these moments of public recognition, both in the classroom and during school-wide events. During lessons, it is not uncommon to see over half of the students' in the class raise their hands with excitement after a question has been posed. Students "ooh" and "ahhhh", nearly jumping out of their seats hoping to be called for. And, if not selected, many will let out noticeable groans of disappointment. There is a level of academic seriousness and competitiveness within the John Hope Franklin community. My intent is not to diminish students' sense of accomplishment. Or, to critique their enthusiasm and desire for affirmation in the form of accolades or grades. Still, I point out that John Hope students see grades, test scores and teacher affirmations as the primary indicators of learning, and, of smartness more generally. These traditional markers of

success fit into the school's definitions of excellence and emphases on college readiness as quantifiable.

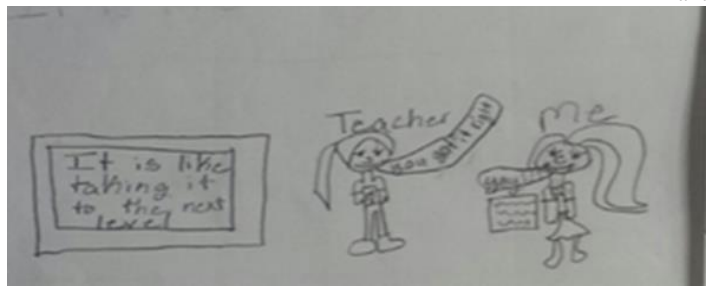
Figure 4.10: Cluster JHF Traditional, Narrow



Malia



Brittany



Heaven

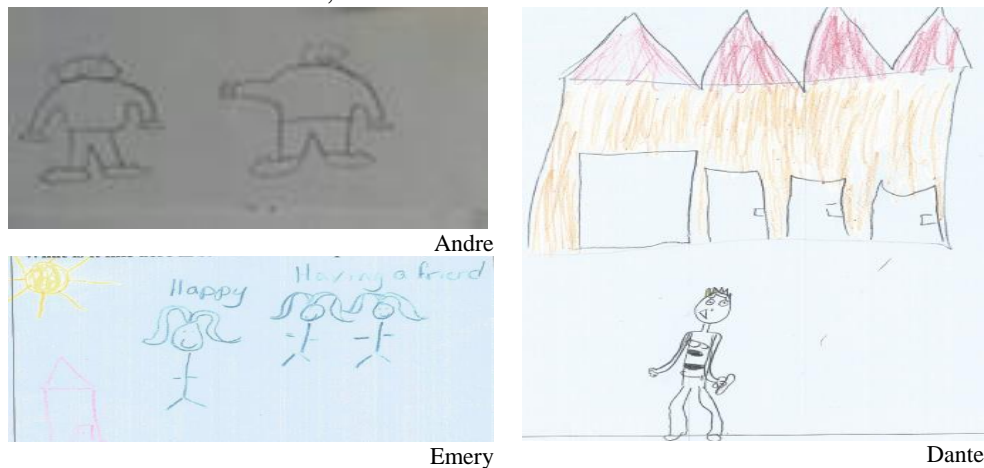


Chase

Also evident from students' illustrations, is a focus on the individual. In general, JHF child drawings, whether depicting social, academic or symbolic scenes, show actors within a narrow, zoomed-in frame. In most pictures, it is unclear what might be happening in the backdrop with other students in the classroom. Students have endeavored to depict only the task that they are actively engaged in. There is virtually no detail other than students' faces/bodies. Even in illustrations set outside (n=3), only one student draws the sun and a small house (barely visible in Emery's drawing) as the sole indicator of the surrounding context. Another, Dante, draws himself playing in front of the Harambee House. In Dante's drawing, the setting seems to be essential to the drawing but curiously, other children are not. Although he mentions that he is engaging socially,

Dante represents himself independently and does not depict the other children whom he is playing with. The composition of these drawings suggest that JHF students, interpret their own independent, individualized actions as reflective of the schooling environment as a whole. Though this assertion may, at first glance, appear commonsensical, it becomes interesting as these illustrations are placed in contrast with those depicting Mission City School.

Figure 4.10: Cluster JHF Social, Narrow



The narrow-gaze and independence reflected in the drawings are also supported by students' articulations. Child Katelyn, when asked about a time in school when she felt "smart", offers the following: "When we took the [state required standardized test] and I didn't really need that much help, and I went through it at a normal pace". First, her words associate standardized test-taking with smartness, when done at a pace she understands as "normal". Presumably, Katelyn is suggesting a connection between aptitude and the speed with which one is able to accomplish a task on her own. Also interesting here, is that Katelyn flags relative independence as indicative of smartness. Recall the JHF mission statement sign and its written commitment to developing "independent" learners. "Stay in your place-and get an education and don't worry about

nobody else...don't get caught up”, stated rather matter-of-factly by Heaven, is another one of many examples where JHF students prioritize independence, focus and progress at the individual level.

From the Elders- Instructing, Signifying & “Keeping it Moving” in the Classroom

And for me, [self-determination in the classroom is] so important because to make it in high school, that’s what you have to do. You have to know how to learn because you are in a different environment. Some high schools have 40 and 50 students in a class. The teacher’s not going to coddle you and tell you come on now, you’ve got to keep moving, you know, so I try to move them towards knowing that that’s what – school is here because we’re supposed to learn. That’s the expectation. And I might have to make it happen my own self.

(Mrs. Taylor, interview)

Although I have made reference to classroom activities, I have not yet offered substantive description of formal instruction. This is intentional. The cultural practices and norms discussed in the previous sections of this chapter overlay and permeate the classroom context(s). Mrs. Taylor and Mrs. Gerald enact teaching personas and practices that advance the mission statement and apparent priorities of the school. In my work, I did not find their pedagogy to be discordant, nor did they verbalize dissatisfaction towards the established policies and/or cultural norms set forth by the school. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss two examples that illustrate what instruction looks like at John Hope Franklin School of Excellence. In providing these illustrations, I increase clarity around students’ everyday classroom experiences. What’s more, I demonstrate the

ways that formal instruction at JHF (4th grade) coincides with the cultural and pedagogical emphases described in earlier sections.

Inside of the classroom space, indicators of the school's African-centeredness are obscured. Unlike the hallway's, there are no cultural flags or symbols. The red, black and green color scheme is replaced by standard classroom trimmings. As seen in Figure 4.6, the walls are adorned with student work and displays of academic content, vocabulary, etc. to near capacity. Students are bombarded with visual reminders of recent and important topics covered that year. Outside of a few posters of African American historical figures, the focus appears to be on standard disciplinary content and away from studies of race and culture. In my time spent participating in the classroom environment, I came to understand the flow of instruction at JHF to be very much like the decorated walls that delineated Mrs. T and Mrs. G's classrooms. Indeed, 4th graders at Hope are virtually always busy. They move at a rapid pace with content mastery in mind. And, although explicit references to race/ethnicity and links to the Diaspora are few and far between, less-overt Black cultural connections are recurrent.



Figure 4.11 *Photo of 4th Grade Classroom*

I began this section with an excerpt from Mrs. Taylor, wherein she articulates some of the understandings that inform her approach to instruction. In this segment of her

interview, Mrs. T stresses the importance of student adaptation to the learning environment, knowing how to learn, and, being self-motivated. Going to school and not learning, regardless of the circumstances, is not an option. Mrs. T sets the expectation that JHF students be resourceful, determined and independent in the classroom as preparation for the future. Children are taught to be ready and open to the fact that they (themselves) may have to exercise agency in order to ensure their own progress, and ultimately, their own success.

The fast pacing of instruction, independent work time, and cold-calling that I observed in the classroom become manifestations of Mrs. Taylor's teaching philosophy. These are strategies that she employs in an effort to prepare students to be competitive in high school and beyond. In the lengthy example below, you can see evidence of the aforementioned tactics. I begin by sketching what a typical morning and afternoon of instruction looks like⁷², as documented in my fieldwork journal. Interwoven with the various vignettes, are analyses of the teacher moves and pedagogical emphases exemplified by the preceding passages.

As I enter into the classroom, I try not to interrupt. I slide into a chair close to the door, so as not to distract too many students with my presence. Ms. T is in the midst of a ELA/vocabulary lesson. They are using a handout as a guide, a traditional worksheet from the provided curriculum. Mrs. T uses the projector to display the week's vocabulary words. They are quickly recited by the group as a call and response (teacher reads once, children repeat). A few moments later,

⁷² Although the two sample lessons featured here were facilitated in Mrs. Taylor's classroom, the pacing and culture in Mrs. Gerald's is consistent with these examples. Because Mrs. Taylor was the primary focus teacher at JHF and the only teacher interviewed, I rely primarily on examples from her classroom.

students read sentences from the worksheet aloud together. Again, they are in sync, but the reading is somewhat robotic. Mrs. Taylor stops periodically to remind students to take note of punctuation. “That’s a comma there!”. She says loudly and with authority. It interrupts the flow of their reading. She has them reread sections, noting the comma, exclamation point, question mark and/or semi-colon. Mrs. Taylor quickly moves onto the next piece- “The vocabulary words for the week place emphasis on stems and how we can discern meaning from the roots of words”. When she asked students to give examples of words that contained the root “derm”, students provided several examples. “dermatologist” “taxidermy” “dermal”. They continue with this exercise. I make a note to follow up and see if the topic had been discussed previously. Students’ command of vocabulary was exceptional. Yet, I wanted to hear the students talking more, and interfacing with their instructor. Mrs. Taylor is old-school, but also cool and collected. There seems to be something that students just “know” or understand about how engagement in this space, but I can’t put my finger on it yet.

Mrs. Taylor’s instruction proceeds at a rapid pace. She often utilizes materials from the standard, scripted curriculum as a base and builds in supplementary mini-lessons as necessary. In the above example, I note how students are often required to read in unison. She critiques the reading from the whole group, rather than singling out individuals. Mrs. T is very detail-oriented and encourages children to be diligent, careful readers. She does not move on until the collective voice of the class aligns with her expectations.

The lesson transitions to students working independently on a related vocabulary handout. Students needed to match unknown words with their definitions, based

on their knowledge of the word root. In my opinion, the work was difficult, because the root of words can have multiple interpretations. The activity required a level of nuance and process of elimination that many students struggled with. Although many of them had incorrect answers (they got to the last question and knew something was wrong), they worked quietly and without complaint. Still seated by the side of the door, I worked with a few surrounding students, trying to help them by focusing first on the more common words, and then moving to the ones that were less obvious. As I began to collaborate with students, this received the attention of other children in the area. They began to walk over to me for help completing the task. Mrs. Taylor, seated at her desk, worked on another lesson preparation task, with her lavender-colored cat-shaped frames. At students' prompting, Mrs. T would responded to their occasional questions, sometimes without looking up from her desk.

The 4th graders of JHF are accustomed to working independently on assigned tasks. While they may quickly elicit help from a peer or an adult, they seem to take pride in completing assignments with minimal help. And so, there is often not much discussion or collaboration happening. Mrs. T asks a series of questions that require recall or short-responses. Students respond simply and, unless their answer is incorrect or unclear, they are not prompted to elaborate.

That afternoon, Mrs. Taylor teaches a short, unrelated module on reading comprehension. The activity is focused on the topic of supporting details and identifying the main idea of a text. I capture a small segment from this lesson in my journal:

The little boy featured in the short text selection is called Scooter. The accompanying illustration portrays Scooter an African American child. Mrs. T hand-selected the handout from a book of short reading activities, so I suspect that she was intentional in choosing a text with a Black protagonist. Scooter, is planning an upcoming event but has yet to advertise it. Students are given the fast cue, “123”, and begin to read the text in unison along with Mrs. Taylor. After a moment, Mrs. T stops and thinks aloud, “this must be an initiating act.....usually when you plan out an event, you don’t wait until the day before to tell people about it, now do you?”. She shifts her tone to something that sounds more like someone’s auntie or grandmother using a rhetorical question for dramatic effect. She doesn’t put her hand on her hip, but the tone of her voice conveys a similar attitude. Some students shake their heads, others let out long “nooooo” and make facial expressions that show sincere dissatisfaction. Angel says aloud” Should we write it down?” Mrs. T replies, “No. The plot sequence is not our objective for today, we don’t need to write it down but I want you to be aware of the key moments in the text” They continue reading while the teacher circulates around the room. Scooter posts flyers and advertises the event via word-of-mouth. The take-away from the story: “Old fashioned ways are still the best”.

The take-away from the reading selection interestingly coincides with the general sentiments and dispositions of JHF teachers. As I experienced and participated in instruction within the classroom, I was often reminded of the methods employed by my own elementary school teachers. As in this example, Mrs. Taylor uses rhetorical devices (in this case, a question) to advance ideas and elicit a response. She switches back and

forth from what could be described as a standard professional demeanor, to a voice that sounds more like one a parent might use in jest and/or to communicate annoyance. My impression is that this change in inflection is used by Mrs. Taylor as a means of connecting culturally with students. Also, in previous conversations with Mrs. Taylor, she explained that she makes a concerted effort to select texts that students can relate to. This did not always require that the protagonist be African American, yet this was often the case. Curiously, as evidenced in the vignette above, I never observed Mrs. T vocalizing to students her intent to present relatable images in the curriculum. Perhaps children noticed that much of their reading selections contained Black characters, but this was never made explicit.

Students are instructed to reread the first paragraph of the Scooter text. They will then circle topic sentences and highlight supporting details. A child, Madison, is quickly called upon to respond with her answer selection. She reads a sentence from the wrong section of the text. "That's not where we are", Mrs. T says, matter-of-factly. Madison, now visibly flustered, takes a moment (with a student's help) to find the right spot. I hear Madison say, "Where are weeee?" in a trailing voice, further indicating her confusion. Mrs. Taylor has moved on. "Use your brain, not mine. I'm not going to tell you again", Mrs. Taylor states aloud and firmly to the group. Without prompting, students' hands shoot up in the air to provide the correct response. They have moved on too. Micah is selected. He reads a response from the text, and is correct. There is a discernable collective sigh from the class. At least 10 students are disappointed that they were not called upon to provide the correct answer. In the whirlwind of instruction,

Angel and Andrew lose their highlighter privilege. They have switched supplies and are creating a “rainbow” in the margin of their handout. Mrs. T sends the only white student in the class, Kasey, to collect their materials. Mrs. T, reiterates that students should be using marker “gently”, so as not to smudge ink. Likely in response to Angel and Andrew, Mrs. Taylor begins indicate when to pick the highlighters up and put them down. Order has been restored.

This vignette describes the typical flow of instruction in Mrs. Taylor’s classroom. Though generally warm in demeanor, Mrs. T exudes a firmness while teaching with little tolerance for off-task behaviors. In this example, Mrs. Taylor does not wait for Madison to find the correct place in the text. She “keeps it moving”, as do the many other students who are eager to take advantage of this opportunity to offer a response. Similarly, Angel and Andrew are not given a warning or engaged in conversation about their (mis)use of materials. Mrs. Taylor has likely discussed the procedure for highlighters in the past. Thus, acting in a manner inconsistent with this protocol results in the loss of the “privilege”. Mrs. T’s commentary insisting for students to use their “own brains”, reinforces a theme of independent thinking. In stating this definitively, Mrs. Taylor further verbalizes her intent to “not coddle” the children in her classroom. Madison, and perhaps others, are encouraged to troubleshoot on their own.

In the preceding example of instruction, Mrs. Taylor teaches standard academic content via traditional methods. Though the vignettes provide insight into pacing and approach, they do not adequately reflect one other important aspect of Mrs. T’s pedagogy—her embodiment of Black cultural practices. Mrs. Taylor, as an African American woman who grew up in Riverside, often made allusions to Black culture and/or

employed slang terminology for humor and/or emphasis. In the following example, Mrs. Taylor signifies to illustrate the colloquial use of figurative language within the Black community. This performance is seemingly impromptu, as she mimics the tone and language that many African Americans associate with “cappin(g)”, “roasting/cooking/baking/fying/burning”, “treating”, “reading” and/or, “playing the dozens”. Consider the following classroom exchange from April 11th, 2016:

Mrs. T: We need to know another word. There are a lot of categories with figurative language. (writes literal language/sentence examples on the board, students begin to murmur and halt as Mrs. Taylor resumes speech) When what you say is literal, it means exactly what you say. With figurative language, you have to go beyond the words, you have to do some thinking and comparison. Remember Deandre’s example “leaves dancing like ballerina” from earlier? Leaves don’t dance. They aren’t ballerinas. We have to think deeper to get meaning. How about....your desk looks like a warzone! (*students laugh*)

Ivan: (*blurts out*) I know what you mean. Literal is talking about real life.

Mrs. T: We know that book hasn’t really been in a warzone. It’s not on a battle field. Leaves aren’t really dancing. We used to say back in my day...shoes are talking. (*class erupts in laughter*) Oh, you all still say that, huh. What does that mean?

Kevin: (*smiling*) like your shoes are cut open in one spot...

Deandre: We call them open biscuits!

Mrs. T: If I say ooooooh, it's kickin in here! Does that mean something is really kicking?

Student across the room blurts out a response... "It stank!"

Mrs. T: Stank is not a word. It stinks. We see how figurative language is a part of our culture. We've been saying these things since before I was a kid. If I wanted to say the same thing without figurative language I'd say, "It smells in here or your shoes are falling apart...you really need to think about getting new ones"

Ivan: So, there's two meanings.....?

Mrs. T: No, not two

Madison: When you say [their shoes are] talking that's meaner

Mrs. T: We used to call that cappin .

Dante: We say cooking on somebody...

Mrs. T: We say you got baked or burned...are we really baking, burning or frying anyone? Instead, what are we doing? Literally?

Heaven: We're talking about someone

Mrs. T: Everybody now is talking about "throwing shade", sitting with girlfriends and say oooooh she threw shade. Shade is blocking out the light. Are we really blocking out light, throwing shade? What does this mean literally?

In the previous exchange, Mrs. Taylor shows literacy in African American vernacular, as well as an understanding of how slang terminology shifts over time (old-

school vs. new school). As she performs the act of signifying, her voice and mannerisms shift to make the impression more believable. Children in the class, understand that she is being facetious in order to convey a point about figurative language, though they humor her by providing their own examples and interpretations. When Mrs. Taylor says “our culture”, it is evident to me and other children in the class that she means Black culture⁷³. Mrs. T’s language suggests that she assumes signifying to be representative of African American culture, *and* that this interpretation is shared by the students in her classroom. In my time spent at JHF, these types of assumptions about shared values and meanings were made often. Also worth noting, is the instance when a student offers a response that would be consistent with Mrs. Taylor’s use of slang (e.g. “it stank”) and it is rejected. Mrs. T’s grammatical revision of the student’s response shows that although she ascribes to the cultural practice, she also acknowledges “rules” for how and when these enactments are appropriate. And so, embedded in this exchange, is another example that reinforces the JHF stance on decorum. In this moment, Mrs. Taylor offers a reminder to Black students to be aware (always) of the broader social norms that govern academic and professional spaces.

In this chapter, I have described various rituals, cultural markers and procedures central to our understanding of John Hope Franklin School of Excellence. From here, we see how JHF embodies an African-centered focus in its efforts to cultivate a school village and, in its incorporation of diasporic language, symbols of Black liberation, and recognition of prominent African American leaders. It is also clear, that the schools’

⁷³ Perhaps also pop and/or youth culture

emphases on order and decorum are hallmark features of the institution. Although JHF teachers and leaders are deeply committed to ensuring the safety, readiness and ultimate success of Black students, they use traditional methods in pursuit of these goals. What's more, the self-determination they teach is premised on individual discipline and diligence. Students receive messages to "rise above" current circumstances and achieve, no matter what obstacles they face.

In many important ways, Mission City School looks, feels and functions quite differently than John Hope School. As I'll show in the next chapter, these institutions are virtually nothing alike. Although these two schools share Black constituents from the eastern neighborhoods of Riverview and both voice, with compassion, urgency and sincerity, high ambitions for their Black students—this seems to be the extent of their similarities. The next chapter takes to the task of describing Mission City School, followed by an analytic summary of the core features and contrasting emphases of the two schools at once.

Chapter V

Figured World(s) of School – Community, Expression and Transformation at Mission City School

Down the road, just six minutes west of John Hope School, Black children in Riverview are immersed in a markedly different schooling experience. Indeed, Mission City School, established with the intent on reimagining what it means to teach and learn, has its own rituals, cultural markers and norms. In the sections that follow, I offer an illustration of Mission City School, as practiced and experienced by the children in Ms. Jamie’s classroom. As the discussion unfolds, the distinction(s) between John Hope Franklin School of Excellence and Mission City School become palpable. To further emphasize the areas of contrast, the structure of the resulting analysis mimics that of the previous chapter. It is followed by a summary section that highlights of the distinctions most relevant to my subsequent analyses of Black student agency. I begin, with a discussion of the activities that initiate each day and each week at MCS—morning meeting.

It’s a New Day - Morning Meetings at Mission City School

Figure 5.1: Darui on Morning Meeting

MORNING MEETING
“...our school morning meetings, we talk about being [luminaries] and why it’s important to be one”
Darui

From my perspective, 9:05am is one of the most serene moments of the school day at Mission City School. Walking into the school building, I pick up a faint odor--a dynamic scent with hints of warm milk, stale air, and yesterday's dinner. But, it is quiet. The classrooms are empty and the hallways are clear. A child or two, backpack in tote, rushes past me as I walk causally into the office to sign in. Some days, I meet another stragglng student who greets me with a cheerful "Hey, Ms. Natalie", as I head upstairs to find Ms. Jamie and the group. Today, Jamie's homeroom holds morning meeting in the library space.

Every room at Mission City serves multiple purposes. The library is a convening space for both formal and informal meetings. Though much smaller than the surrounding classrooms on the second floor, it feels more open, perhaps due to there being minimal furniture in the room. The large, brightly colored throw pillows are stashed in the corners during morning meeting. Although they are not in use, the cushions help to create a comfortable atmosphere. There are hundreds if not thousands of books organized neatly in shelves lining the perimeter of the space. A colorful mural depicting various children reading, writing, playing and gardening can be found bordering the top of the library walls. As lovely as the space is, well-suited for lounging and immersing oneself in a good book, it works less well for large groups. This morning, it takes the children, about twenty 4th and 5th graders dressed uniquely, several moments to form a circle and get settled into their places on the carpeted floor. A boy, Jeremick, plops down on a stack of pillows in the corner with arms outstretched. Unruffled but firm, Ms. Jamie issues multiple reminders about leaving the pillows and the books where they are. She rings a chime and waits for the group to come to attention. Then she sits, legs-crossed at the head

of the circle with a miniature stuffed grapefruit toy in her lap. This prop acts as a “mic” while students are sharing out. There is only “one mic”, so the sole speaker is the person holding the grapefruit. Jamie is situated next to a small whiteboard easel with an agenda and message written on it.



Figure 5.2 *MCS Library Mural from One Angle*

In a low, calm voice Jamie addresses the group: “Good morning, I hope you all a good weekend. We’re going to go ahead and greet our friends with a hug, handshake or high-five. Stay where you are in the circle”. The brief moment of virtual silence is quickly broken and children begin to greet one another. I notice that these greetings are accompanied by conversation and play. A student intentionally squeezes a nearby friend and lifts them slightly off of the ground. Another pocket of students issue handshakes that include dance moves. The chime rings again. After about five seconds, the group is seated and attentive again. Ms. Jamie reads the message written on the easel, “It’s starting to look like Spring! I hope you got to enjoy the nice weather this weekend. Today, we will go to the library. We have a quiz in math and will learn about invasive species in science. What do you like most about spring time? Or, any other share you would like.” These messages vary, but generally alert students to what’s coming up this week, and sometimes, encourage children to think and discuss social dynamics. The message is signed, “Love, Ms. Jamie”. Next, students go around the circle and quickly respond to the “share” prompt, In this case, students give examples of their favorite aspect of

springtime. Some also convey excitement for upcoming activities, what they did over the weekend, or plans for the week/weekend ahead. This flows pretty quickly, even with occasional student interruptions, digressions and co-signs. Within five minutes, the task is complete.

Morning Meeting concludes with students selecting a game to play as a group. Often, Ms. Jamie will ask for suggestions and then put the choice to a class vote. I've also seen her select one student for a preference, and proceed with the proposed game. Today, "silent ball" is the game selection. Students stand in anticipation for the activity. Jamie counts down "3,2,1" and any chatter is quieted. The stuffed grapefruit is then tossed from child to child. The receiving child must catch the grapefruit without making noise. Any player who doesn't catch the grapefruit and/or, breaks the silence, must sit down for the remainder of that round. The gameplay is skillful (think: NBA all-star weekend dunk contest) and hilarious. Students get creative in their tossing of the toy, all in an effort to make the game more challenging and competitive. The activity time of Morning Meeting can easily become chaotic. Still, this is a time when you can observe most MCS children smiling and laughing. After a couple of rounds, Ms. Jamie initiates a transition, "ok, let's line up". Students form a haphazard line and process next door into their classroom.

Figure 5.3: Morning Meeting Agenda

<p><i>Morning Meeting</i>- Standard Agenda</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Greeting: An act of hospitality. Teacher greets class and students greet peers.2) Message: Teacher reads pre-written message to orient children to the day's work. Message typically ends with a share prompt.3) Share: Students respond to the prompt, or may opt to "pass". An exercise in speaking and empathetic listening.4) Activity: Usually a game, selected by students.
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Virtually every day at Mission City begins with Morning Meeting. And, while the agenda generally follows the structure outlined above, one of the qualities that defines the Mission City School community is their willingness to be flexible and, as necessary, abandon convention in pursuit of a greater good. Thus, I have observed many alternative iterations of morning meeting. When there is a community issue⁷⁴, the upper grade (4-6) classrooms come together in the large, tiled multipurpose space⁷⁵. On occasion, a whole school morning meeting will convene in lieu of the standard meeting. Teachers and school leaders utilize this time to convey messages to the entire school, or to debrief events thought to be relevant to all. Parents and volunteers often attend these gatherings, and they are concluded with the singing of the school song. Student Lisa confirms this practice in her interview, and depicts the ritual in an illustration (Figure 5.1). When asked to explain the content and reasoning behind her drawing, Lisa expresses, “Well [it’s] the whole school in whole school morning meeting because we have to sing some songs and we sing the [Mission City] School song. This says we have the teachers teach us to learn”.



Figure 5.2 *Lisa’s Illustration of All-School Morning Meeting*

⁷⁴ More on this in the next section.

⁷⁵ Also known as the cafetorium or flex space. Art class, exploration class, performances and assemblies are also held here.

In the next section, I will discuss in greater detail the function and significance of class and whole-group meetings at Mission City School. Nonetheless, given that morning meetings are often closed in song, I close this section with a brief analysis of the school song, represented in Lisa’s drawing as a group of individuals, diverse in color/skin tone and size, singing in unison. In both the lyrical content and the manner in which it was written, the school song reflects the communal and academic ideals held by the founders of Mission City. Not long after MCS’ inception, administrators invited a long-time friend and local musical artist to assist in creating a school song. Together, with the input of students, volunteers and school staff, the lyrics of the song were penned. Later, the musician arranged the song and added in an accompaniment. The resulting tune is cheerful and whimsical, a jazzy blend of rock and contemporary folk, with heavy guitar strumming. Although this song is quite different than the music I observed most students, discussing, singing and dancing to in the hallways⁷⁶, the children seem to enjoy singing along and swaying to the catchy tune. The lyrics of the song are worth quoting here at length:

Figure 5.5: School Song Visual

[Mission City] is full of love and grace, [Our] school is an amazing place (2x)

Every day we wake up. We brush our teeth and wash our face.
We are part of a community, where we all have a place.
Thank goodness it’s a school day. And we’re rushing out the door.
We’re going to a special place with our friends. We can explore.

This place is an oasis, a garden of smiling faces,
[Mission City] School is a community where friendship, love and grace is.

⁷⁶ Mostly hip-hop and pop music. I should also mention that as part of an in-school project, participating students created a school song “remix”, set (partially) to the beat of the rap track Pretty Boy Swag by Soulja Boy. Select lyrics include: “This is our school song ([Mission!])... We might be tiny, but we are mighty..These children rockin, rockin, these children roll, roll. [Riverview] is rockin, rockin, this how we roll, roll”

It's amazing. We teach each other new things. How to write, read, and do math.
And together we love to sing. We stay after school. We rest and reap.
And we learn that peanut butter grows from a seed.
And 12×12 is 144. And we learn so much more ...
What matters most is how we live. And the energy we give.
To our community [redacted]...we learn how we can be, Riverview's luminaries

This place is an oasis, a garden of smiling faces,
[Mission City] School is a community where friendship, love and grace is.

We're full of positivity.
And we practice empathy. To understand how others feel, if you're hurt we want to help you heal.
We will be kind. We will be safe.
We will take care of this place.
We let the teachers teach, and the learners learn.
We let the garden grow and we all take turns

Repeat Introduction (2x)
Thank goodness it's a school day. And we're rushing out the door.
We're going to a special place with our friends. We can explore.

These lyrics reinforce the school's place-based, communal focus. It makes mention of the school's connection to the city of Riverview, and has multiple references to exploring, caring for and contributing to community. What's more, even if aspirational, the words project an image of a school where students feel safe and affirmed. In the song, MCS claims to be a collaborative space that children are excited to attend. The repetitive use of "we", further suggests communality. The lyrics also leave open to interpretation that the students themselves can be positioned as both teachers and learners in the school context. Though standard academic learning and content are indicated in the school song (e.g. "read, write and do math", " 12×12 is 144"), these references are followed by the stipulation that, "What matters most is how we live. And the energy we give...To our community". This phrasing implies that while standard disciplinary learning may be important, living responsibly and generously takes precedence. During my time at Mission City, I came to see many examples of explicit

teaching around social values and community engagement. I argue herein that meetings, such as Morning Meeting described above, serve as important sites for engaging students in conversations about “energy”, friendship, participation, and the social impact of behaviors. Upon close consideration of these meetings, the cultural norms and values within Mission City become increasingly apparent. I now turn to a more pointed discussion of meetings as spaces of social learning and collective problem solving.

MCS Meetings: Sites of Redirection, Reckoning, Reconciliation and Learning

At MCS, there are a lot of meetings. I’ve touched on Morning Meetings (MM), which happen most every day. Also recall, that the upper grades combine, at times, to convene at the start of the day as one collective. Sometimes MM is replaced by all-School Meetings. Panels and presentations featuring invited speakers and guests (generally “friends” of the school and/or members of the local community. Some examples include: representatives from local non-profits, artists, parents, undergraduate students, young adults, volunteers, or, government officials) also constitute assemblies in the middle of the school day. None of this is the result of happenstance. Staff at MCS understand group dialogue to be a priority. Thus, they are intentional about carving out adequate space to allow for students to express themselves and engage in conversation. This is a key component of the MCS pedagogical approach. I offer words from Mrs. Nikki, school principal, who emphasizes dialogue and the development of multiple literacies as core foci within the curriculum. In her interview, Nikki reflects upon the founding of the school and the types of understandings important to the conception of Mission City. Nikki explains:

When I talk to people about the school I like to stress that we did not mean...when we started we didn't know we were going to be a school on the east side. We knew nothing about what the school would look like. In 2008, we just started conversations like ...”why do we have...what’s the purpose of school? What if there were no schools? Would people be ok? Why would we educate kids for what purpose? What made us successful? What did we appreciate about our educations? What were we disappointed by in our educations? And then we came to this idea, universally, that we wanted our kids to be mult-ably [multi] literate. Right? Just not just reading, writing and make but we wanted them to be computer literate, media literate. We wanted them to know multiple languages and feel comfortable in whatever context they were in. Like I am in [a city 40 miles away] and I feel like I belong there. I feel like I can converse there....

From Nikki’s commentary, we see that Mission City began, quite literally, as a conversation. Staff at Mission City value in the ability to communicate across contexts and in multiple languages. According to Nikki, this capacity to be conversational and multi-literate facilitates a feeling of belonging. Thusly, meetings at the school create opportunities for children to practice and build competency in this area. They ensure that students develop a sense of belonging and ownership.

Teacher Jamie further emphasizes the utility of meetings as opportunities for students to voice opinions, offer recommendations and exercise agency within the context of school. This sentiment is reflected in the following exchange:

Jamie: But like when we're doing morning meeting, I try to let them always choose the game that they want to do or like I don't know, I try to get their opinions on things. We'll like vote on stuff that we could – when it's in regards to them and their free time, I want them to have the choice to do that. And I feel like last year, there was a couple more times where we were able to like have more voice in what happens and like when we're solving problems or talking about things as a whole group, I like to ask their opinion on things, because they know more [and] better about what, you know, their interactions are like than I do because they're in the middle of it, so.

Natalie: You mean like for like the circles?

Jamie: Yeah. I just like to hear from them. But it's also like I try to ask them like what can you do in the situation, instead of being like this is what you – you know, go tell a teacher. It's like well really, if you're in the situation, like what would you do? So trying to do that as much as possible.

Jamie confirms that in-school meetings are leveraged to create opportunities to hear from students. In doing so, Ms. Jamie positions them as experts of their own experiences. In the latter half of this exchange, Jamie references problem-solving and building capacity in youth to solve their own social problems. And so, conversations during meetings are thought to be generative, not only because they allow students to articulate themselves and engage in dialogue, but also because these are sites where students learn strategies for resolving issues. Recall child Darui's comment at the start of this chapter. Therein, Darui also expresses that (morning) meeting is where MCS students talk about what it

means to be “luminaries”. This includes, but it not limited to, problem-solving and acting in a manner that is empathetic, critical, forward-thinking and inclusive. MCS children are often challenged to practice critical, compassionate thinking and, to consider the extent to which their actions align with the luminary charge⁷⁷. Two illustrative examples come to mind. In the first, student Diamond offers a reflection based on a conversation from MM. For the second, I retell a version⁷⁸ of a story conveyed to me on two separate occasions by two different members of the MCS staff. Both of these illustrations make evident the types of social learning enabled during these frequent school meetings.

Consider the following exchange between myself and Diamond, wherein she rehashes considerations related to peer behaviors, as offered during MM:

Diamond: Because sometimes people, they don't realize what they're doing or who they are....Like, I could say they is -- I don't know. Like, it's kind of complicated.

Ms. Natalie: Okay. I'm here to listen. I think I understand what you're saying. I'm just trying to -- when you said that *they* don't understand reality, I'm trying to think of who you're talking about. Like, just--

Diamond: Kids that really get in fights. And then, like -- I was talking about at morning meeting, it wasn't, like, a while ago or two weeks ago I'm talking about. So we get in a fight. It's really big. It could be really big or really small. But this one was really big. You get suspended. And some kid will say, Wow, you're

⁷⁷ More on this in the section on excellence and embodiment via habits.

⁷⁸ I intentionally paraphrase and leave out details in an effort to respect the confidentiality wishes of staff persons, as well as to not alienate particular children.

suspended. I get to go home early. And they're not thinking of the consequences. So we're starting to make real, like, consequences because kids just get -- sometimes, their parents have to go to work. And the kids are home on their phone and stuff like that. And their parents is just saying, "Oh my God. I got to go to work." You stay home and stuff like that after you get suspended from school.

As reflected in the above excerpt, Diamond discusses how student behavior, in this case fighting, has consequences that extend beyond the individuals engaged in conflict. By her own omission, she elaborates on these consequences during morning meeting, presumably, to help the "kids that really get in fights" rethink their behaviors. In this case, Diamond prompts her peers to empathize with their parents, who need to go to work and shouldn't be burdened by the need to work out childcare for a suspended student. Diamond is both practicing and promoting a type of mindfulness during morning meeting; she is thinking-aloud to convey the complexities and impact of actions that may be perceived as significant only at the individual-level. In this way, Diamond demonstrates the type of child expertise that Ms. Jamie works to center through discussion.

Learning in meetings does not always manifest through deliberate conflict resolution and students' offering advice to peers. MCS staff also recognize meetings as spaces that engender more nuanced understandings about culture, diversity and respect across difference. Admittedly, the process is imperfect, uncertain and wrought with challenges. Ms. Jamie speaks to the intent and difficulty of these efforts. "I feel like that's

the whole like empowerment and agency kind of thing, like it doesn't matter where you are or what privilege you do or do not have, you still – your voice is still important, you know? But it's like that's really hard to do. I don't know how much I'm preparing them, I don't know (laughs)", she explains. Occasionally, school staff receive feedback through group dialogue that confirms progress in the right direction.

The following example was shared as an illustrative case of learning consistent with the intent behind frequent meetings and conversation: One day, the upper grades were participating in MM. Business as usual. The share topic for that morning prompted children to share their favorite gym shoes. Admittedly, this topic was selected because it was regarded as relatively straightforward. The check-in was supposed to be easy i.e. not intellectually demanding or socially-charged. Apparently, the meeting facilitator had engaged in many off-line conversations with students about the newest trends in fashion and suspected that participating youth would be eager to share their thoughts. The staff person did not enter into the conversation with the intent of prompting dialogue about race, consumerism or other values. Yet, the conversation quickly evolved into a discussion that touched on all of these topics.

To initiate the share, several Black students offered the name of their favorite sneakers. Each offering was met with a round of animated responses. Some students shook their head vigorously in disagreement, physically communicating a preference for another type of shoe. Others gave the hand signal indicating agreement. Most let out smiles and laughs, displays of interest and listening. A white student, when given the "mic", responds with a critique of both the question and the values assumed to be reflected by an interest in gym shoes. This child referred to the question as "stupid" and

insisted that *he*, as an individual, was not “materialistic”-- judgments that both the adults and most of the children in the room found to be inappropriate and alienating.

Importantly though, the Black children’s responses indicated that while they may have felt insulted by his remark, they were not surprised by the white student’s contribution. This became another instance of cultural differences that seemed to manifest along racial lines. The facilitator did not intervene, in part trying to determine the best way to respond. As the next non-Black student proceeded to take his turn, the group listened in anticipation. His response (paraphrased): “I don’t have a lot of things and basically have to take what my parents buy me, but if I had my choice, I’d say the retro high-top Nikes”. The room erupted in celebrations and affirmations. Students even went as far as to give the speaker “dap”⁷⁹. In that moment, as perceived by the adults in the room, students of different racial identities made cross-cultural connections and witnessed culture manifest as a non-binary. Another child then offered, “I don’t know a lot about shoes but I’m down with this conversation because I’m learning”. Reflecting on that instance, both of the staff persons who shared the anecdote with me were proud of the way that the “retro high-top” student and the subsequent speakers navigated the conversation and shifted it back to an inclusive place. They affirmed the position of the Black student majority in this instance⁸⁰. Instead, the focus, was on next steps towards teaching the “non-materialistic” student to convey difference without judgment.

⁷⁹ Also, “pounds”, i.e. any variety handshakes, high-fives and fist-bumps done as an informal affirmation.

⁸⁰ These are my words/conclusions, not theirs. My point is that the objective at MCS is inclusivity. I emphasize that it is not the race of students that dictated adults’ allegiance within the schooling environment. To my knowledge, all students were treated with care, respect and fairness. From my perspective, though there was an awareness of how race and cultural differences may be playing out, the staff critique was formed on the basis of inclusivity. Similarly, I make clear that my intent is not to

Several things become evident across these two exchanges. First, Mission City teachers and staff try to strike a balance that leaves open the potential for students to work out their own issues. They encourage children to engage with issues of inclusion and to hold each other accountable to inclusive, considerate behaviors. Students are aware of this focus on inclusivity. Student Craig stated plainly, “We include people”, when asked to describe the school. Correspondingly, Darui describes MCS as “a very nice school and I could guarantee you, you will probably make a lot of friends...Because lots of the people here are really nice and they are welcoming”. Also evident here is that MCS privileges social (emotional) development. It is normal for students to speak freely about their feelings, i.e. likes and dislikes, and to contribute their own assessments of school culture and behaviors. Finally, these examples indicate that, like most schools, there are interpersonal tensions at MCS. More precisely, Diamond’s quote references peer-to-peer conflict and the shoe anecdote suggests tensions around racial and/or class lines. I return to both types of social contention in later discussions.

In this section, I have shown how MCS utilizes meetings as a pedagogical tool to reinforce intuitional ideals related to student’s social engagement and development. In meetings, student voices are privileged. Students have frequent opportunities to offer insights and hear from one another. Moreover, individual actions are situated as having significance for the collective. Consequently, interpersonal issues become fair game as the subject of community conversations. Though these qualities are exemplified through meetings, the evidence of a communal, child-centered school culture is not isolated to

disparage any of the children engaged in this dialogue. I commend all of the students for actively and honestly contributing to the conversation and thus creating a rich opportunity for learning.

these activities. Next, I provide additional indication into the norms and emphases of MCS, with focused attention to how what is *seen* intersects with what is *enacted* and *experienced*.

In and Around Mission City School – Signs & Symbols on (Bodies) & School Walls

Figure 5.6: MCS Logo



Typically school logos are displayed prominently in school gymnasiums, auditoriums and, upon entering the building. MCS is the exception. At Mission City, the logo (pictured above) is worn on t-shirts and sweatshirts. Symbolically, rather than occupy a static position on a wall, it becomes animated through the people who propagate its image. The communal, people-centric ideals informing the institutional culture and practice are reflected even in the display of the logo. It's prominence at any given moment is *contingent upon people*. The absence of the school's official logo on the walls of the building may not be the result of a conscious decision. Still, given the level of intentionality displayed in making decisions about what *is* exhibited (i.e. in the commission of murals, bold paint choices, bulletin boards, artifacts reflecting past and present community activities), the absence of the logo is curious.

To attend to the graphic design of the logo, we can clearly see the depiction of two brown hands, one adult and one child. The smaller hand, is extended and poised as if

ready to receive. At the same time, the larger hand passes over a seedling. The graphic carries over the theme of gardening and growth present in the school song. We get the impression that, at MCS, adults plant “seeds”⁸¹ and initiate the growth cycle. But ultimately, children carry are charged with seeing the process (of learning, of cultivation, of action) through. Responsibility rests in the hands of children. A section of the library mural (see Figure 5.3 below) conveys a similar sentiment. Two vignettes are represented here. In the background, one adult and two children rake the soil together, presumably preparing the land for sowing. In the foreground, three children appear to reap the benefits of their labor. One child’s stance conveys excitement and pride as he lifts up bounty from the garden. The other children eat vegetables/greens. Upon seeing the mural, I was struck by the resemblance of the characters depicted to actual MCS students. When I asked if particular children were reflected in the murals, a staff member explained that the representations were “inspired” by the students though not intended to portray specific individuals. As to be expected given the racial makeup of MCS, most of the characters depicted in the murals have deep brown skin tones. My presumption is that they are intended as African American characters.



Figure 5.7 Sowing Seeds and Gardening Represented via Mural

⁸¹ Seeds could literally be those planted in a garden. More likely, the seedling symbolizes an intellectual idea or social good. Adults act as initiators and facilitators, preparing students to carry the torch and ensure that the seed evolves and develops into

Just as we see visual evidence⁸² which suggests that children are expected to actively contribute to the development of their community in a figurative sense, there also exists signs that serve as practical directives. Each Mission City classroom has on display a community agreement, signed by all participating students and the classroom teacher. These agreements provide guidance around what students will do⁸³ (e.g. “treat others kindly”, “be your best self”), as opposed to specifying forbidden behaviors. Community agreements are living documents that are mostly⁸⁴ a reflection of students’ ideas. In my time at MCS, I saw community agreements revisited and revised on several occasions. A poster, with its band of post-it-like adhesive, would be relocated to ensure visibility during a class meeting. Then, depending on the direction of the conversation, additions would be made to the existing document or a new one created. For example, I observed a morning meeting that touched on the topic of cyber-bullying and social media etiquette. For background, a MCS staff person uncovered multiple Instagram and Facebook accounts, noting the presence of adult language and verbal insults in “anonymous” comments. Given the sentence structure, spelling errors, etc. it was determined that MCS children were likely the authors of the inappropriate posts⁸⁵. Ms. Jamie’s students were asked to reflect back on their community agreement and, if necessary, offer new suggestions based on the recent happenings. By the end, a new document was drafted.

⁸² On walls and on apparel

⁸³ Alternatively, what they should do i.e. aspirations

⁸⁴ Of course, students’ histories of participation in school have bearing on their understandings of “acceptable” and “appropriate” schooling behaviors. Also, I have witnessed teachers hinting at apparent gaps in the working list of community agreements. Ms. Jamie, for example, might ask a question or pose a hypothetical scenario and ask students if the existing guidelines apply to that scenario.

⁸⁵ Without calling out individuals, students confirmed that online bullying was an issue that some of their peers were engaging in, albeit infrequently.

To supplement to the agreements, MCS teachers create impromptu visuals that summarize take-aways from the community conversations. Figure 5.4 depicts two relevant examples. On the left, a poster was developed featuring student responses to the prompt “how do we solve conflict?”. Pictured right, are notes from a discussion about privacy and respecting the property of others. Mission City does not have lockers. Students hang up their belongings on coat hooks. A problem arose where unattended children (likely going to or from the restroom) would sometimes rummage through other’s bags and/or lunches. So, at the end of class one afternoon, Ms. Jamie’s class spent about ten minutes mapping out the issue and possible solutions. As documentation, Jamie took a photo of the ideas generated to pass on to the administration. In both of the examples seen in Figure 5.4, both students and adults are acknowledged as responsible for maintaining a conflict-free environment. Echoing the themes evident in the collaborative gardening section of the library mural, responsibility⁸⁶ is shared by many—it rests in the hands of children and teachers.

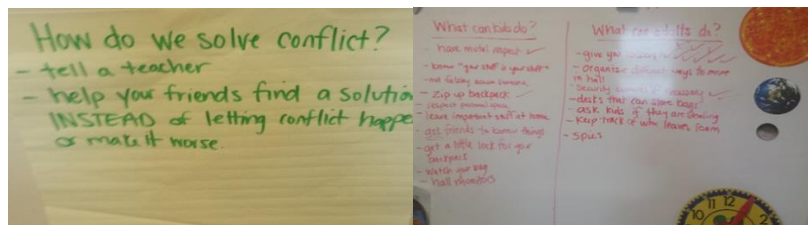


Figure 5.4 Notes from Community Conversations as Visual Reminders

⁸⁶ To attend to problems, participate, etc,

Embodiment and Excellence through Habits

“ ..they teach us like different things like not just about like learning things, they teach us about like life too....Like not just like math and science and social studies. They teach us like life tools like you have to *show* integrity” (*Kisha, emphasis added*)

Clearly, Mission City School privileges practices that support the development and sustenance of community. Up until this point, much of the examples provided have given little insight into academic learning and traditional modes of achievement. This is not to say that academic excellence and acquiring new knowledge and skills are not important. My understanding is that Mission City teachers are deeply concerned with disciplinary knowledge and general preparedness. In addition to being a priority in their own right, social/cultural values are leveraged as a means of positioning children to be curious, determined and bold in their pursuit of intellectual stimulation. I stress that these are qualitative indicators. Beyond a tangible end product, children are encouraged to reflect on the *why* i.e. the purpose and practical application of learning. Similarly, students are encouraged to be mindful of *how* they engage in the acts of living and learning, i.e. their presence, process, values and dispositions. So, in many ways, excellence at Mission City is reflected in students’ manner and embodiment. Mrs. Nikki, a wordsmith in her own right, speaks eloquently on these points:

How do we make school about serving the community as opposed to having to leaving it? And we talk a lot about we expect kids to graduate from High School and turn around and give back. But they haven’t given back the whole time so how do you like know what it means to be into the community? How do you know how to serve the community if you’ve never been expected to do it, that’s

never been a conversation? So all of those things got boiled down to the mission: to nurture critical, creative thinkers who contribute to the well-being of their school. And what I tell parents is that there are plenty of critical, creative thinkers who are on Wall Street stealing from people. It's because they didn't get the 3rd thing that they're supposed to contribute to the well-being of their community. You know? So for us, defining us as maybe the classroom, as maybe the school as maybe the neighborhood ...you know your city.....but I don't think that getting an "A" is the end all, be all of life. And one of our purposes that we tell the families is like "it's our job to provide the tools for kids to have ambitious goals and live lives with meaning...That might be the Ivy League. That might not be the Ivy League...that might not be college at all. That doesn't mean that your life isn't meaningful. (Mrs. Nikki, Interview)

Nikki's words indicate a focus on acting and doing with purpose as central to the school's mission. At Mission City, students are prompted to "walk the walk" and to practice service within the context of school⁸⁷. In the latter half of her commentary, Nikki mentions ambition and meaning as the indicators of success. Rather than grades or acceptance into elite colleges, Nikki makes evident a personal and institutional commitment to student development not assessed solely through traditional measures. All of these priorities interpreted as central to the mission-acting as critical thinkers and creative servants, with purpose and ambition, are reinforced via visual signs and school practices.

⁸⁷ With the understanding that this will prepare students to engage meaningfully in a broader community context.

The hallway mural, pictured in Figure 5.5 and crafted by the same artist whose work is featured in the school library, incorporates the institutional mission into the design. Comparatively, it is more abstract with elements of fantasy. The children, painted in the colors of the rainbow, serve to convey a feeling of content without specifying what particular activities produced said affect. It is less than clear *why* the children in the picture feel happy or loved. Still, the child's hands mimicking a heart-shape and the flurry of leaves (or butterflies) symbolize hope and imagination. It appears that the source of the butterflies is another child's mouth, a reflection of the way that ideas and actions can take flight. Perhaps, these things that come from within us (i.e. individuals or humans more generally), also envelope and shape the experiences of others. Using Nikki's commentary as context, it is reasonable to assert that the absence of academic acts⁸⁸ and lack of specificity in delineating what precisely what the pictured children might be contributing was intentional. What students ultimately produce, the impact that they make, is determined on an individual basis. Child Starr offers a complimentary reflection. When asked to talk about the priorities of the school and what children are prompted to do, she asserts, "To solve problems on my own and to be my own kind of beautiful". There is a balance being struck between MCS's acknowledgement of individual gifts and leveraging these gifts for the benefit of others.

⁸⁸ Painted children not in the classroom or engaging in any assignment associated with school work.



Figure 5.9 Hallway Mural Design with School Mission

Though Mission City students may be encouraged to be their “own kind of beautiful”, there are guiding principles designed to support students in the self-actualization process. These are referred to simply as the “habits”, and are explicated as follows: grit, critical thinking, empathy, collaboration, health, inclusion, resourcefulness, mastery and, self-determination. Children within the school recognize the significance of these habits, and note the expectation that they are, in fact, expected to embody said habits. Jointly, though perhaps not exhaustive, the habits serve as qualitative indicators to assess students’ development as luminaries.

On many occasions, in their interviews, Mission City students confirmed an awareness of the nine habits. In addition to reciting them from memory, students like Marcus also provide interpretations of the tenants consistent with the concepts propagated by the school. This is captured in the exchange below. When asked what the staff at Mission City found prioritized, Marcus responded in the following manner:

Marcus: They’d say grit

Ms. Natalie: What does that mean?

Marcus: I will never give up... Where you do your work, you would never give up.

Ms. Natalie: What else?

Marcus: Collaboration (What's that mean?)...Collaborating with somebody. Like trying to be different--Empathy.

Ms. Natalie: What's that?

Marcus: If somebody they hurt, you can be hurt too...By somebody else actions.

Craig and Iris also reflect upon the ideals of the school and connect back to the habits. What's more, both of their comments further illuminate the school's emphases on being and acting in particular ways. According to Craig, MCS expects children, "To be smart, to be helpful and to not pick on nobody...They want smart and, and, and critical thinkers. ...So when you grow up, you know what this mean or that mean". Relatedly, Iris offers this sharp articulation of the school's priorities, "To nurture creative and critical thinkers who contribute to being a better community... to raise children who can look at something and say, "This is not right; I'm going to strive to change this." Like this is something not right about this right now. And I'm going to get my friends together and we're going to brainstorm and change this". In Iris' example, she goes beyond simply listing the habits to describe what they might look like in practice. This is not surprising, given that MCS has instituted a protocol that also, in part, translates habits, as concepts, into practice. As pictured below, a "Caught in the Habit" board recognizes individual students for acting in accordance with the values guiding the school. Instead of a traditional honor roll display, MCS have the opportunity to see themselves featured on the wall for embodying habits. Students can be nominated by their peers or a staff person.

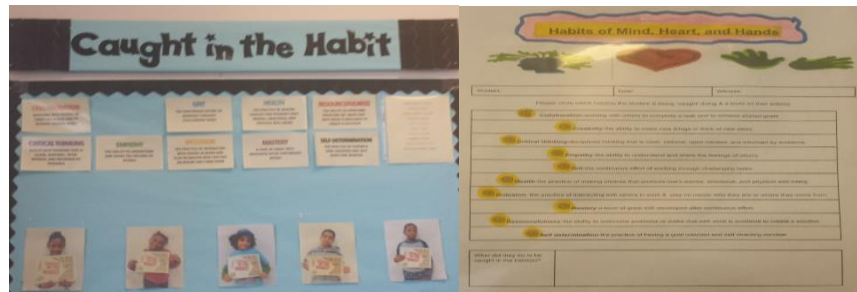


Figure 5.10 Habits Display & Nomination Form

Mission City promotes an idea of excellence as actively and deliberately doing the work of the school (e.g. acting in accordance with stated values). The habits bulletin board provides examples of how qualities like grit and empathy become operationalized and acted out within the school environment. Juliana outlines a relevant example of acting as a luminary and embodying the habits inclusion, empathy and perhaps others. She explains, "...one of my friends here were hurt. I ran over there to make sure she was okay -- I walked her down to the office...And I spent a little time with her to make her feel a little better....Because when I see someone hurt, I want to rush over there in order to help her. So I can make her feel that she has somebody that really cares about her". Juliana and her peers' keen ability to identify everyday behaviors consistent with the MCS habits is a testament to their salience. And, when coupled with the absence of traditional markers of educational achievement⁸⁹ (i.e. grades, honor roll), establish a standard of excellence that is context-dependent, mutable and exhibited via lived values.

♪♪ *What matters most is how we live. And the energy we give.* ♪♪
 ♪♪ *To our community [redacted] ...we learn how we can be, Riverview's luminaries* ♪♪

To make a final point related to MCS ideals around excellence and embodiment, I return to lyrics of the school song. Excerpted above, the recurrent theme of living in

⁸⁹ Student work is displayed at MCS, although this is usually limited to displays of artwork and/or the product(s) of project-based assignments. They are presented without a score or grade. Often, Mission City students are given time and space to revise assignments until they reach an acceptable quality.

accordance with communal values is once again evident. Further, there is an indication that children should be giving something to the city of Riverview, as if leaving a legacy behind. Though just a small segment of the school song, I assert that this idea is a core aspect of the Mission City philosophy. I heard comments related to this idea repeatedly on numerous occasions, specifically, during whole-school meetings, and during other community events like the school block party and parade⁹⁰. The message is clear: how we *live* now and what we *give* now has implications for our community/city in the future.

Mission City students are prompted to be aware of their presence and ultimately, contribute to progress. And, hallway displays serve as visual reminders to this point. Figure 5.7. features a collage of photos of the Mission City building and community, past and present. There's, of course, a backstory to these pictures. As they were moving into the building, school staff discovered artifacts from the building's previous use as a community center. The school leadership saw this as a potentially-rich opportunity to engage students in learning about place, and of, the history of their neighborhood. This idea evolved into an oral history project, which many students took part in. Some of the learnings are represented through photographs, such as those pictured below. In each frame, a photo depicting activities from the past are placed alongside one depicting a related activity from the present era. These visuals symbolize a community connectivity, and also prompt observers within the school to consider how things may have progressed and evolved. Mission City students see themselves in the present but have the backdrop

⁹⁰ To culminate each school year, MCS has guided students in a neighborhood parade. Children carry the school banner, and other art and signs constructed during the school year. The parade is small and relatively brief. Still, it is a unique activity not typical of Riverview schools.

of the past as a reminder that (1) we/ they do not exist in isolation and (2) we should be thinking about how we'll be represented to future generations.



Figure 5.7 Mission City Past & Present Displays

Notes on Carefree Children and the Preservation of [Revolutionary] [Black] Spirits – The School as a Sanctuary

At my very first MCS meeting with Ms. Lauren, she explained that the children go outside for recess every day, regardless of season⁹¹. “Every day?”, I asked, both intrigued and surprised. This is atypical, to say the least. Recess for students in the city of Riverside is often an occasional treat. Many schools in the district do not have functional, safe playground space for students to utilize. When I was a child in Riverview school system, opportunities to go outside for free time were not promised. And the smallest infraction, a few moments of unwelcome rowdiness by a restless class, and the “privilege” was taken away.

To return to Mission City, the discussion around recess and the protected time for free play was my first indication that there was some facet(s) of childhood, as imagined, that staff were working to preserve. In that conversation, Ms. Lauren emphasized that all

⁹¹ If the weather is sub-zero or there is a storm, students have indoor recess. Otherwise, nothing conflicts with the dedicated 20 minutes of free play after lunch. On several occasions, I stood outside shivering while the children ran around enthusiastically. All children are required to have snow boots and a warm coat for this reason. If children’s families cannot provide these things, the school typically assists by allowing them to borrow a donated item.

people, especially children, need breaks. They need time to use their imagination and explore. It's a part of their learning and development. This is what all of the studies indicate, yet many schools ignore this, Lauren mentioned. Though recess may better enable children to focus on discrete academic tasks (i.e. in the classroom), most Mission City staff persons frame the practice as having intrinsic value beyond traditional achievement. Activities like recess at MCS affirm the humanity of children-- their innate inclinations to be unrestricted, active and social. And, I argue, are evidence of the school's pedagogical and human concerns for the preservation of the carefree [Black] child. In this section, I briefly explore Mission City's institutional focus, protection and cultivation of the carefree spirit. More precisely, I discuss how this notion is evidenced through students' expressions, school curriculum and procedures, and, through the staff's orientation towards discipline, healing and justice.

The space for carefree [Black] childhood is contested. The more recent trending hashtags of #carefreeblackgirl⁹², #carefreeblackboy and #CarefreeBlackKids2k16⁹³, though also used for entertainment purposes, began as a political statement. Hit hard by the unarmed shootings of Black boys by the police, harsh and discriminatory school discipline policies, and images portraying Black children as violent, mature, hyper-sexualized, etc. – these hashtags and related images, video, etc. were circulated in an effort to push back against counterproductive, negative tropes. With this context, Iris' drawing of school (found below) takes on greater significance. She indicates a feeling of warmth and sincere happiness through her use of a rainbow, and illustrations of a

⁹² First tweeted/trended in May 2013.

⁹³ <https://blavity.com/carefreeblackkids2k16-trending-just-needed-today/>

cheerful child strolling with a lollipop and puppy in tote. All of these objects, individually and collectively, carry with them a connotation of whimsy and contentment. The image of the child depicted *looks* carefree. Rather than draw a structured aspect of the school day (or even attempt to draw some area on the school grounds), Iris portrays a feeling associated with her educational experience.

Figure 5.12: Iris' Carefree Drawing



Though not necessarily evident in their drawings, many other children articulate an understanding of MCS as a place that prioritizes students' freedom of expression and emotional needs. One way that these priorities manifest is through the school's policy of "free dress". As child Kisha explains, "We have free dress, at [my previous school] we didn't....I can express my clothing style". In her statement, Kisha acknowledges that the dress code at Mission City is different from other schools. What's more, she recognizes this policy as a means of allowing for increased individual expression. Similarly, Diamond also provides insight that connects dress with a sentiment of freedom more broadly. "...we don't have to wear uniforms. We have -- like we -- they let us express our self or express how we feel in our type of clothing", she expresses, closely mirroring Kisha's comment. She goes on to say, "And I am really happy that we -- it's not even to be free. It's to be -- we get to be free-er". Diamond is keenly aware of the school's effort provide space for creative individuality. And she appreciates this aspect of the culture, as

it contributes to a sense of liberation. Indeed, on any given day at MCS, you see student's taking full advantage of this liberty and pushing boundaries for dress. It is not uncommon to see students with brightly-colored chalk highlights in their hair, glow in the dark hoodies, bedazzled accessories, and/or patterned leggings (a pair featuring emojis was a personal favorite). But, even beyond dress, the recognition of freedom, expression and childhood was recurrent across student responses. As one student explains, the philosophy of the school involves, "being a kid. They let you be yourself when you're a kid". Correspondingly, student Lisa describes the school environment as such, "you get to be yourself and do all these things that you might want to do or you can just be free in a kind of way. Not [too] free... you need to learn". Lisa's comment suggests a reasonable balance between what she understands as freedom and intentional learning.

Their teacher, Jamie, provides further distinction between protected time for children to make choices about play and, to some extent, learning in the academic content areas. Consider the following excerpt from Jamie:

I try to give them choice when it comes to things that they – when it's like their time. I told them I didn't want – I'll plan some games for them but I don't want to, because I want it to be their time. But I feel like when it comes to things like what are you interested in learning, like I don't want to teach them things that they're not interested in learning, as far as like science stuff. But math, it's like kind of – I can't really give them that much choice.

Jamie describes various considerations around how and when to provide structure for students, versus a desire to allow students to be self-guided i.e. follow their curiosities, and, to inform the curriculum. In my observations, this balance was being achieved

through a number of other co-curricular offerings, in addition to Ms. Jamie’s classroom. Every Friday, for example, students participate in an elective course based upon their individual interests. This course, which I refer to here as “Zeal”, is facilitated by a number of teachers and volunteers. Teacher expertise, as well as student interests, dictate the Zeal course content. Foci have varied, including but not limited to journalism, cooking, a logic/fiber arts class. Additionally, students of a specific age participate in an outdoor winter camp. The camp, which I chaperoned in 2016, features two days of unstructured play, team-building activities, games, nature walks and science investigations.

Though I’ve discussed the institutional commitment to freedom, the component of “care”⁹⁴ should be further explained. I rely on the words of Mrs. Nikki, who in the following passage, contextualizes this aspect of the Mission City pedagogical approach:

When something is broken we wanted them to know how to tinker with it and fix it instead of just throwing it away. All of these like hands-on things ...knowing that kids not only learn with their minds but their minds and their heart and their hands. We wanted them to feel loved and learn how to love people and accept the love they were given so all if this is on the list of things we wanted kids to get out of it.

In this excerpt, Nikki speaks to the school’s focus on the whole child, to include an open heart. She is explicit in naming love and the practice of loving as central to the MCS approach. Her words, when taken with the various other references found within the

⁹⁴ As in care-free

school to the heart, love, freedom, play and exploration, work to convey a commitment to cultivating a particular form of childhood. And, I argue, demonstrate the school's attempt to preserve the essence and whimsy of the child's spirit. Regardless of the circumstances that children may face outside of school, the school grounds becomes a sanctuary where "just being a kid" and imagining are normed enactments.

Though much of this section has highlighted how MCS supports children in excluding a carefree persona, there are ways that free-spiritedness also manifests (and is cultivated) as the revolutionary imagination. In addition to mention of local, well-known activists and others such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr.⁹⁵, MCS children are often brought into conversations with community organizers active in the Riverview context. These individuals and "friends of the school" talk about their work, and the non-violent action/methods employed in an effort to reach a sociopolitical aim. So, MCS students have heard visitors talk about participating in protest marches, demanding meetings with legislators, attending/speaking at community forums, working for campaigns, and even, participating in lock-ins/demonstrations that resulted in arrests. Though the activists are not always Black, they often cite racism as a root cause of the issues they fight.

Perhaps not surprisingly, students are supported in applying their knowledge about direct action and critique of authority within the context of school. Students feel comfortable challenging those in power. This exchange between myself and Jack is relevant to the aforementioned point:

⁹⁵ Sometimes in the classroom but often during All-School Meetings

Ms. Natalie: Okay. So you said you know the adults here care for you. How do you know that?

Jack: Because I could see them all the, all the time saying that they care for me and like...But they're irritating at the same time.

Ms. Natalie: Why are they irritating?

Jack: Like I think -- like yeah, also -- because today, when I was getting my lunch -- so the, the -- you know how those clouds in there? ...One of them fell because of the wind and then I tried to help and then -- because I was too short, I jumped but I couldn't catch it. So they took it and then the kids just going to go up, just going to go up to me and kind of make fun of me and I tried to squeeze back through to get back in my spot and then [Ms. Nikki] told me to come here and get to the end of the line.

Ms. Natalie: Did you explain to her what happened?

Jack: Yes, and she didn't care.

Jack's commentary is telling. He acknowledges the school's explicit attempts to demonstrate care but then quickly offers a criticism. In many schools or homes, referring to adults as "irritating" would be considered as very disrespectful. Though he was talking to me⁹⁶ and not Jamie or a school leader, I do not think Jack would feel at liberty to speak so candidly in another context. In his account, Jack also confirms an attempt to explain his side of the story: There is a cloud decoration hanging from the ceiling and apparently, one component was blow out of place by the wind. Jack, small in stature but big in

⁹⁶ i.e. not a formal member of the staff. Still, because I often led Jack's math group, I do believe that he viewed me like a teacher and representative of the adults/staff.

enthusiasm/energy, likely jumped dramatically but to no avail. Thus, losing his place in line. It is debatable whether or not Ms. Nikki “cared”. More likely, is that she felt less inclined to disrupt the order of the line given that Jack jumped out of line playfully, and on his own accord. Still, we get a sense from this excerpt that MCS are inclined to advocate on behalf of themselves and speak openly about their contentions.

Relatedly, Mission City students also feel comfortable making requests for special dispensations and/or changes in policies. On one occasion, a group of children (majority boys), drafted a letter on their own time requesting a school football team. They submitted this letter, and received a letter from the administration in response. Jamie read the letter aloud to the classroom, which was accepted with much disappointment from the students. The administration cited safety as a major factor in their decision, even pointing out research on brain trauma. Though students were not satisfied with the end result, it was clear to all that their letter had been read and considered. They were affirmed in their critique of the current policy, love of football⁹⁷ and desire to be competitive. Children in Ms. Jamie’s classroom also organized a silent protest. I remember that day vividly. It was noticeably quieter during work time. I settled into the classroom and put my belongings away. Then I went out in the hallway to work with the first group. During the transition, Starr comes out of the classroom and over to us. She walks up to me and hands me a post-it note with instructions from Jamie. Starr does not speak. I was a bit confused as to why she didn’t just verbally convey the message. My assumption at the time was that she had lost her voice.

⁹⁷ The staff agreed to ensure that a football would be available during recess for casual play.

Child Gabby reflects on her role in the student-led effort, conducted with revolutionary intent. “The strike movement--The no talking strike... I started it. And I felt when everybody else got into what I felt that I was doing something good. And I felt that I was doing something to try to help a very great community”. Gabby communicates a feeling of contentment in bringing her peers into the “movement”. In the excerpt below, Lisa confirms Gabby’s role and also elaborates on their motivations and experiences:

I think that I was one of the first people—last week we stood in solitary with [Gabby] because a lot of people were suspended. Six people were suspended and we thought some of the rules were not fair. So I was one of the first people to start being silent. It was really hard for me because I talk a lot. I was silent for the whole day except the end. It was really hard for me, but I thought I was a leader because I was one of the first people to start doing it

Here, Lisa states “solitary” but clearly means “solidarity”, a reasonable substitution/speech error for a child and novice. Lisa is still very much engaged in the learning process; she’s learning about vocabulary, learning about self and self-determination. Yet, she is strong in her convictions. And finally, Iris speaks to the significance of the silent protest, as representative of the school culture more broadly.

Iris: We had like a moment of silence because there’s so much bullying.

Ms. Natalie: Can you tell me more about that?

Iris: So, six kids were suspended. And one maybe expelled because there was like a verbal fight that turned physical between like seven and six students...So, we’ve said, if we don’t talk, then we can get into this kind of physical fights. So, we stopped talking until we got our demands. We got a new social contract,

which is like rules but kind of not rules. Things you agree to, they're like rules you agree to.

Ms. Natalie: So, why did that make you feel free?

Iris: Because if we're free to do our assignment thing without about being suspended. So, if we can do that, I feel we can do -- we are pretty free to do any protest that we want to. And like get reasonable like coverage.

Ms. Natalie: Okay. Like with your request granted.

Iris articulates a sense of freedom within the school context. She also references bullying I'll explore in the next substantive section. But, what is important to note here is Iris' conclusion about "reasonable" requests and the freedom to organize and resist without fear of persecution. At Mission City, along with attempts to preserve the sanctity of childhood, I also see evidence that staff carve out space for students to cultivate a revolutionary spirit. The adults, including myself, were immensely proud of the students who led the demonstration effort. Though they did not coddle them, in part in an effort not to mislead them into thinking that direct action comes without challenges and opposition. But, the school culture and orientation of the staff left open the potential for this type of engagement.

Renderings from Students- Key Features & Child-centered Impressions of MCS

In previous sections of this chapter, students' words have been woven into my analyses of the Mission City School environment. For this next section, I provide further insights into students' impressions of school. The primary source of evidence is illustrations constructed by the children to represent their associations and the most characteristic sites, features, etc. Their drawings depict Mission City as situated within a

broader neighborhood context and animated through social interactions. MCS students are aware of the multiplicity of things happening at particular moments within the school building or classroom. The social and academic environment depicted is abuzz with activity. But, it is also imperfect and wrought with interpersonal tensions. I explore each of these characterizations in the paragraphs to follow.

As a place-based institution, MCS privileges knowledge of and engagement within, the surrounding community. I have mentioned before, the class “Exploration”, where children participate in a range of lessons and activities set around the neighborhood. Student Mackenzie describes Exploration, to include her interpretation of its pedagogical aims. She explains, “Well, as before, we've been learning in [Exploration], I think that it means, like, finding out things, why is those things happening. ...And we take walks around the school....To see how the neighborhood looks and how it's improving”. In addition to the walks that Mackenzie mentions, students also complete assignments that draw upon principles in science, social studies and urban planning. One such assignment required students to develop a blueprint for the school’s expansion into an adjacent lot. Given the curricular elements of the Exploration course alone, it is not surprising that students would see their school as not disconnected from the surrounding neighborhood.

Marcus, Jeff, Craig and Darui all crafted illustrations that show MCS from the outside. Marcus’ drawing depicts the neighborhood with a particular level of sophistication. When asked to report back on the features of his drawing, Marcus stated, “I drew houses [and] the school”. When I asked him where exactly the school was, Marcus replied, “In the streets”. Other children also endeavored to represent the school

building from the perspective of the sidewalk, or streets. The remaining boys here, sans Marcus, do not show the surrounding buildings. Instead, they dedicate space to depicting, primarily, the social interactions that are happening in front (or beside) the edifice at the start of the school day. Darui provides the following explanation for his drawing of people greeting one another outside of the MCS building:

Well I drew a picture of in the morning time. Where you know there is usually people talking in front of the school and the grown up comes out and says its breakfast time or time for school like schools open. And then yeah I see a lot of my friends walking into the school and other than that.

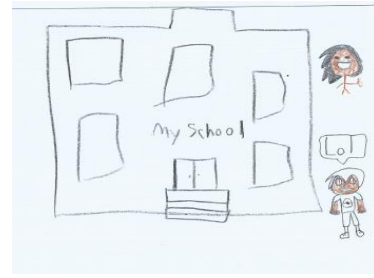
Darui acknowledges the school as a space of convening, friendship and socialization. Also related to the themes of community and inclusivity discussed earlier in this chapter, Darui illustrates the precise moment where adults warmly invite children into the building to begin the day. Similarly, Craig indicates that in his illustration, “People are talking...They’re students”. He even goes as far as to point out the “little ramp thing” drawn as a detail in his picture, a common site for student convening before and after school⁹⁸. The cluster of child drawings featured here indicate a wide, big-picture gaze. They represent the school as a backdrop that serves as the setting for activity.

⁹⁸ Also an area where students attempt physical stunts/acrobatics. Children have been known to slide down and jump over the railing.

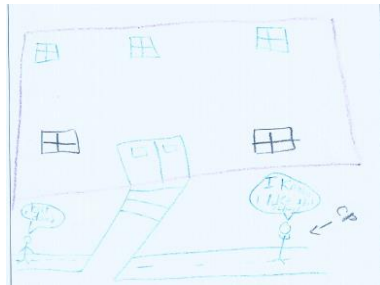
Figure 5.13: Cluster Wide-Gaze School Drawings



Marcus



Jeff



Craig

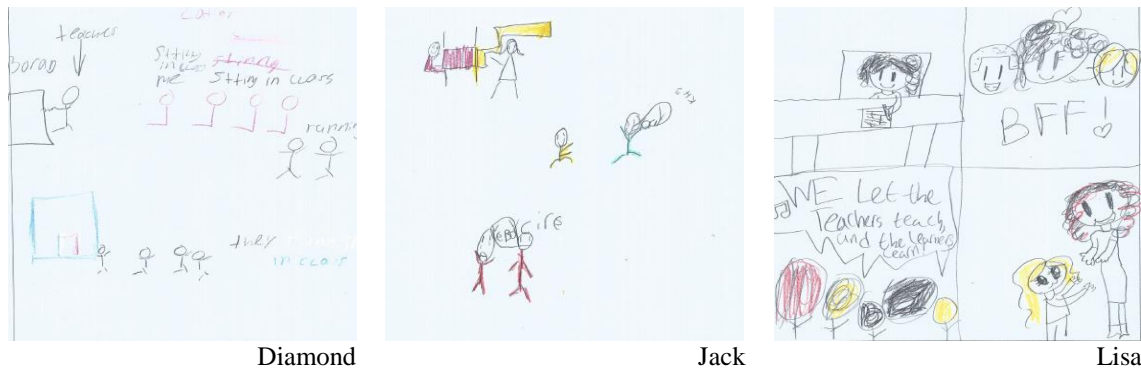


Darui

Student's drawings of the inside of MCS also suggest a bird's-eye perspective and demonstrate an awareness of multiple happenings, sometimes even simultaneously. When MCS students drew dynamics within the inside of the school, there were often several vignettes pictured. Accordingly, student Lisa's drawing has four distinct scenes. She illustrates many students singing the school song, her socializing with friends (top-right), engaging in classwork, and finally, a student being helped by a teacher. Diamond and Jack also represent multiple school happenings in their drawings, ranging from groups of children in the classroom to play⁹⁹ during recess. Notice that across all of these visual cases, there is no one point or person of focus.

⁹⁹ Part of Jack's drawing also includes an instance where he is being teased by another student. Though I do not discuss this here, I explore bullying and social tensions towards the end of this section.

Figure 5.14: Cluster Dynamic School Drawings



Children like Kisha and Gabby opted to depict a singular classroom setting. But, although only one site is featured in each of their drawings, multiple children are included in the scene. In Kisha's picture, other children look on as a student (center) responds correctly to a math question. Interestingly, the classroom that Kisha opted to draw was not her own. Her likeness is on the bottom-righthand side. In the illustration, Kisha is waiting for a pause in instruction to signal an appropriate time to deliver a note to the classroom teacher. Like examples from her peers, she demonstrates an awareness of the larger context and does not want to "interrupt" the flow of instruction. Pictured right, Gabby's picture depicts instruction in her own classroom. Though she insists that she is fully engaged, Gabby shows some of her classmates being "disruptive", much to Ms. Jamie's dismay. "... everyone's in there. There's going to be someone who is not paying attention", Gabby explains. Both her drawing and her words speak to multiple dynamics happening at a given moment in time. While "everyone" is physically present, Gabby demonstrates how participation and engagement may differ.

Figure 5.15: Cluster Social and Academic



Mission City students depict a complex mingling of social and academic interactions. Social dynamics appear to be especially salient. But, with increased opportunities to interact with one another, and, more freedom to move about, MCS students also find increased opportunities for social conflict and off-task behavior. This aspect is also represented by the final cluster of child drawings. In this set of illustrations, students depict the ups and downs related to relationships, feelings and social groups, sometimes along racial/class lines. I begin with Iris' drawing, which was discussed earlier in this chapter. Iris focuses here on the positive affective response associated with her experience at Mission City. Similarly, Starr also represents her feelings, this time differentiating between two primary types of sentiments. Consider the following excerpt wherein Starr describes aspects of her drawing:

I drew good days and the bad days, where there's no conflict and it's a nice day out. And there's no fighting and everyone is nice, or they just don't talk to each other. And then there was bad days where it's raining and everyone's mad and like rain makes you feel sleepy and everyone's cranky and mean to each other and there's fights. And it's like a storm. It's usually the bad days but there are good

days. Like today, because is like a mix of it because it's not raining but it's muddy.

Like Iris, we see the use of weather/nature features as symbolic of emotion. On the left, Starr depicts a thunderstorm as representative of the bad days, i.e. those ripe with social tensions. On the right, Starr's drawing of a sunny day represents the positive, peaceful times. Starr places herself in the middle of the drawing, and indicates her positive feelings to be occurring 90% of the time. And though she verbalizes that "it's usually the bad days" for others, her circles place students at various places (i.e. positive, negative, and neutral) on the spectrum. Still, Starr acknowledges a range of peer dispositions. She goes on to say, "...sometimes we're usually a bunch of happy people but sometimes there's mad people and there are so many that I can help". With this, Starr reframes her assessment of her peers from generally negative to generally positive. Also, she situates herself as a potential helper and source of support.

Figure 5.16: Cluster Social & Emotional Dynamics at MCS



Mackenzie depicts a phenomenon that occurs in most schools to some extent. Her drawing organizes children according to cliques, or social groups. As pictured, the children in each group look virtually identical. And so, I rely heavily on Mackenzie's

words to extract meaning. In debriefing this illustration, I learned that Mackenzie sees her peers as falling into one of the following groups: wannabe smart/nerd, fancy, bossy/mean girls or boys group. The nerd group, described by Mackenzie as “The people that think that they're smarter”, includes the white children. And, the “fancy” group, according to Mackenzie, “Like, they mainly just put on gloss and try to get boys”. These four groups are less inclined to mix (with the exception of the “fancy” group and the boys¹⁰⁰), and sometimes find themselves in conflict with one another. Mackenzie admits that she is often “irritated”, “Mainly because, like, people try to call me a follower. And I'm not. And that's just irritating me more”. Her account here complicates the portrayal of school represented by Iris’ drawing, and, stands in opposition to the aforementioned efforts around inclusivity acknowledged by both MCS students and adults. What is evident here is that Mission City, though it often demonstrates a deep commitment to community and positivity, does at moments, fall short of its ambitions. For students, freedom in movement, choice and expression offered by the school, are sometimes enjoyed in ways that are less than inclusive.

As a final point relevant to the topic of inclusivity and student social dynamics, I return to Mackenzie’s reference to the “nerd” group, which I indicated as inclusive of the white children (primarily boys) from the upper grade classrooms. It is important to note that the white children at Mission City generally come from comparatively wealthier

¹⁰⁰ Mackenzie suggests that the boys and fancy girls intermingle in a flirtatious sort of way. While I am not comfortable categorizing their actions in this way, it is true that many of the students, on the cusp of adolescence, are becoming more aware of the attention of the opposite sex (or same sex). Towards the end of my study, I did note that more children were freely referencing “crushes” and pairs “going together”. Even when students were rumored as “going together”, I did not notice any difference in their behaviors and honestly would not have known had it not been stated.

families¹⁰¹. And so, racial perceptions, or in this case, “whiteness”, become intermingled with the images of smartness *and* affluence. On one occasion, I overheard a conversation in the hallway where a Black student asked a teacher, “why does it seem like all of the white kids are smarter than us?”, with *us* being the Black students at MCS. Another Black student in the vicinity seconded this question, signaling a potential shared impression amongst a subset of the student body. But, there is reason to believe that these perceptions (i.e. white students being smarter) are internalized by both Black and white students. Recall Mackenzie’s commentary, wherein she expresses that the nerd group “thinks” they are smarter than the other students. Here, Mackenzie implies that the students in this social group exude a pretentiousness not necessarily supported by actual ability. I witnessed this dynamic play out during a classroom *Jeopardy*-inspired game one afternoon. Coincidentally, though groups were assigned randomly, most of the white students in the classroom ended up on the same team. I observed how these white students, excited and engaged in gameplay, made decisions about solutions to problems without consulting the Black children also present at the table. Sometimes, a white student would write down an answer so quickly that even I wasn’t able to make out the response. “They won’t listen to us”, one Black child murmured to me with frustration written all over his face.

¹⁰¹ Ms. Jamie discussed this observation in her interview, noting “like [the white students] all come from privileged families. Their parents are – like have good jobs, they’re – you know, their parents are privileged in other ways. And it’s not – that’s not only the white kids. There are some of the black kids that have...But like specifically if I think just about the white kids, like they don’t have the same situations that the black kids do. And it’s not all of them, you know?”. Though I don’t have SES data to confirm this was also my impression.

Though I assume that there was no mal intent to marginalize the Black students, the divide along racial lines was evident. Admittedly, even I became frustrated by what I perceived as acts of poor sportsmanship (e.g. lengthy bouts of celebration, making statements such as “that’s so easy” as another group struggled to offer a response), which even Ms. Jamie noticed and made attempts to quell. I observed and participated in many iterations of science and math Jeopardy during my time at MCS, but this occurrence was different. I attribute the shift in dynamics to the team make-up, which made race a more salient dimension of difference. In offering these examples, I hope to make evident the following assertion: At MCS, the physical presence of white students¹⁰², prompt questions and concerns about difference, racial stereotypes (particularly, those related to intelligence/achievement), privilege, etc. Because the demographics of the school is made up of a small, yet perceptible of white children, teachers and volunteers, Black students at MCS do not experience the normed culture of Blackness characteristic of most Riverview schools. And, I argue, thusly think about racism and issues of diversity with increased frequency.

From Pedagogues: Instructing Through Dialogue and [Imperfect] Collaborative Learning

“I also want them to see that they have a voice and like can influence others and that like I don’t want there to be really a big difference between like adults and children. Like I know that it’s my job to provide them with certain things and I have to provide them a structure and I have to keep them safe and I’m responsible for them because they’re

¹⁰² And majority white teachers, which prompted Gabby to express, “... I feel like this school needs a little bit more of black teachers because there’s a lot of white teachers but a lot of black kids and a lot of white teachers, you know, and a little white kids”

children. But I want – I don’t want them to see as I’m the only person who has the answers...I want you to solve the problems on your own.”

Ms. Jamie, Teacher

Given the preceding analyses of power dynamics, cultivating community and MCS’s commitments to honoring student voice, Ms. Jamie’s statement (excerpted above) might be interpreted as applying exclusively to the social and cultural aspects of the educational environment. In this final section on classroom instruction, I show how the commitments expressed in this comment from Jamie—child voice, impact/influence, structure and student-driven problem solving, are reflected through teaching practice and the design of the learning environment. I provide two substantive illustrations. The first, depicts a typical day wherein students work in small groups. The second example, a student debate conducted as part of a unit on urban water, embodies the school’s place-based, social justice orientation. Across cases, the role of the teacher manifests as more of a facilitator while participating students engage one another, albeit not always in the most generative or cooperative ways.

On October 19th, immediately after morning meeting, I documented the following in my fieldnotes:

Walking from the multipurpose space, the groups split and I proceed with Ms. J into the classroom. The agenda for the day, as indicated on the white board, will begin with science. I sit near the center/back of the classroom, on the meditation bean bag. Gabby, budding actress and filmmaker, is seated nearby at the half moon-shaped table that doubles as Ms. J’s desk. Upon sitting, she turns around and says, matter-of-factly, “You mad? That’s the “mad chair”. I tell her no, and

ask her what the seat is used for, curious to hear her response. She just stares blankly. Ms. J. begins the lesson on mass and weight. As she begins, two parents enter to sit in on instruction. They sit off to the side and don't interact with the students. Jamie initiates saying something to the effect of: "Today we are going to learn about mass and weight. This is something that you all know something about. Where have you heard these words before in your lives or at school? Who can tell me what these words mean?" Several children raise their hands. Jamie selects several them to offer a response. Students surmised that weight was when something is "weighed to see how heavy it is" and mass was "how much something holds" or "how wide". Ms. Jamie does not correct students, responding only to say, "ok", and "what do other people think?". Jamie plays a short cartoon/educational video on the content. Most students are listening intently, sans Camden who begins to make hand puppets on the projector screen. Gabby, from the rear of the room, sternly states, "Stop that". Camden immediately complies.

In introducing the lesson, Jamie begins with an opportunity for students in the class to offer insights on the day's topic. Ms. Jamie assumes that students enter in with prior knowledge, and spends the first few minutes prompting them to make associations. During this time, Jamie does not correct students. Instead she listens and affirms each response with an "ok". Early into this lesson (and others), I note how Jamie resists the inclination to correct every student misunderstanding. I have often observed her write out an incorrect solution as a student dictates it, and then pose a question to the group, "Is this what you all got? Does anyone have a different answer?". In this approach, Jamie's

teaching practice aligns with her expressed desire to prompt students to solve problems “on their own”. Also important here, is that Jamie’s classroom is “open”. Volunteers and, on rare occasion, parents, enter and exit freely. This is a normal, and Ms. Jamie’s teaching proceeds according to her schedule, with timer in tote, regardless of who is visiting or helping. Finally, I note the significance of Gabby and Camden’s interaction¹⁰³, a fairly common occurrence during instructional or group work time. Though Ms. Jamie is the primary arbiter of order, the small group activities that constitute at least half of the instructional blocks often position students as leaders amongst peers. Consequently, MCS appear to have grown accustomed to managing and supporting the behaviors of classmates, and will complain if one or more person is thought to be “throwing off” the group dynamic. Gabby, and likely others, were annoyed by Camden’s attempt to provide entertainment. He was creating a distraction during a moment that students generally enjoy- Jamie’s use of cartoons/videos, many of which end with a game-like quiz. Camden also allows himself to be “checked” by Gabby while Ms. Jamie (though she is aware) chooses not to intervene.

After the video, Ms. J asks students to reiterate the topics covered. Three students, different than those selected before, provide a general summary of the video content. They articulate amended definitions of mass (how much matter in a thing) and weight (how heavy it is, measured with a scale). Then Jamie asks a series of questions: “Do any of you use a scale at home? This is a type of balance. Have you seen scales at the grocery store for produce?” Jamie asks the group

¹⁰³ Gabby and I also have an interaction that is indicative of her high level of comfort in questioning (and some extent, reminding) me of the intended function of the meditation space. I have discussed this dynamic and the ways that MCS children sometimes challenge adults in earlier sections.

what scales measure, encouraging a definition more specific than weight/heaviness. After receiving a couple of repetitive responses, she prompts a student to explain further, “what does a person or thing’s weight tells us though?”. A student shouts out, “The pull of gravity!”. Without acknowledging the student directly, Ms. Jamie transitions into a related line of questioning. “Is there gravity in the classroom? Josiah, is there gravity in here?”. Josiah responds, “Yes” [tone indicates some hesitation, looks as if he’ll change his response.] Ms. J moves him along by asking, “How do you know?” “Because everything isn’t floating”, Josiah explains. Ms. J verbally confirms, “Good. That’s right”, and after a brief pause, transitions to a demonstration. “Ok, now I’m going to show you all how to use the balance so that you know what to do when your group gets to this station” (Ms. J, paraphrased). During the demonstration, students lean in to get a better visual. Student Tisha sits up on her knees. Kyle stands. A couple of others move closer. Ms. J carries on with the explanation without commenting on the student-initiated movements/relocations. The room is noticeably peaceful. As the children begin to form groups according to Jamie’s instructions, Ms. J makes a comment on how “chill” the class is...

Consistent with the overall culture of Mission City School, Jamie’s lesson privileges responses from students. She asks questions, some in an attempt to help students make additional connections between the science content in the video and students’ everyday lives. There are no textbooks, which I interpret as evidence of the school’s less-traditional, least restrictive approach. When a student shouts out, Jamie implicitly accepts the child’s verbal contribution as relevant to the conversation but does not give explicit

praise. This is consistent with Jamie’s practice more generally. She often ignores inappropriate behaviors and instead, acknowledges those who are acting in accordance with the classroom agreements and/or pre-established protocols. During the demonstration, Jamie assumes that students will move out of their assigned seats in order to see. She does not announce this or grant formal permission, which is an indicator that this type of movement is normal and acceptable. Students in the classroom frequently move around to participate in classroom activities. They must move, in fact, to accommodate learning stations, group work, games, or demonstrations (See Figure 5.8, a photo of students gathering during a math game). Finally, Jamie’s “chill” comment suggests that the group is generally high energy. Yet, she does not frame this heightened level of energy (i.e. less than chill) negatively. My understanding is that MCS staff and teachers accept a “reasonable” amount of energy and disorder. They see these things as indicators of learning and engagement, rather than misbehavior.



Figure 5.17 *Classroom Configuration & Student Movement – Playing a Math Game*

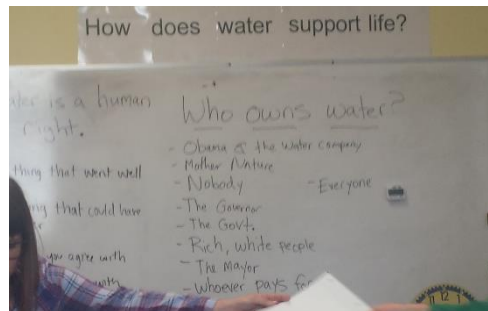
During the lesson described above, I recall one point of contention amongst students. A student, Kami, small in size but big in personality, was unhappy with the group she was assigned to. As the other students began to work in their groups, Kami protests

assertively, turning her whole body in the opposite direction and repeating, “I don’t want to work with hiiimmm”. The boy she is referring to, Jack, also (evidently) did not want to work with Kami. So, he begins to mope, staring in the direction of Kami and the table but not walking, with his head drooped and shoulders hunched over. Ms. Jamie seems unaffected, and says aloud, “you two have to figure out how to work with one another, even if you’re not friends”. Jack joins the table group and begins to attempt collaborative work. Kami does not budge. After a few moments, Kami takes the handout distributed for the assignment and begins to work on it alone. She refuses to allow Jack to write his name on the page. As I begin to intervene, Ms. Jamie notices something is awry. She walks over the group and explains to Kami, in a firm but only slightly elevated tone, that she/Kami MUST work together with Jack. Kami responds, though still despondently, to Jamie’s imperative. Herein, Jamie reinforces the notion that collaboration between students is the expectation and a fundamental component of the learning process. She began by prompting students to devise a strategy for working together effectively, in essence, giving the children an opportunity/invitation to figure things out on their own. Only when Kami fails to respond, does Jamie assert authority and reframe the invitation as a non-negotiable. Important here is the hesitation on Jamie’s part to move from facilitator to authoritarian (e.g. “someone who has all the answers”). Also important, is that this is one of many instances where children in Ms. Jamie’s classroom are given the choice and flexibility to design solutions to interpersonal problems.

In this next example, Ms. Jamie’s class engages in a whole-group debate. A bit of background is necessary to contextualize the illustration: For the past couple of weeks prior to this below exchange, Ms. Jamie, administrator Ms. Adriana, and a representative

from a local community education and arts program (Mr. Max) had been facilitating various activities related to the nationally publicized Flint Water Crisis¹⁰⁴. In previous class sessions, students discussed news articles associated with the issue, and developed posters (Appendix E) with key-takeaways. Ms. Jamie also initiated a science unit on water, its significance to the environment and organisms, and, on the form¹⁰⁵ and flow of water. In unpacking this dialogue between students and adults, my primary focus is on the pedagogical moves and features of the lesson. I recognize that the specific content embedded within the students' commentary here is political and gives insight into their ideologies and positioning. This is taken up in a later chapter. For now, I analyze this example strictly as a window into the dynamics of pedagogy and types of child engagement engendered by the activity.

5.18: How Does Water Support Life? Activity Notes



On February 23rd, facilitator Mr. Max, a tall and thin white male with a relaxed aesthetic, introduces the activity with a question: *Why are we studying water?* Max proceeds to select from a range of hands shot into the air with enthusiasm.

¹⁰⁴ The small city of Flint, MI gained national attention after the public learned that for several years, the drinking/pipe water being utilized by residents was contaminated with high amounts of lead- amounts so high that the people were experiencing severe skin problems and health complications. Some doctors commented that Flint's prolonged lead exposure will likely lead to irreversible brain damage. Flint is a higher-poverty city with a high concentration of African American residents.

¹⁰⁵ E.g. bodies of water and their features

“Flint Water Crisis”

“History in the making”, is offered by student Starr

Max continues his introduction while Ms. Jamie stands nearby. He explains that the class will be participating in a debate related to the group’s study of water. “The point of a debate is to seek what is true”. Mr. Max directs the student’s gaze to the white board where a list of “ground rules/norms” is outlined with the following information:

- ✓ You can change your mind.
- ✓ One person speaks at a time
- ✓ Use evidence, ask for specific evidence
- ✓ On topic, general evidence (not calling out individuals)
- ✓ Reasonable volume
- ✓ Participate but step back sometimes to make space for others

Mr. Max quickly paraphrases each of the bullet points on norms. Ms. Jamie writes on the board: *Statement: Water is a human right*. “What’s a human right?”, Max poses to the group. Three students offer the following responses, one Black and the others white, “Something you need no matter what that’s key to survival, “Something that a human can do or get”, and, “something you should be able to get, like you deserve it because you’re human”. Mr. Max establishes consensus around the definition, “A human right is something that people deserve to do or have just because they are people, something that shouldn’t be taken away from you”. Ms. Jamie chimes in to clarify which sides of the room is designated as “agree” and which side is reserved for the “disagree” camp. One student blurts out, “Is there a middle?”. Ms. Jamie does not respond to this question but continues by stating, “You’re spread out and standing up, making sure we can hear each person’s voice”.

In the set-up portion of the lesson, both Max and Jamie work collaboratively to provide structure for the activity. The presence of multiple facilitators signals an attempt at shared power and reinforces the idea that Jamie is not the sole arbitrator of knowledge in the space. Jamie echoes this sentiment in her articulation to students that they should configure themselves such that all voices might be heard. Max, even as a white male, situates himself as both an educator and community partner. His participation and presence is evidence of the school's commitment to blurring the lines between "insider" and "outsider", perhaps even complicating the image of "teacher". As in the last example, the activity is initiated by two questions. The first question, prompts participating students to reflect on the learning goals driving the unit. And, it establishes a forum for students to emphasize the relevance of their learning. It is significant that both student responses captured insinuate a relationship between classroom work and the broader society. This assumption is consistent with the school's public mission.

The second question prompt, is an opportunity for students to co-construct, with adults, the definition for "human right". This term is fundamental to the forthcoming debate. I note the racial demographics of the students who offer responses. Though Ms. Jamie employs various strategies in her practice (e.g. pulling random student's names from Popsicle sticks) to ensure that all students' voices are heard, in the absence of such techniques to elicit participation, the white children offer responses more frequently¹⁰⁶. This is despite being underrepresented in the classroom space. When coupled with previous discussions of MCS children's racialized perceptions of smartness, this

¹⁰⁶ In general

observation further begs the question of how these dynamics in school might inform students' understandings of social dynamics more broadly.

Finally, the ground rules for the debate suggest a balance between honoring individual voice and fluidity¹⁰⁷, and cultivating the type of inclusive environment that affords generative dialogue. Ms. Jamie and Mr. Max establishes the activity as one where students can offer opinions, but they must also be mindful of both the content of and frequency of their contributions. Though I don't offer substantive analyses of child articulations here, I document some of the student talk captured in my fieldnotes while Ms. J served as scribe from a position at the rear of the classroom:

Mr. Max: Ms. J is going to take notes. Start by calmly walking to the side you believe in. Iris: I'm going to be Devil's advocate (*Jack follows to disagree side*)...ok guys, SIlence!

About six students migrate to the middle. Disagree group now includes three more students, including Casey

Iris: (*matter-of-factly*) Government has to be paid.

Omar (boy): nobody can go without water. (*tries to make a point about lead water*)

Casey: ...And then in kills you! (*Lots of crosstalk ensues Jaquell tries to clarify what Omar was saying*).....it's a different kind of death!

Josh: You can go without water for 3 days so you don't really need it.

Casey: Since Rick Snyder¹⁰⁸ wants to tell us, didn't tell us like ten years ago.

¹⁰⁷ As thinkers who are free to extend or amend their thinking

¹⁰⁸ Much-criticized governor of Michigan

Lisa: *(to Casey)* That means you disagree and should switch sides.

Ashton: If you agree you deserve it, but what if people abuse it?

Zuri: You can get it yourself. But what if they made you pay based on how much the government knows you have?

Iris: pay less, but just pay a little.

Omar: Nothing wrong with paying for water, but if you don't have it, you shouldn't have water shut off. If you can't afford it, shutting off water is practically a death penalty.

Some movement with sides. Girl with locs, Zuri, moves from disagree to middle

Lisa: I moved from middle to agree. Water is a human right because you need it. For certain people, it should be free.

Allurah: People on the street, should have a program to help them

Ashton: *(now in disagree)* Can't you see people abusing it?

For a few additional minutes, students continue with the debate. Ms. Jamie then brings the conversation to a halt by ringing the hand chime. "We'll debrief but much improved from last year. I started getting what people were saying, but then I had to transition into what people were doing because there was too much crosstalk. Some people were talking and participating, others were just kind of hanging out and doing other things". She directs students to write down the following on a separate sheet of paper: (1) thing that went well, (2) one thing that could have been better, (3) a statement that you agree with and (4) a statement that you disagree with. After five or so minutes, Jamie invites students to share out loud by stating, "...we want to hear about what you all are thinking", and construct a list. Students offer very specific critiques of one another,

collectively and individually, sometimes calling out specific students for engaging in side conversations.

During the exchange between students, we see students like Casey and Josh reference the content of prior lessons. Other students engaging in the conversation also seem to have an understanding of the prior knowledge being leveraged throughout the debate. Child Jaquell, even endeavors to try to explain on behalf of his peer Omar after he was interrupted by Casey. Throughout the debate, there is a lack of teacher intervention/voice, even as participating students are engaging in crosstalk and/or behaviors that conflict with the pre-established ground rules. Ms. Jamie provides critical commentary, but does so after the debate is over. This type of delayed intervention is interpreted as an intentional pedagogical move, wherein students are given the space to self-manage and troubleshoot on their own. Jamie then facilitates the process of reflection, which again is driven by the observations and critiques of children, as opposed to adults. Here again, Ms. Jamie affirms the idea that students have the capacity to voice concerns and reflect in ways that can and should shape (positively) the classroom space. She provides an opportunity for children to take ownership of their actions, their learning and, of the progress of the group.

In the next two chapters, I explore how institutional practices and meanings normalized within school manifest in ways relevant to students' understandings beyond school. Taking the thick description of John Hope Franklin and Mission City into account, with all of their areas of contrast, I now privilege the stories told by these Black children about opportunity, constraint, morality and their own agency in Riverview and the broader society.

Chapter VI

To Rise Above and Beyond Hope- Black Students' Knowing (of self, community, society) and Agentic Positioning

Introduction

Recall the figured world of JHF, where African-centeredness manifests through affirmations of the Black child as disciplined, respectful and capable of academic achievement at the highest levels. Teachers at John Hope Franklin work to cultivate a learning environment that is both rigorous¹⁰⁹ and familial. Though they reinforce traditional notions of deference and decorum with a clear hierarchy from elder to child, educators draw upon cultural resources liberally and fluidly throughout the course of the school day. At JHF, children are made aware of a rich legacy of Black excellence represented through the accomplishments of individual leaders from eras past. And finally, students are encouraged to “get it together” with awareness of both *who* they are (physical bodies raced Black) and *where* they are (context and environment) in order to *rise* --to elevate beyond the current circumstances of their neighborhoods and city.

Although the connections between work in school and their agency outside of school (as individuals and Black people in particular) are not always made explicit by Hope teachers, they are palpable and understood by the children in attendance. Black

¹⁰⁹ i.e. proficient test scores, fast pacing on par with or surpassing district mandates, high school and college readiness

students enrolled at the John Hope School of Excellence demonstrate very particular understandings of what these connections and intersections should and might be. In this chapter, I begin first with a discussion of the ways that JHF staff anticipates and frames the social constraints thought to be most relevant to their Black students. Next, I explore how these very understandings become animated through children’s moral visions and articulations around the constraints at the local level. This is followed by a discussion of how and when race/racism becomes salient in student’s conceptions of issues faced by Black people. Finally, I unpack Hope students’ accounts of their own potential and agency despite obstacles, with attention to their emergent strategies for circumventing and/or overcoming barriers.

“Schooling” towards Strength: JHF as Preparation for Life

JHF educators teach with intention—possessing a clear vision for how classroom learning translates into life skills and future success. Speaking with resolve, Mrs. Taylor offers the following insights during her interview:

...by the time they get to high school, I think they’ll be strong and ready...They need to develop strength and perseverance, because that’s what it really takes if they’re going to get through college, if they’re going to be an entrepreneur, you know, whatever they’re going to do. It takes perseverance to – to – you might fail, but you’ve got to get back up and keep going...I would like to see African-centeredness to keep these kids on task, on point with what – you know, knowing who they are, you know, they need to be able to be a leader, they need to be able to say no and not follow these people to be cool. One thing I love about Mrs. [Brown] and Harambee, she would tell the kids, “it’s cool to be smart at [Hope]”, so. And that philosophy, you know, is wonderful. So they need that carried

through in order to put them in that learning zone...To be strong...To be able to resist, to be able to resist when you are being tempted to come and do all these crazy things that they're tempted to do (laughs) all day long by the few handful of, you know, children that are going to try and pull them in that direction. You have to be strong. You have to say no, I'm going to class or – you know, just keep focused. Stay focused and stay strong in what you need to do and where – know where you want to go and stay focused on that.

(Mrs. Taylor)

Her words are a window into her educational philosophy and the purpose(s) of pedagogy more generally. Mrs. T also articulates an understanding of how JHF's African-centered philosophy might factor into student development and success beyond school.

Compelling here, is Mrs. Taylor's use of the words *strength/strong*, *resist*, and *perseverance*, words often associated with a collective Black struggle¹¹⁰, in ways that privilege sound individual choices and behaviors. She alludes to a version of self-reliance that, while informed by adults/teachers in the present, will ultimately manifest at the level of the individual child. Mrs. Taylor voices a concern that her students might succumb to defeat when faced with adversity, or, when tempted by peer-pressure. And, she envisions the school as a resource in ensuring that children develop the level of self-discipline, confidence and persistence to stay the course as they pursue higher education towards their professional ambitions.

Mrs. Taylor's statements establish a foundation for thinking about the relationship between school and the societal obstacles though to be most relevant to her African American students. Though Mrs. T conveyed these thoughts to make evident her

¹¹⁰ And, social movements, revolutionary imagination/acts, etc.

intentions and genuine hopes for students' success, she does so by implying distinctions between the potential trajectories of her students and "others" with whom their paths will inevitably cross. When Mrs. Taylor talks about resistance, she means resisting distractions and wayward peer influences. She expresses a continual need for her Black students to stay the course and differentiate between the pathway to success and the "wrong" direction. Even in her taking up of Mrs. Brown's reframing of the cool-smart paradox, Mrs. T implies perceived and unresolved tensions embodied by her students. Implicit in her statement is a desire to reconcile children's notions of "coolness" to include a prioritization of the "on point" dispositions (i.e. focus, leadership, school vs. social priorities) thought to directly correlate to their academic and professional achievements.

My findings show that the children at Hope School, by and large, are motivated by concerns similar to those expressed by Mrs. Taylor. Across their interviews, Hope students convey a pronounced level of seriousness in thinking about how what they practice and perform in elementary school has implications for adulthood. Moving further beyond the context of school, Hope students demonstrate that they are thinking about their future prospects in deeply complex ways. As they endorse the school's emphases on individual focus, aligning oneself with the "right" crowd, choosing smartness and following rules, it becomes evident that this orientation is about much more than elitism--children's physical safety, opportunities for mobility and general quality of life are thought to be contingent upon these factors. Their stories of community and society, wrought with obstacles provide insight into why these precise forms of self-discipline, discernment and (as Mrs. T, explains) strength are so incredibly important. *What are the*

societal constraints and moral imaginings most salient in the eyes of these young people?

I turn now to a detailed analysis of JHF student commentary on life outside of school¹¹¹.

More precisely, I demonstrate that although the children demonstrate an awareness of the pervasive nature of local crime, violence and poverty, they generally regard these phenomena as idiosyncratic as opposed to systemic problems. Similarly, even when asked to discuss issues specific to African Americans, students often attribute problems experienced by Black people to individual shortcomings and are reluctant to name racism as a salient, contemporary factor.

“It’s bad in [Riverview]”- Youth Impressions of Community Violence and Misconduct

When I asked Hope students to talk about the good aspects of their cities and communities (if any), children’s responses were sometimes wrought with tensions. Consider Angelique’s attempts to speak to the positive aspects of her city and neighborhood:

we have — Good water...Because the Flint water crisis, they — their water was poisoned. They was using some of our water from Riverside, and the Governor Snyder cut it off, but we still have good water, and we try to send them some. And their water was good, but now it’s metal in their water. (ND: *Anything else that’s good about [this city]?*) They refurbishing Riverside and making it look better and building more jobs — building more — what you call it? (ND: *Businesses?*)Yeah, businesses and other stores

¹¹¹ Throughout this analysis, I am most concerned with students’ unpacking of local issues. Though I asked students to reflect on problems faced by citizens and Black people nationally, and internationally, these discussions often morphed into conversations about their most immediate context. Outside of some considerations on the 2016 presidential election (& candidates), what was most salient and clearly articulated were their conceptions of constraints as manifest at home. Given that this is their primary referent in imagining society, I limit my analyses to reflect what was most salient in the eyes of participants.

and stuff downtown. They — I heard it on the news, they said they were making the new Nike store, and a brand new little set for the basketball game, and that's it. That's all I can think of.

Angelique's framing of Riverview water as "good", on the basis of it not being poisoned, is intriguing. Though some might consider access to clean water in the U.S. a human right and thusly mundane, Angelique does not take Riverview's access to drinkable water for granted. Yet, Angelique positions this feature of the city as positive only in light of the dire circumstances in Flint. If Flint were not in the midst of crisis, it's unlikely that the topic of water would be salient. Her second point regarding the city's revitalization feels less complimentary, in part because of her admission that Riverview is being made to "look better". Obvious here is a distinction between the prior and perhaps current state of the city, and, the progress anticipated from "refurnishing" efforts.

A more typical exchange to my questions about students' likes¹¹² and community "goods" is modeled by Paris

Natalie: Okay. Well, that's close to [Riverview]. But you go to school in [Riverview]. I'm sure you probably spend a lot of time in [Riverview]. Okay. So tell me about [Riverview]. What's good about [Riverview], if anything?

Paris: Nothing. It's bad in [Riverview].

Natalie: It's bad? What's so bad about [Riverview]?

Paris: Well, people get shot, and some – well, there's this man that we knew and he shot my brother (ND: Oh no) ...In the leg.

¹¹² Related to their city of residence, namely, Riverview.

While many JHF students struggled to express positive descriptors of the city, like Paris, children readily identified problems and voiced their concerns. Most always, these concerns were in relation to local violence and crime. “Too much killing”, Dante conveyed, “Yeah, and too much people going fast on our street....People kidnapping. All the danger stuff, all the stuff that’s in danger”. Similarly, Malia voices concerns about “danger stuff” close to home, “That people steal...people be shooting, killing people...next door, they broke into they house. That's all I know”. These are issues that carry emotional weight and prompt worry about one’s well-being. As Brittany shares, “I'm worried about my family...Because there's too many bad people.-- some people just kill people and rob people and stuff.. I don't want people to mess around and kill my parents and stuff.

Though Hope students’ conceptions of city problems were often evidenced by their own experiences and first-hand observations, the news was often cited as a resource for information. Kevin discusses the threat of violence in Riverview, this time drawing upon personal narratives and stories presented on the local news. “There's people shooting each other....Shooting each other and people getting killed for no apparent reason. And like, on the news today, like, a child – I don't know, but he got shot and he got – and he died”. Kevin has first-hand knowledge of the fragility of life in his own neighborhood: “it was a little time ago when I was coming from school—and somebody got shot...they lived right down the street from us and they was laying right there”. Even as JHF children represent a range of neighborhoods in the city, they share complimentary stories about violence in the city. Next consider the following exchange between Chase and I, wherein Chase offers an impression influenced by the news:

Natalie: ...Are there any problems in the Riverview community?

Chase: A lot...Well, on the news I see a lot of people every day getting killed and stuff like that, or getting robbed or something...Yeah, I saw this one news, I think it was – it was either that or it's a different gas station that my daddy know, but this one lady, there was a couple of guys in a car, and she pulled a gun from under her skirt, and then she was trying to shoot somebody, and then she shot the driver that was driving the other car.

Natalie: They caught her on video?

Chase: Yeah.

Natalie: Yeah, I saw that. What did you think about that?

Chase: I think that she's a psycho.

Chase highlights that the media outlets, with stories corroborated by his father, have informed his impression of Riverview as violent. Even Andre, though he admits to only having personal experience in neighborhoods perceived as being safe, had this to say about Riverview:

Andre: Some places of [Riverview] is bad...They rob and kill other people.

Natalie: Have you been in any areas that you felt like were bad areas?

Andre: No.

Natalie: No? Okay. So what makes you think that there are bad areas?

Andre: There's bad things on the news.

The narratives of Riverview perpetuated by the news are largely accepted by JHF students, regardless of whether or not the stories presented are representative of their own experiences. Generally, children describe their local context outside of school as

dangerous¹¹³, populated by “bad” people in “bad areas”. These bad people on the news and in the streets, given the demographics of Riverview, are most always African American. Consequently, there is also evidence to suggest that JHF children may associate Blackness with a heightened inclination towards violent, immoral and/or deviant behavior. The following exchange between Katelyn and I speaks to this association:

Katelyn: I think some [Black people] die in jail, because some be doing bad things, like peeing on buildings, killing people, killing kids, because on the news they said a black person killed a two year old child, and two grandparents was like, questioned because a little girl died, because they had a gun under their pillow, and the little girl found it and she just pulled the trigger, she didn't know what it was or anything. That's why they – I think if they don't go to jail, I don't even know – but I think some is on death row.

Natalie: Hmm. Do you think that black people commit crimes more than other people?

Katelyn: Mhm.

ND: What makes you think that?

Katelyn: Because most of the time I watch the news, all I see is black people killing other black people, or killing other people and stuff.

Curiously, even as Katelyn contemplates the specific¹¹⁴ case of the toddler’s death while in their grandparents’ care as a possible accident, Katelyn maintains her stance on Black criminality. Katelyn articulates a conception of Black people being incarcerated at high

¹¹³ The fear of danger to students’ physical bodies was previously discussed in Chapter 4. Still, it is worth reiterating that JHF students recognize the steps taken by the school staff to ensure that the (bad) from the outside community does not enter into the building. E.g. “I learned at this school is to not open the door for people that you don't know ...Because they could be a stranger and they could come in the school with an inappropriate” (Andrew)

¹¹⁴ tragic

rates, and for serious crimes (warranting, in some cases, death sentences) of which they are in fact guilty. Katelyn, like many of her peers, takes for granted the objectivity of the news outlets and criminal justice system. This tendency to accept these stories as truth may be expected given her age. Still, in doing so, Katelyn frames the phenomena of Black/mass incarceration as propagated exclusively by the “bad things” done by Black people. This is echoed by Andrew, who describes the hardships experienced by Black people as the occurring when they, individually, “do bad things” like stealing and lying.

Malia, Dante and Chase offer similar summations regarding Black people as increasingly volatile due to their individual behaviors and dispositions. Malia discusses a specific and raced example: “they just might get mad at the white person if they called them Black...then they just want to fight them, then they go to jail...Then they end up going to jail”. Later, she adds, “There's more Black people that get in trouble....there's more Black people on TV that get in trouble. I see it every day....some people are good, some people are bad”. Dante expresses a complimentary perspective, “they get in trouble too a lot and like they go to jail or something... like they [Blacks] didn't get all the degrees and all of that”. In both of these instances, students privilege the position of the individual while minimizing the salience of other contributing factors. In Malia’s account¹¹⁵, she does not express that the white person’s intent to disparage the Black person as particularly threatening, loaded, or problematic given the outcome. She frames this as a simple matter of one person’s lapse in resolve when tested by the words/intent of another. Likewise, Dante acknowledges a possible relationship between degree

¹¹⁵ There were other instances where students portrayed Black people as ghetto/ uncouth, lacking in temperance and/or as overreacting, even when being accosted and/or not the initiator of conflict.

attainment and criminal acts, but does so in a way that places emphasis on what those in jail did or didn't get (i.e. degrees). Finally, consider this exchange between Chase and me, where he acknowledges the possibility that the news may be biased in their portrayal of African Americans:

Chase: Like, say a white person could shoot a black person or a black person could shoot a white person. It ain't nothing new because it don't matter if the white people don't get – it don't matter if you think the black people just causing all the problems, it can be white people, too.

Natalie: Mhm. What do you mean it don't matter if you think that the black people are causing all the problems? Do you think people think that, that the black people are causing all the problems?

Chase: Mhm. Because mainly I see a lot of black people on TV, mainly. That's it. I don't see that many whites...

Natalie: Yeah. What do you think about that?

Chase: I think that whatever they're doing, they should quit.

In this segment of the interview, Chase dismisses the notion of racial bias as less consequential. And, though he recognizes that Black people are disproportionately represented as criminals, he defaults to a generalized admonition towards the individual. To be clear, I am not suggesting that these children are wrong or irrational in their critiques of those convicted of crimes, no matter the race. I also stress that given the age of these participants, I understand their articulations as insight into where they are now, not who they will always be. My intent here is to demonstrate how JHF students' conceive of the immediacy of crime/violence, as well as their tendencies towards framing these things, exclusively, as the result of individual (often Black) deviance.

A Note on Innocence – Politics, Police and Student’s Faith in Leaders

It is worth noting that part of what allows children here to reconcile and accept negative constructions of Black people as unlawful, is their trust in leaders and law enforcement. Simply put, children are inclined to respect and trust those who ought to be respectable and trustworthy. Several Hope students aspire to be police officers and/or know others who occupy these roles. When I asked children to identify leaders in Riverview, most of them named the mayor and law enforcement officers. And, when I asked them whether or not they thought the leaders in Riverview that they named were doing a good job, most often they replied in the affirmative. Here, I offer some examples of how students’ belief in leadership and orientation towards deference were animated. With respect to the issue of community violence, Paris insists that the problem could be ameliorated if more residents in Riverview just called the police. She explains here:

Paris: By calling the police. (laughs)

Natalie: Okay. So do you think people don't call the police now?

Paris: Some people do.

Natalie: Mhm. But not everyone?

Paris: No...Because they – some people solve it theirselves.

It’s true that people in Riverview, at times, may opt to solve issues on their own and without police interference. There are many motivating factors, some less prudent to this discussion. Still, in my experience and observation, the relationship between city residents and the police is more complicated than Paris presumes. In Riverview and many Black communities, people have grown distrustful of law enforcement. Even more relevant at a practical level, is that Riverview residents are often doubtful that the police

will even respond to calls for help in a timely manner¹¹⁶. But Paris and peers, do not voice an impression of the local police as unreliable or problematic. As Andre puts it, “They take care of it...Make sure there's no trouble”. Likewise, Brittany adds that the police are doing a good job overall, “By arresting people first and by, like, taking care of [sick] people”. Finally, Chase characterizes police as all working tirelessly, “they’re working, working, working, working...the only time they get a break is their lunch break or when work is over”.

A complimentary, also favorable impression is evident in reference to the city’s mayor. Consider the following responses from Dante:

Natalie: What about the mayor, [redacted], is he doing a good job?

Dante: Yeah...Because he is doing it, a lot of stuff to the kids in [Riverview].

Natalie: Like what?

Dante: Like toys and backpacks and school supplies.

Dante sees that mayor as one who has been generous in his support of children through charitable donation. These initiatives that provide backpacks and supplies to kids in the city predate the current mayor, though Dante sees these programs as representative of the mayor’s efficacy. Katelyn offers her support of the mayor with the opinion that, “they try to do their best, and they – they want to get done by 2017”. Here, Katelyn is referring to attending to the road quality, which most JHF students note as an issue in the city.

According to an interview she saw on TV, Katelyn surmised that local leadership is

¹¹⁶ This is one instance (of many) where my background and positioning as a Riverview native resonates as informing my interpretive frame.

working diligently, "...to get it finished so the communities can get better now, and they can just go help people – other people, like in Flint or in Texas or something".

Even as JHF students demonstrate what Kevin vocalizes, "I don't really know what the mayor do"¹¹⁷ or as Angelique confesses, "I don't really pay attention too much about the mayor", they are still inclined to assume their ethics, competency and loyalty. My stance, is that these beliefs also lend itself to a more individualistic orientation towards change. As representatives of systems and appointed arbiters of justice, leaders like the police and the mayor *should* be demonstrating effectiveness and the higher moral character. And, if students imagine that this is in fact the case, it must be others (i.e. civilians, laypersons) who are consistently falling short of the ideal.

***"I see it everywhere"*¹¹⁸- Manifestations of Poverty in the City**

John Hope students are not only concerned with the threat of violence and crime. Evident across student responses, was attention to manifestations of poverty- homelessness, joblessness and the crumbling physical infrastructure of the city. All around them they see signs and reminders of instability. Though students rarely invoked the words "poor" or "poverty", they consistently discussed social conditions indicative of limited fiscal resources. Whereas Angelique (above, in the section on violence) focuses on the creation of jobs and opportunities for development, Emery reflects here on the conditions of the present. "There's a lot (of problems)", Emery expressed. She elaborates,

¹¹⁷ Malia's accurate response to my question about who the mayor is, where she notes a gendered pattern: "I forgot who--I know it got to be a boy...Because we never even had a girl president. I think it's really all boys"

¹¹⁸ Child Andre, Interview

“It's a lot of vacant houses and a lot of vacant schools, bumpy roads... A lot of people don't have a lot of jobs in [Riverview]?” I note that her phrasing frames the issue of jobs as a condition of people, as opposed to an economic problem (i.e. job availability, industry capacity). In fact, Emery later goes on to communicate the idea that people bring about joblessness when they drop out of school. Still, Emery's statement summarizes interrelated concerns seen and lived by JHF students. Katelyn elaborates on the issue of abandoned homes and buildings in the city, with some attention to the emotive response their presence evokes:

Well, sometimes I get sad when I see them, because it just – it – when I see abandoned houses, I picture in my head there used to be a family there, or when I see abandoned buildings, I picture in my head there used to be a little – it used to be a little business going on. But now the buildings and houses just destroyed – some was demolished. And where my auntie lives – I saw an abandoned house getting demolished. And every time we went by – we went to the skating rink by there – I used to see a family that was moving out. Then like now – that used to be like, in 2013 or something. But now I saw it getting demolished, and then it just fall to the ground.

Evident in this articulation, Katelyn sees blight and makes empathetic, human connections. The homes and buildings become more than just structures devoid of life and meaning; they are seen as places where Riverside families once dwelled of frequented. Upon further prompting, Katelyn confirmed that vacant homes are prevalent in the city. “Maybe it was something wrong with them, maybe it was just in there so long that it started to grow mold in there and different types of bugs just went in there”, Katelyn considers. Her rationale contrasts with her initial discussion of the issue.

Whereas her first expression foregrounds people interacting socially, her subsequent explanation attributed the problem to faulty materials *disassociated* from people who monitor and maintain them. Andre frames the related issue of burned down houses similarly i.e. disconnected from human phenomena like poverty¹¹⁹. “I see it everywhere”, Andre explains in reference to burnt homes in Riverview. When I asked him how all of these cases came to be, Andre replied straightforwardly, “There was fires”.

The following exchange between Malia and I introduces an association between city poverty and the crime discussed in the previous section.

Malia: People keep stealing and people keep going to jail back and forth...People keep just getting in trouble...Like, some people – let's say they're homeless. They always – like, some people that's homeless steal – steal food and stuff.

Natalie: What do you think about that?

Malia: It's because they're homeless.

Natalie: It's because they're homeless?

Malia: Yeah. They don't have anything, and so they steal clothes just to – stuff that they don't need –But –

Natalie: But what?

Malia: They can go to church, though.

Natalie: How would that – would that help?

¹¹⁹ Or even crime/arson for that matter. Though I maintain that these analyses of problems are consistent with Hope students' tendency towards the pragmatic and individual, I recognize that student's histories of participation and developmental level are also relevant here. As an adult with intimate knowledge of Riverview, I am aware of the fact that petty arson was once regarded as a huge problem in the city. But I am also aware, along with other Riverview natives, that the recession, blight (+ lack of response from city officials), back-tax conundrums, homelessness/residents “squatting” in abandoned homes, and general economic downturn in the city have also prompted residents to “take matters into their own hands” and burn down edifices thought to be hazardous or problematic.

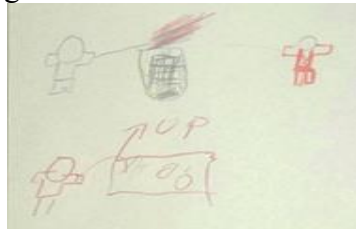
Malia: ..Well, it will help them--Because you could get blessings--the blessing oil.

When Malia begins, I thought that she might be noting a link between poverty and crime i.e. how the cycle of poverty may place people in compromising situations. But her observation quickly shifts to a critique as she conveys that homeless people “steal stuff they don’t need”. Malia then proposes that these people, presumably those who are homeless and stealing *just because*, go to church to receive “blessings”. Though her intent is positive, blessings in this instance are not tangible goods or services that would immediately ameliorate the condition of homelessness. What Malia is proposing is more akin to prayer, an anointing and perhaps, a rededication to God to be undertaken by one person. Even as I acknowledge Malia’s implied belief in the transformative power of faith and the spirit and will of a higher power, absent here is a consideration (or critique) of big systems. Kevin and Emery, in their discussions of homelessness in Riverview, also attributes the problem to individual shortcomings. “[T]hey probably dropped out of school and didn’t listen to their parents”, Emery conveys. Similarly, Kevin concludes that people on the street, “didn’t graduate...or didn’t go to college” as the only relevant factors. Interestingly, Kevin’s “race” drawing (pictured below) shows that he also associates homelessness with Blackness in a general sense, though it is unclear if this is strictly a consequence of his experiences in the predominately African American city of Riverview. Kevin depicts a number of individuals, all without homes and all African American, gathering by a fire. In his debriefing, he makes several references to Black people needing to be “grateful”¹²⁰. Though his drawing is the only one that depicts Black

¹²⁰ Grateful for the help and generosity of others. He then goes on to share a story about when his grandmother offered food to a homeless, Black man. When the gesture was refused, Kevin saw this as rude and ungrateful.

people in this regard, other students offer complimentary raced articulations that suggest a relationship between gratitude and the African American struggle. Students often express relief and gratitude now that the struggle is over and Black people are no longer enslaved. Next, I explore John Hope students' understandings of Black "struggles" both in the past and present era.

Figure 6.1: Kevin's Drawing



Kevin's Drawing

Black Problems as “People” Problems, Racism as Distal, Dissipating and Idiosyncratic

In the preceding sections on local violence and poverty, I discuss some of the ways that race enters into children's articulations around constraint at the community level. But are these salient issues, by virtue of the demographics of Riverview, regarded as *Black* issues? Or, are these universal problems distributed proportionally irrespective of race? Children at John Hope Franklin School of Excellence, when asked explicitly to discuss problems specific to Black people, by and large did not distinguish “black” problems from individual “people” problems. Consistent with the focus on individual deficiencies as exclusively producing crime and poverty evident in the afore-specified analyses, Hope students deemphasize collective, systemic racialized constraints in favor of individual agency and merit. Malia articulates that skin color doesn't matter because “these days people can get jobs”. As Brittany conveyed, Black people just have to worry about “themselves...make sure they don't get caught up in it”. I provide two illustrations

that evidence this worldview. What is most compelling about these examples, is that even as students provide commentary on issues that have powerful, specific racial undercurrents, they do not explore racism as directly relevant to their assessment(s) of the problem.

Consider this exchange between Heaven and me wherein she explained why some Black people experience hardships:

Heaven: Just people that don't have a good education... – they had to learn from the streets, basically.

Natalie: They had to learn from the streets? Would that be true for like, an Asian person or a white person, too, if they didn't have an education?

Heaven: I would say for a white person, probably, yeah.

Natalie: Okay. And what about for an Asian person?

Heaven: I don't think so. I don't think so.

Natalie: Okay. Why do you think for a white person, yes, but not for an Asian person?

Heaven: Because – because they kind of like – they kind of like the same, basically.

Like, in movies, they act like they're like black people and –

Natalie: Who acts like black people?

Heaven: Well, white people like, had – didn't – what was the movie – I don't know what it was called, but there was a man that didn't have a good life, and he used to always go to his – he would always walk out the house and go places and learn, and what people – what people do, and it affected his life....It was a white person. I'm saying that he – the person – the person was acting like the black person. I was talking about the effect that education – effect on their life in the streets.

Heaven suggests that Black people who may not have a “good education” fall into the ways of the streets. But, in her recounting of a movie, Heaven suggests that white people who experience hardships bring this about as they mimic the street behaviors of Black people. Heaven’s expressions do not disrupt the negative stereotype of African Americans as thugs, or as her peers comment, as “ghetto”. Moreover, even though her mention of education could be read as referring to a larger issue of access, her other responses make clear that she is most focused on how students apply themselves and take advantage of perceived educational resources.

In the excerpt from Chase below, he shares an anecdote about Freddie Gray, who died in the backseat of a police cruiser from a broken neck. Many regarded his case as a race driven slaying not disassociated from recent cases¹²¹ of police brutality garnering national attention.

Chase: That remind me of what the cops did to that man – they put a man in handcuffs because he did something bad or something, and everybody else was strapped in, and he was not strapped in, and they was driving real fast, hitting corners, hitting the brakes real hard and fast. Yeah. They hit the – well, the one corner they hit the brakes on, and they hit the brakes hard, and they was speeding around corners – yeah, and they speed around this one corner and the guy hit his neck on the seat or something and broke it.

[...]

Natalie: Okay. So when you mentioned the problem about the – the guy not being strapped in, do you think that that had anything to do with that man's skin color?

¹²¹ e.g. Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri

Chase: No...But what I was thinking when I realized that – he probably did something really, really badder than anything that they didn't – that they didn't want to strap him in, and they was – they was just trying to hurt him but not kill him. ...

Chase does state that the police were wrong and should have arrested Gray instead of inflicting violence. He also critiques the protesters for Gray that were, “taking stuff and hitting the police cars and stuff with it... Because when they swinging at the cars, mainly what they're doing is putting their self in trouble as well”. Still, Chase does not see this instance as an indication of racism. He, like his peers, are of the mind that racism is distant--a relic of the past, something far away only upheld by a few prejudiced individuals. Accordingly, John Hope students see racial inequality as virtually inconsequential to their everyday lives, so much so that they find it imprudent to even speak of race/racial differences.

Andrew shared with me his insights on the persistence and proximity of racism in the exchange below:

Andrew: There's no more like, racists.

Natalie: No more racists?

Andrew: But sometimes there is...There's no more slavery, yeah, and there's no more them signs and stuff...What I mean is it's not no more – it's not no more slavery. That's all I meant.

Natalie: Yeah. But then you said but sometimes there still is.

Andrew: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, but – yeah, there's not no more slavery, but sometimes people in other states could still hate white – I mean, black people.

His words highlight the two important points. First, he renounces the persistence of racism on the basis of the abolishment of slavery and absence of prejudiced “signs and

stuff”, likely referring to Jim Crow legalized segregation. Andrew reduces racism to a few legalized, albeit significant, aspects. Second, Andrew revises his previous assertion but still in a manner that establishes distance from the phenomenon. Andrew imagines that other states may still have people who actively hate Blacks. Again, he reduces racism to an interpersonal issue less relevant to him and the people of Riverview.

Other children’s accounts of racism coincide with Andrew’s stance that “There’s no more racists” on the basis of historical shifts and victories. When I asked Brittany if she thought that Black people might have different problems than others she replied: “they don’t – because they’re not – they’re not slaves no more, they have equal rights”. Brittany defines equality rather crudely here, as if freedom from enslavement is the only precondition for realized equal rights. Katelyn echoes this sentiment, introducing the determination of the Jim Crow laws as constitutional as another indicator of the fall of racism:

Well, I think since we're not under the Jim Crow law anymore, that we can actually express ourselves more, and we can do what other – like, other people that's different colors can do, because we're not under slavery anymore. And some people are still racist, but most of them are not.

Katelyn is correct in her assessment that the termination of this overtly discriminatory set of laws opened up new and legal possibilities for African Americans. But the conclusion that “most of them” are no longer racist because of a jurisdictional change is debatable. With this optimistic articulation, Katelyn also distances herself from the possibility of encountering racism, provided that she steers clear of the small subset of people who still uphold racist ideologies.

When Hope students discuss racism against Black people, it is most always “back in the day”¹²² or occurring in another state (or region i.e. the South). “Sometimes white people call black people n word and threaten and spit on us...but that doesn’t really happen no more”, Angelique asserts, framing racist acts as dissipating and infrequent. Consider Emery’s words excerpted below:

Natalie: Are there any problems that you think black people face more than other people?

Emery: Yeah. ..Like, if you try to get on a bus, they probably going to send you back-- back, like, or give up they seat...Probably can't eat in a certain restaurant...Like, some black people, they can't drink out the same water fountain as the other people do.

Natalie: Mhm. You think that's true today? I know that used to happen during the civil rights in the '60s and '50s, '40s, during the Jim Crow Era. But what about today? Do you think that black people still have--

Emery: No

When I asked Emery that initial question, I was prompting her to discuss issues that Black people face in the present. Given her response, it occurred to me that she was articulating problems of the past, which she then confirms in her final utterance. Heaven similarly defaults to anecdotes of the past when asked about the present: “It's not fair. Like, Martin¹²³ – when Martin was a kid, was little, he had a white friend, but when he came over, he didn't get to play with him no more”. Later, I try to elicit Emery’s opinion on contemporary racialized constraints. When I asked her if there were any circumstances wherein Black people might face additional challenges due to their race, Emery offers the following:

¹²² Malia, in an interview

¹²³ Martin Luther King Jr.

If you don't – if you live in a place where there's a lot of black people, or if your family got only black people, and then only white or Caucasian people live in there, you will have a hard time...because they probably don't like black people because they've been in a white or Caucasian neighborhood for a long time..

To Emery, Black people living in predominately-white settings have a harder time due to the possibility of the white people being biased against African Americans. This concern about racist, “mean people”¹²⁴, would be less pertinent to the Riverview context, given the demographics of the city. With this logic, racism isn't everywhere. Rather, it is context specific and avoidable. Brittany confirms that one's physical location matters as she speculates that racism happens in “Nashville” evidenced by a story she heard of a Black person being “bullied” in Tennessee. As a consequence, Brittany determined that she would not travel to Nashville.

Finally, Hope students' distancing from racism as salient is evident via their reluctance to even specify race as a descriptive category. Take this example from Malia:

Malia:..one time I did something really mean.

Natalie: What did you do?

Malia: When Mrs. [Gerald] was talking – I think Mrs. [Taylor] or Mrs. [Gerald] was talking about race, and I looked at [Katherine, the only white student]...Because she is white.

Natalie: Why did you think that was mean, to just look at her? Were you making faces at her?

Malia: I was just looking at her because Mrs. [Gerald] said the word white.

¹²⁴ When I asked Malia what it means for a person to be racist, she replied “to be mean”. As discussed elsewhere, she reflects here the tendency away from racism as a means of withholding power, rights and/or resources.

Natalie: Oh, you think it's mean to say that people are white? If somebody said that you were black, would that seem mean to you? Huh?

Malia: Mhm.

Malia, though she claims no mal intent, feels remorseful for even acknowledging another student in the class as white. Similarly, child Kevin shares, "--I said a white person, then my cousin said don't say that, because that's racist". When I asked if Kevin agreed with his cousin he replied in the affirmative. Relatedly, Andrew suggests that JHF's designation as an African-centered school may also be racist because it was designed with Black people in mind. "It's like, a racist thing—Because--I was going to say that like, it's only for black people... Because it says it's a black-centered". Here, merely speaking of race or catering to the needs of a particular racial group is likened to racism.

If this is the society that they imagine as young people and residents of Riverview, the question arises of how they describe and situate self in the midst of these circumstances. Though Riverview is a majority-Black city often associated with racial inequality, discussions of contemporary racial constraints are virtually absent from students' discussions of local problems. Generally, children do not frame the problems that they see as rooted in racial inequalities or connected to Black persons histories of oppression. In thinking about the role of individuals raced Black in a city where the threat of criminality and poverty are the most salient concerns--children default towards putting faith in the individual. And, as I discuss later, how they envision their own agency is shaped by these understandings of how one can best survive and thrive in the world they imagine.

Do you see what I see?: Describing and Positioning (Black & Future) Selves

“...we felt like if they really knew who they were – where they came from, it does change a child’s attitude, esteem, hope and everything. And feeling like they can accomplish and do anything. I see too many kids and I’m not just – you know, that feel intimidated by this world and intimidated by white people, feel inferior. And so you’re trying to undo that myth of black inferiority on children by instilling in them their history, their culture.....but that’s one of the things that we could pride ourselves on, that sense of community in the school...And we were very organized and orderly– after we got through the first few years of getting rid of the troublemakers, we had a pretty peaceful school, so that culture and climate was ideal, you know” (Mrs. Brown, AP)

Even in the midst of a city described as rife with challenges, students at John Hope Franklin see great promise in themselves. Though they do not exhibit signs of internalizing notions of their own inferiority, these understandings may not apply to Black persons in a collective sense. In their demonstrated confidence, high aspirations and positive self-perceptions, JHF children embody the hopes expressed by Mrs. Brown (above). With the exception of Andre and two students who weren’t yet certain, Hope students articulated strong desires to be doctors, lawyers, architects, teachers, writers, scientists and police officers, all jobs associated with moderate to high social status. Dante, a budding scientist, had this to say about his prestigious future work, “Like I want to be a famous scientist and that anybody can go to me to do this and do that and be like, "Where's the cure for this?" I'd would be like, "Here, here you go." Unmoved by the prospect of obstacles, Hope children seem well aware that actualizing their professional dreams would require immense time and effort. Katelyn, with particularly ambitious goals, described her interest in becoming a lawyer, doctor *and* a teacher. Unflustered by

my follow-up questions, Katelyn shared, “you have to have many years of college and school to get to know what you going to do as you begin becoming those things”.

Just as children speak of high aspirations with enthusiasm, they also speak highly of themselves as individuals. When I asked students to describe themselves, they offered combinations of the adjectives “smart”, “beautiful”, “talented”, “friendly”, and “nice”. And it became evident through their illustrations that these characteristics also apply when thinking about themselves as Black people. As an entrée into a discussion of agency, I first show how students’ representations of Blackness demonstrate their positive self-concept. Further, even in cases where children depict images related to Blackness that do not include themselves (symbolic or historic), they show African Americans as strong and/or victorious. The drawings from students underscore JHF students’ sense of individual agency and distal conceptions of racism. Armed with these perceptions, children envision agency to enact change in individualistic, non-confrontational and highly pragmatic ways.

For many John Hope children, Blackness is embodied by their positive, lived realities as Black people. When students were asked, “what does being Black/African American mean to you”, students offered self-portraits that depicted them as happy and confident in their own skin.

Figure 6.2: Cluster- JHF Skin I'm In



In the top two illustrations by Emery and Kayla, Blackness means simply being who they are as individuals. Both Kayla and Emery depict themselves “just standing there”, as Emery explains, smiling and happy. Chase and Andre also express a positive sentiment, drawing themselves actively engaging in play. Chase tosses a football around, noting that he associates “fun” and “friendliness” with being Black. Across this cluster of drawings, students convey Blackness through their own personal experiences. Though Chase and Andre draw themselves participating socially through play, they remain the primary referent and focus of these drawings. The African American descriptor becomes one not essential to the drawing. It is, in effect, just who they are.

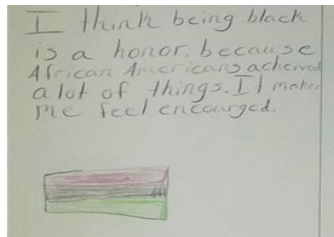
Angelique and Katelyn draw celebratory pictures with explicit African American cultural symbols and/or references. Consequently, both of their drawings work to celebrate heritage. Angelique honors what she understands as “Black hair”, and

represents this feature on her mom, sister and self. She describes her illustration thusly, with great enthusiasm:

You know, we have nappy hair and I like nappy hair, and drums, I like to play the drums. I just — Africans play drums. And I like the color of my skin. It's the color brown. I like this type of brown. And the sun, when it — the sun starts to shine we turn tan, and when we turn tan, it's like, a little different color, but I still like the color of my skin. ..I'm touching my hair...Because I like how it feel, it nappy and soft. And this is my mom, and she touching her skin because the sun made her skin tan. And--this is my sister playing the drums.

Clearly, Angelique has a positive response to the natural aesthetics and versatility of her “nappy hair” and skin complexion. She depicts her own image as one that is beautiful, and includes the drums as an aspect of her culture that she particularly enjoys. Katelyn’s drawing is perhaps more symbolic but similarly celebratory. Katelyn makes references to the legacy and achievements of African American people. She includes the African American flag, which carries cultural meaning of solidarity and history. And finally, Katelyn articulates that it is an “honor” to be African American. These drawings demonstrate student pride as it relates to aspects of the Black experience. It is also interesting how these student pictures contain images/items encountered at Hope school, underscoring the salience of school rituals and visual signs.

Figure 6.3: Cluster- Black Pride



Katelyn



Angelique

Hope students also position Black people in their drawings as agentic, most often depicting a moment of triumph in the past. From these illustrations, it is evident that children are aware of the ways in which African Americans have met and overcome racial adversity. But, the fact that these drawings reference past feats, does further imply that these types of struggles are bounded by time. Thusly, these drawings triangulate my previously discussed race-distal claim. Heaven's drawing of herself, is the exception here. While it looks quite similar to the "just who I am" group above, her explanation is justification for placing her in this category. "They were treated wrong....I'm happy that I didn't grow up in slavery", Heaven explains. Consequently, she draws herself as exuding this happiness and relief. Dante's drawing is historical fiction. He imagines two Black persons escaping the "storm" of slavery. Malia transports us to the Civil Rights Movement. She depicts trailblazer Maya Angelou marching in celebration with Martin Luther King Jr. In Malia's drawing, Maya is not actively engaged in the fight for freedom. With the U.S. flag in tote, Maya is cheering in acknowledgement of a perceived victory.

Figure 6.4: Cluster- African American's as Agentic



Dante



Malia



Heaven



Brittany

Brittany's debrief of her drawing is worth quoting at length:

Brittany: It says, "I'm Black. How do you like it?"

Natalie: Who is she talking to?

Brittany: The White folks.... And the White person is saying -- the White person is kind of mean to the Black. Racist....I'm smiling.

Natalie: You're smiling. Okay. And then it says, "I'm going to -- " what's this? Oh, " -- kill you. I'm going to kill you." And then the Black person is saying, "Let slavery go."

Okay. Can you tell me why you chose to draw this?

Brittany: I chose to draw it because I seen some African-American movies and I saw how White people back in the day treated Black people... And I saw Ruby

Bridges...Ruby Bridges tried to go in the White people school

As evidenced in the exchange, Brittany draws herself looking back in time. Interestingly, though the figure in the picture references slavery, Brittany also indicates that the drawing is inspired by the Ruby Bridges film set decades after the legal abolishment of slavery. Both, according to Brittany, are instances where "white people back in the day" treated Black people with hatred and prejudice. Yet, Brittany looks in on this with a smile. Though I neglected to confirm why she was smiling, it is unlikely that she would be doing so in affirmation of the white person issuing the threat. What is more probable,

is that Brittany is marveled by the boldness of the African American figure who is presented as standing strong and exercising agency in opposition to the racist individual.

***“Because I don’t wanna be like that when I get older and I don’t want others to be like that”*: Black Child Agency via Three Approaches**

Natalie : Do you think that they have it harder here because they’re Black?

Dante: Some.

Natalie: Can you tell me about that?

Dante: ‘Cause they are not finishing school and you know when you don’t finish school you don’t get a job. And when you don’t get a job you gonna be homeless. So that equals up to like a part of being --not getting a job because there was this woman that couldn’t even go in the store...[s]he’ll be at the store all the time. [S]He ask to pump people’s gas and all that and that’s really, really sad...Because I don’t wanna be like that when I get older and I don’t want others to be like that.

The conversation with Dante excerpted above, reminds us once more of the threat of poverty felt by the Black children at JHF. Equally as important, is his attribution of homelessness/panhandling to this woman’s presumed failure to complete school. With this response, Dante (again) suggests that when Black people experience hardships like joblessness, it is due to their own shortcomings. What I want to focus on here is Dante’s last statement “I don’t wanna be like that when I get older and I don’t want others to be like that”, as a window into his own agency. What would it then require from students to engage, circumvent and/or navigate the constraints they see as most relevant to their lives¹²⁵? What types of dispositions and actions are required? In my findings, it is evident

¹²⁵ And those around them

that Hope students express their agency in three substantive ways. First, as individual agents, students set boundaries to define their locus of control and are pragmatic in thinking about their role in attending to social issues faced by Riverview citizens. Relatedly, in pursuit of upward mobility, they envision using their future professional work as a means of service and impact. Next, because they generally regard opportunities as fairly distributed, children express political ideologies that are acquiescent and deferential towards local (and formal) leadership. Finally, as social agents, JHF children focus on modeling and services that benefit individuals in their immediate context. I discuss all of these approaches in turn.

Keep to yourself, worry about yourself, work hard- Agency as Pragmatic

In Chapter 4, I quoted Heaven’s advisement to “stay in your place...and don’t worry about nobody else...because you can get caught up—caught up in somebody else’s business”. When I asked about her whether or not she could make her community better now or in the future, Heaven later had this to say, “No...basically. I got to – I have to learn how to do my own stuff first before I help other people”. John Hope students often made these types of statements in support of forms of agency that they perceive to be reasonable under the circumstances. In Heaven’s case, she assesses her own current capacity and determines that her own learning and development is a prerequisite for service to others. Paris, references limited monetary resources as a barrier to her making the world a better place for Black people, “I don’t have enough money...They’re going to want a lot of money”, she explains. Because Paris doesn’t feel that she would have enough money to make an impact, she withdraws from the effort all together. Other

times, students demonstrate discernment and pragmatism by determining that it would be improper to attempt to influence others. The following exchange with Andre illustrates this dynamic:

Natalie: Do you think you could make the world a better place?

Andre: No.

Natalie: Why not?

Andre: Because some places have kings...and queens.

Natalie: So what does having kings or queens have to do with you being able to make a difference?

Andre: I can't rule them.

Because Andre has not been designated as a ruler in a formal capacity, he surmises that would be less prudent for him to try to effect change at scale. Dante similarly replies in the negative when posed with a question about making his country better. "I can't tell nobody what to do because I'm not nobodies mother or dad or somebody that helps them get along in the world. I can't do that". Herein, Dante also conveys a desire to "stay in his place" and respect the boundaries of others. Finally, Kevin's articulations serve as evidence of another form of discernment impacting students' conceptions of agency—effort/risk and reward. Just as Heaven expressed concern for getting "caught up", Kevin provides another rationale for why acts of service may not be worth it. When I asked Kevin if he there was anything that he thought he could do to make things better for Black people, this was his reply: No-...because some people don't be grateful--my grandma bought somebody – a black person something, but they said they didn't want it, and plus they was homeless, but they was ungrateful". According to Kevin, some

attempts to help others go unrecognized. This may be reason to not focus one's energy on these types of acts.

So, if JHF students feel limited in their ability to make an impact at a larger scale, what is it that they can do? My understanding is that the children focus inwardly, committing to hard work, a disciplined life and making the "right" choices on an individual level. Once they complete school and obtain a job of high status, they envision that they will then be well positioned to contribute. Katelyn's words resonate here:

Natalie: Are there things that you think you can do to help in your community, either now or when you get older?

Katelyn: When I get older, because I feel like some little kids can't do as much because they're not grown yet and they're not done with school yet.

Natalie: Mhm. Okay. That's fair. But what about when you get older?

Katelyn: When I get older I think I can like, make a difference, like some people did.

Natalie: What do you mean, like some people did?

Katelyn: Well, I think I can make a difference like – like, doctors that find cures and stuff.

Though Katelyn sees children as having limited potential to enact change, with adulthood comes additional opportunities to make a difference. In her future role as a doctor, Katelyn envisions that she could contribute through medical advancements. Notice that the potential that Katelyn references is directly tied to her career. In this case, developing a cure, while significant and exceptional, is within the purview of her professional obligations.

Malia similarly imagines her ability to make a difference in the community as bound by professional obligations:

Malia: I think I would be able to fix the streets if I would –If I be a construction worker.

But I'm not going to be that.

Natalie: (laughs) Okay. Anything else you could do to help the community?

Malia: Let's see. I could be a police...Because police capture bad guys, but I think I would be able to find them and get good observations.

If or when Malia engages with poor physical infrastructure in the city or crime, she plans to do so through her paid job. On the topic of alleviating crime, Dante echoes Malia's sentiment: "I can sign up to be a police officer and if I notice anybody in trouble, put on the sirens, and arrest them". Dante makes this assertion rather matter-of-factly, further indicating his confidence. Across many JHF interviews, students frame consummate professionalism and dedication to their careers as a primary means of making an impact. They imagine their future jobs as places where change is possible, and look forward to the prospect of achievement in their respective fields.

***"They don't listen"*- Following Rules & Reliance on Official Leaders**

Not disconnected from the theme of pragmatism, is Hope students' intent on following rules as a means of securing their own successes and well-being. Recall Angel's comment, "When you get older you're going to need it. To learn how to pay attention and not always be free and do what you want... To follow the law--the rules...it helps you stay protected so you won't get into accidents and stuff". Similarly, Brittany and Malia assert that "bad" and unsuccessful people, "They don't listen", thusly associating compliance with virtue and achievement. Chase reiterates, "when somebody tell you to do something, you should do it and don't just do what you want". And so, JHF students express a commitment to following established rules and laws without question.

To this point, Angelique provides some additional explanation: “Well, I’m not good at making laws. Of course I obey the laws, but I’m not good at making them, or I’ll probably just learn how to do that maybe in college, but I don’t want to do it”. Angelique positions herself as someone who adheres to the laws, but does not have a desire to participate in shaping or reforming them.

With this context, it is not surprising that their imagined ways of engaging with social issues are non-confrontational and by and large not intended to disrupt current institutions or power dynamics (i.e. the status quo). Across the interviews, I would often hear children express deferential attitudes towards official leaders and reliance on these leaders for solutions to big problems. This is captured in Heaven’s comment in response to my question about who can help solve the homelessness problem, “Well, the mayor or president can – can pass money to the poor people and give them food and shelter”. Angelique also indicates that she looks to city/state officials for direction. “— people out on the street, maybe the governor could probably say help.. bring water, food, help them out, bring — make a little place for them to stay if they don’t got a home...the mayor could say clean up the area around you and fix up the houses and places”. Rather than challenge leaders, JHF students position themselves as people who can and should act in alignment with leadership.

Agency as Individual Acts of Helping

As they pursue upward mobility and impactful professional careers through hard work and rule-following, Hope students imagine attending to problems faced by individuals with acts of service directed towards those individuals in need. Their

tendency towards framing social issues as individualized and idiosyncratic bound the possibilities for addressing said issues. Often times, when I asked students about engaging with social problems in their community, with emphases on those issues relevant to African Americans as a collective, children describe things that they might do in support of one or a few Black persons in need. They privilege modeling Black capability, possibility and/or charity in ways that benefit a select few. Generally, students envision making a donation, job support or serving as a mentor/life coach. Emery explains that she would, “take care of the bills” and buy a person things that they don’t have. Angelique, in the excerpt below, describes a plan for feeding the homeless through the local Girl Scouts program:

— we have the Girl Scouts, and I wanted to ask if we could sell food and water to the homeless with Girl Scouts after school on every Tuesday. Then they have — (ND: Sell to them?)... I mean, yeah, just give it away. And somebody had asked that question, too, and she said yes, and then I wanted to ask if we could do it with homeless people, but don’t sell it because they probably don’t have no money, and just do it like, in a way where they don’t have to buy nothing

Though Angelique references leveraging the resources of an organization in pursuit of this initiative, it is a solution to a symptom and not the root causes/condition of homelessness. Also in response to the issue of homelessness, Dante offers that he could “Help them get a job...If I work at a job or I own my job, I help them on the street, give a job give um some money”. Dante describes offering support and a potential opportunity to someone currently on the street. He assumes that this help is all a person might need to get ahead. Perhaps he is right. Chase imagines support in helping a person become

adopted, “I could take them to one of the places so they could get adopted”. Chase takes for granted the accessibility and reliability of the adoption/fostering process. His concern is limited to the individual in need of a family. Importantly, the goal here is not to diminish these young people’s intent to show kindness to others, regardless of the form it takes. Still, these are examples that illustrate traditional, isolated acts of community service.

Sometimes, acts of service thought to benefit the community are focused on helping neighbors and family members. Malia describes making a contribution via care for her grandfather. “I’m very used to helping my granddad...He just had knee surgery”. Malia sees her efforts at home as indicative of her potential impact in a broader sense. She shares an anecdote wherein she massages her grandfather’s knee to relieve the pain, and talks about possibly working part-time as a massage therapist so other might benefit from this service. Finally, consider this response from Chase, wherein he shares a story of a mutually-beneficial effort to help a neighbor:

Like, me. My neighbor – like, it was snowing real bad, and I – and sometimes he'd go out and shovel his snow, but I decided I think he might not feel like doing it today, he might do it later on, so I decided to just go out, get my boots and stuff, and go out and help him and shovel the snow by myself and got paid

Chase later clarifies that his desire to help out a neighbor was not solely driven by the hopes that he would be compensated. Chase anticipated that this older resident might have a difficult time clearing away the snow, and so he believed that his efforts would be both helpful and appreciated. What Chase describes is neighborly behavior in the day-to-

day. He, like his peers, seem to understand these discreet and kind acts as the primary means by which they can enact changes within their community.

Next, I turn to discuss findings from the children Mission City School. MCS students identify many of the same social issues as their peers at JHF. Yet, their articulations of the factors contributing to these issues contrast along many dimensions, racism being one key consideration. Mission City children see themselves as obligated and capable of attending to the problems afflicting their community. As a consequence, the Black children at MCS imagine agency in ways that are empathetic and if need be, confrontational.

Chapter VII

On a Mission in the City- Black Students' Knowing (of self, community, society) and Agentic Positioning

Introduction

Recall the figured world of Mission City, where children are encouraged to be expressive and ever-engaged in the happenings of the school. Students are situated as active participants in the school community, empowered to challenge current norms and co-construct new ones. MCS draws in an eclectic group of teachers and volunteers, often with experience in the arts or political organizing. As a consequence, the school's commitments to creativity, activism and progressive pedagogies are evident and often alluded to. School leaders push back against traditional measures of achievement as the sole modicum of success and instead emphasize the embodiment of habits, of dispositions like criticality, grit and inclusiveness. The freedoms that students enjoy (i.e. recess, choice in electives, collaborative work) necessitates a substantial amount of child-child social interaction. At times, these interactions are generative and allow students' to develop positive social, cross-cultural and communal competencies. Sometimes though, conflict and disruptions impede students' progress towards instructional goals. Even as MCS affirms students' individual contributions with attention to the uniqueness and spirits of Black children, the broader school to community/society nexus is of constant concern. Children and adults voice, with resolve and intensity, their

interpretations of the school's mission and charge to solve problems and reimagine new and better conditions. This chapter mimics, in part, the structure of the previous one, this time with MCS students as the focus. Because MCS students often spoke about the intersections between local issues, social structures and/or racial prejudice, there are moments when I rework the chapter's format to accommodate analyses of these intersections. I first discuss the ways that school learning is understood as preparation for critical, purposeful engagement in society. Next, I explore how Black students at Mission City conceptualize and articulate concerns in Riverview and neighboring communities. MCS students similarly speak to the prevalence of crime, violence and manifestations of poverty in the city, though the theme of local water justice is foregrounded. I follow with a discussion of how an awareness of race/racism in a contemporary sense informs students' perceptions of issues faced by Black people in particular. Finally, I share findings that illustrate Mission City students' account of their own agency and potential, highlighting their tendency towards transformative, communal and sometimes, confrontational, action.

Finding Voice and Purpose: MCS as Preparation for a Purpose-driven Life

Teacher Jamie provides a thorough and affecting discussion of how her pedagogical hopes and commitments for her students could be realized as they transition into adulthood. Given her attention to many topics germane to this chapter, I quote Ms. Jamie at length:

I feel like, you know, the biggest thing is like that they have a voice and what they say is important, that it's like it doesn't matter where you came from or who you are, or if you

went to college or not, like you still have an important thing to do.... I want them to – their purpose not to be about going to work to make money, but going to work to make a difference. Whatever that is. I mean, that can be something so different than teaching, you know, like and so different than what I view of what I want to have. But like – and not everybody’s like that, some – but I want them to at least have some sort of purpose to their life that they’re trying to make the world a better place. And so knowing that just because they’re 15 or 16 or 12, like they can – they have ideas and they see what’s going on around them and they can come up with solutions and just because they’re from [Riverview], that doesn’t mean that like they can’t ...like that there’s any difference in them than like kids in [a white, affluent neighboring suburb], you know? I also – I mean, eventually – we’re not quite there yet but want them to understand that like– race is like a really big deal and that I don’t want them to be seen – see that they can’t do stuff or that they like – I don’t know. I want them to be empowered, I want – and I know that I can’t empower them in one year. But I want them to like have the understanding and like the foundation and the mindset that they can have agency, you know? Which I don’t know, sometimes I feel like I don’t know how well I really do that. But it’s hard. And I feel like that’s something that they’ll realize more as they get older. (Ms. Jamie)

Jamie’s comment covers extensive ground and largely coincides with MCS culture and practices¹²⁶. Accordingly, Ms. J frames school as a place where children realize (or are reminded) that there is power in their voices. Jamie hopes that students will feel that they

¹²⁶ Her explicit reference to race is unique and possibly prompted by my previous inquires about Black students in particular. MCS teachers, whether Black or white have demonstrated that they are aware of racial dynamics within the school and are generally comfortable discussing these issues amongst other adults. So, while I never observed Jamie speak to (Black) students about how they might be perceived relative to their white, suburban counterparts, I do believe that her commitments to racial equity were implicit in her practice (and likely felt by students).

have permission to pursue their interests—to pursue answers to problems. Her words, *empowerment, voice, purpose*, point to a concern for something different and perhaps more difficult to quantify. And she seems to acknowledge the challenges and ambiguity inherent in this approach. Her words suggest that she worries that we won't know if she's fully realized her ambitions until students reach adulthood.

Absent in this excerpt from Jamie, is any universal indicator of success. Her insistence that students should be, “making the world a better place” and making a “difference”, are the only criterion offered here. But the school's mission, curricular offerings, and the “Habits” forwards what making a difference entails. Such becomes evident in the articulations of students. Iris and Juliana provide illustrations that add specificity to Jamie's intent. When I asked students to talk to me about the school's mission and about the types of life lessons taught to them, Iris and Juliana offered this:

to raise children [at this school] who can look at something and say, “This is not right; I'm going to strive to change this.” Like this is something not right about this right now. And I'm going to get my friends together and we're going to brainstorm and change this. And like start changing things, like changing the community, changing how the bus system works...abandon buildings (Iris)

...what I've heard about [in school] is that [we are supposed to find] solutions to every problem. So I'm thinking so much about that and how I could be -- well, I'm already a [luminary], but how I can be a better [luminary] on how to fix things around this state and the city. (Juliana)

In both cases, children talk explicitly about school as preparation for problem solving at the local level. Juliana indicates that she's already thinking about what this type of social

engagement could look like, and how she might work on growing in her capacity to “fix things around this state and the city”. Iris, rather impassioned in her response, names issues of particular relevance to Riverview residents. She also references collective brainstorming as central to the process of change agency.

My findings show that Mission City School students are in fact motivated by the charge to transform their communities for the better. Though they sense the pervasiveness of local constraints, including but not limited to contemporary manifestations of racism, they feel efficacious in speaking out and attending to these issues at the grassroots level. Even as they pursue a range of ambitious and creative professions, MCS students endorse the school’s communal focus. As I show, they demonstrate an idealistic desire to critique and transform social conditions. In the subsequent section, I explore the precise constraints most salient to Mission City children. Furthermore, I structure responses to the following questions: *How do these Black students imagine society and the challenges faced therein? Where and when does race and/or racial inequities factor into their conceptions? And, finally, where are the possibilities?*--what can be done (by them or others) about any of this?

“...it’s just a lot of conflicts in [Riverview]”: Youth Impressions of Community Violence and Misconduct

“First, shooting. Second, killing, murdering, kidnapping and--¹²⁷“, relative to the children at JHF, Jack offers a familiar list when describing major problems in the

¹²⁷ Jack also names Governor Snyder of Flint, MI and states that “I know where he lives”. I discuss student attitudes towards leadership in a later section. It is interesting though, that Jack responded with a reference to a problem affecting people in a distant city when asked about issues in his community. As I later claim, MCS came to regard the issues of Flint/Flint water as “their” problem, even though they were shielded from the direct impacts of the crises.

Riverview community. Indeed, the children of Mission City often name community violence, conflict and non-violent criminal misconduct as salient, pressing issues. In select cases, students attribute the crimes they observe to individual choices or pathologies, albeit often in empathetic ways. But, more prominently, students' articulations show concern for how negative perceptions of Riverview residents and Black people may factor into the prevalence of crime. Returning to Jack, he continues his discussion of Riverview problems with the assertion that, "Everybody dies every day". When I later asked him if he thought that people's skin color had anything to do with the issues he noticed, Jack articulates the following:

Jack: No, because like usually, I see -- like sometimes -- well, yes. Kind of, yes, because of law in [Riverview]. It's kind of really bad.

Natalie Davis: Uh-huh. Tell me about that law.

Jack: Because some of the law -- White people are racists. So like if we just like -- if you like ride your bike or something, they were like, Get off, get off, get off the bike or get off the court or get off the court. And then they're going to take you. They're going to be like -- they're going to handcuff you...On your car...The police do.

Jack begins with ranking violent acts according to his perception of their frequency. Implicit in his initial comment, is that there are delinquent individuals committing said crimes, so much so that people are dying at alarming rates. But in a query about the prospective influence of race, Jack then suggests that in some cases, Black people in Riverview are harassed by the police for crimes that they did not commit. So, on the one hand, people as individuals engage in criminal behavior. Meanwhile, others are being

unjustly implicated (e.g. due to their race). I explore how this duality is evidenced across MCS students' responses.

Darui responds to my inquiry about local problems as follows, "Well there is a lot of murders happening and a lot of bad people and there has been a lot of littering going on and graffiti on people's property". Starr provides a characterization consistent with Darui's, expressing that "you can't change people like the violence for instance. You can't change that and it's all over [everywhere]". Darui and especially Starr's commentary both imply that the amount of violent crime in Riverview is tremendous, perhaps even overwhelming. Darui's reference to bad people and Starr's comment about people being set in their ways, both signal a potential dichotomy between "good" and "bad", those capable of being saved and those "unredeemable". Across the data, these statements were tempered with comments that were similarly impassioned, but more focused on the holistic impact of community violence. In select cases, both here and in their discussions of poverty, Mission City children even demonstrate *empathy* for those who commit crimes and/or individuals without jobs. Iris exemplifies this in her comment: "Sometimes like we heard gunshots. And I worry about the people who like are actually not doing safe things. And who are shooting and we saw like syringes by our tree lawns when we're taking our walk. I felt bad for the people who had those syringes". Here, she discusses her experience with violence, and the types of concerns that this occurrence prompted for her. Iris explains. Her comment spans several issues, wherein she focuses on community safety and those actually engaging in deviant behavior. Even as she notes the unfortunate sighting of used syringes, Iris demonstrates her compassion towards those

currently using drugs. This compassion becomes important as students then begin to imagine solutions to social problems.

Conflict in the city became evident as another problem of concern for Mission City children. Diamond succinctly articulates, “It's just a lot of conflicts in [Riverview]”. More elaborately, Mackenzie shared an anecdote about arguments between neighbors, where she highlights the fears she felt being in such close proximity. I quote this exchange between Mackenzie and me at length as she considers both violence and conflicts in her neighborhood.

Mackenzie: Well, some problems and things that I worry about is, well, we used to have these neighbors and they used to, like, argue a lot....And then before they left, they bring out a big gun and I was really scared.

Natalie: They brought out a big gun?

Mackenzie: Yes.

Natalie: Who were they directing the gun at?

Mackenzie: Their family. Because they used to always argue....And other things that I worry about is robberies.Because [a restaurant] is, you know, right down the street from us and that place had got held hostage.

Natalie: Oh, that's scary.

Mackenzie: It was all on the news.

Natalie: Uh-huh. That's pretty scary.

Mackenzie: Yeah. And I'm glad I wasn't there.

Mackenzie draws upon two instances happening nearby. She speaks of her encounter witnessing a gun being drawn and later sense of relief that she was not at the scene of the robbery. Importantly, Mackenzie's comment indicates that violence and crime are often

not distant considerations. These are proximal, perhaps commonplace occurrences that children are actively concerned about.

Gabby, speaks on conflicts that arise frequently in her apartment building. She states:

They always fight and I can't stand it. They're always yelling and screaming. So I'm right here and then they live right here and then you can always hear them and then scream. They have gotten several complaints where people ask them, because you can even hear on the first floor, I live on the sixth floor. And you can hear them because they'll be screaming and everything.

Gabby is clearly affected by the prevalence of fighting, persistent and unavoidable even while at home. She clearly sees the fighting in her building as an annoyance and seems frustrated by the tenants' unresponsiveness to their neighbors' complaints. But outside of the context of her building, Gabby asserts that law enforcement's response to conflicts are sometimes informed by racial biases.

Because I'll say there was a fight between a white person and a black person. Most likely the black person will go to jail and not the white person. It might depend on the situation but most likely because of their skin color and forget what you've been wearing or the other dude who got shot. Because the white person has shot him and he was walking from the store.

Gabby begins with a general understanding that, in altercations involving both Whites and Blacks, Black people are punished more harshly. As a means of providing evidence for her assertion, Gabby invokes the Trayvon Martin slaying wherein the assailant, a phenotypically-white person, was not convicted of Martin's murder. This specific allusion to Trayvon Martin is a more extreme case of differential treatment by the law

than where Gabby began. Still, both references are indicative of views that race, crime and punishment are inextricably linked to the disadvantage of African Americans.

Mission City students' recognize criminal misconduct and violence as occurring frequently in their hometown. Still, as Iris and others point out, they acknowledge other considerations as relevant to outsiders' perceptions of their city and its residents. Below, Iris comments on Riverview's reputation as being "gangster", an opinion that she disagrees with:

People, like picture [Riverview] because I was playing a game...I was online--and somebody came there like "oh, are you from [Riverview]?" Like in, "Are you from [Riverview] because your tag says you're from [there]." I'm like "yeah." [They're] like, "Oh, is it terrible there like everyone in Florida says?" So there is a Florida kid who thought [Riverview] was like gangster and like thuggy and bad...And there was no good points about it.

Even as they acknowledge the issues in their community, often MCS children affirmed Riverview fiercely. They demonstrated pride in the people, activities and resources in the city. Iris critiques her fellow gamer's assessment of Riverview as inaccurate because there were "no good points about it", a viewpoint that contradicts her own understandings of the place she calls home. Contrasted with the children from John Hope, who were generally inclined to accept the news/public portrayals of Riverview and its residents as truth, MCS students would consistently reject or contextualize overly-negative representations.

As another example, Marcus in an exchange with me, provides evidence of his classmates' questioning of racial biases in the public as it relates to criminality. When I

asked Marcus whether or not he thought that things might be harder for Black people, he replied thusly:

Marcus: Yes, [for] some. I'm not trying to be racist but like some Caucasian people like on the neighborhoods, they are like sometime they don't want like Black people in their neighborhood. Like the violence and all of that. They want it peaceful.

Ms. Natalie: What do you think about that? Do you think that Black people are violent?

Marcus: No. I'm not saying everybody but some...Other people too.

Natalie Davis: Why do you think some people just think that Black people are more violent then?

Marcus: Because of what going on in the news...

In the preceding exchange, Marcus voices an understanding of "some" white people's racially-prejudiced preference to live separately from Black people based on presumptions about African American's propensity towards violence. Though Marcus does not agree with this viewpoint, he cites the news as a factor contributing to people's perceptions. With this framing, Marcus does not regard the news as an unbiased source of information and takes advantage of his right to critique news outlets.

Returning to Mackenzie, she similarly articulates an awareness of the intersections between racial bias and crime. Consistent with Jack's earlier comment about harassment, Mackenzie discusses how racial stereotypes play out to the detriment of Black residents in the city.

Ms. Natalie: Do you think that people in your community might have it harder because they're Black?

Mackenzie: Yes. Because -- it's hard because, like, a lot of people -- well, a lot of Whites own stores and, like, when you go to the gas station, you would ask them to -- you know,

how people say five on ten? ...like, they want to really make sure that is -- the car out there is not robbing nobody.

Natalie: That's what the White people do?

Mackenzie: Yeah... And like, a lot of Black people don't -- probably don't want to go out. Always have -- having to get checked.

Natalie: What do you mean "get checked"?

Mackenzie: Like, make sure that their car is really out there... a lot of White people -- well, a lot of White people aren't innocent. Like, they do bad things, too.

Natalie: Uh-huh.

Mackenzie: But to me, a lot of people think Whites are, you know, are innocent and Blacks do the most crime.

Natalie: What do you think about that?

Mackenzie: I think that Blacks and Whites do crime. And it shouldn't just be, you know, put on the Blacks.

In the exchange above, Mackenzie asserts that Black people in the city may feel discouraged about going places even as common as the gas station. She notes a perception of Black people (by Whites) as predisposed to deviance, such that white people would feel the need to check for their belongings while in the presence of an African American person. Mackenzie sees this assumption as unfounded, given that people of all races commit crimes. Still, she is aware of this perception and its relevance even in a predominately-African American context. In Mackenzie's case, she distinguishes between constructions of Black people as criminal versus the reality of crime. Next, I analyze MCS's conceptions of constraint as it related to the realities of poverty. Here too, I found evidence to show students' consideration of context, prejudice

and structural inequities as relevant to individual opportunity and the obtainment of resources.

“like the abandoned houses, they didn’t just end up abandoned”- Manifestations of Poverty in the City

Like JHF, though Mission City students did not invoke the word “poverty” specifically, they regularly discussed conditions typically associated with limited financial resources. Most often, they cited joblessness, homelessness and the prevalence of abandoned buildings. MCS students provided evidence that shows an awareness of these same social problems. Interestingly and unlike their peers at John Hope, they demonstrate a tendency to attribute the issues they identify to institutionalized inequities, as opposed to individual shortcomings. And, even in instances where they acknowledge that individual decisions may be relevant to one’s current circumstances, MCS children generally portray the persons experiencing hardships empathetically.

Many Mission City students note the presence of dilapidated buildings in Riverview. Child Lisa provides some commentary on this topic, describing how blight in her neighborhood was regarded as hazardous to children in the area. She articulates: [There are] A lot of abandoned houses, and somebody tried to make a meeting and talked to the city to try to get them torn down. Because a lot of kids live around where I live and they like playing in the fields—because I have a field next to my house that used to be an abandoned house before my mom was a teenager. Because she live in the same place and they got that torn down. Lisa speaks to the enduring nature of blight with the presence of abandoned homes that preceded her birth. Lisa also indicates in her interview that those homes sometimes attracted strangers and thusly, increased safety risks for children. She alludes to this risk

in the excerpt above. Her classmate, Starr, also offers abandoned buildings as a problem of relevance in her community. Alternatively, in her articulation, she focuses on how those abandoned homes came to exist. This is evidenced in the following exchange:

Starr: But like the abandoned houses, they didn't just end up abandoned. Something have to happen to them. I think that there is like buildings, they have a lot of lots that they need to put stuff on. There's a lot of stuff that they could put. Like there's a lot across there.

Ms. Natalie: Across there like across the street from the school?

Starr: Mm-hmm. There's a lot of stuff you could put in there so like from you knocking down houses.

Natalie: Who's they? You said they, that "they" could put stuff there. You said "you" knocking down houses. Who's "they" and who's "you"?

Starr: Who build the houses... Like the mayor. My mom works for the mayor. He hasn't really made the best decisions sometimes.

Starr quickly transitions from problem identification to a discussion of contributing factors. Further, she makes the claim that these houses are not normal; their presence is man-made and the result of the poor choices made by city leadership. Recall how Hope students often framed issues as idiosyncratic or happenstance (see Katelyn's excerpt on abandoned buildings). Contrastingly, MCS children often relied on explanations of social problems that revolved around institutions (e.g. governmental leaders) and/or *patterns* of social inequities.

The following articulation from Diamond raises concerns about abandoned/shuttered businesses, as well as the decline in jobs opportunities. In her statement, Diamond also situates the issue as a racial problem. In response to my inquiry

about whether or how she thinks that race has anything to do with the local problems previously named, Diamond offers this:

...not to try to be racist but a lot of -- White people, they don't live around -- like, well, not to say the hood -- but around where we live now....Because where I live, there's a lot of my color....first, there was a lot of jobs. In social studies, there was -- jobs started opening in [Riverview]. And that's when White people and Black people-- A lot of jobs started opening in [Riverview]. And a lot of Black people and White people started having more business in [Riverview]. But then they left, once they started...They left when stuff was starting to getting tear down....They didn't make enough money

Here, Diamond makes explicit mention of a social studies lesson, presumably on the economic ramifications of White flight from the city of Riverview¹²⁸. Diamond notes the city's transition from more racially diverse to predominately Black. In doing so, she also recognizes how the demographics in a city may have bearing on the growth of industry. According to Diamond's logic, shuttered businesses and joblessness are not solely due to the shortcomings of individuals. Rather, a racialized history of migration prompted systemic scarcity.

Kisha similarly weighs in on the relevance of systemic scarcity, speaking specifically about the prevalence of joblessness in Riverview. Consider the following excerpt wherein Kisha explains why so many people in her community are without jobs:

Like some people, it's kind of their fault because like they might have made bad choices....Like they might have been on drug and waste their money out of that and they can't pay their bills. But some people, it's not their fault like maybe their job was closing

¹²⁸ And also the migration of more affluent classes out to the suburbs.

down...And they couldn't afford to pay their rent...And they were looking for a job but they couldn't find one. Like that's not really their fault...Because they were trying as much as they could

Above, Kisha acknowledges that in select cases, individuals might bring joblessness or impoverishment upon themselves. And yet, she quickly demonstrates her viewpoint that joblessness is not caused exclusively by individual choices. Sometimes, there are factors beyond a person's control. In the next exchange, Kisha continues to describe patterns and systems which are of relevance in thinking about joblessness.

Kisha: Because people that have a lot of money, they usually hire people with a lot of money so they don't have pay them a whole lot, but they can still make more money.

Ms. Natalie: Okay.

Kisha: Say then soon like a lot of people, there just going to be a couple of people with a lot of money and then the rest of the people don't have a lot of money, so.

Natalie: Well, so you said people who make a lot of money hire people that have a lot of money or don't?

Kisha: Usually, they have a lot of money, I think....Because so then they don't have to pay them as much because they won't be complaining because they already have some money.

Natalie: Oh, that's interesting.

Kisha: And then those people if they own a house, they'll rent it to the people with a lot of money because they know they can pay even more for a rent and they can make more money out of that. So then the people that don't have a lot of money won't get like good houses and they might have like a really small house and they have a big family or something like that. And then that just makes more homeless people.

Through her thorough critical analyses of business owners and the rich, Kisha empathizes with the position of poor, jobless and/or homeless people. Kisha suggests here that patterns of deprivation and inequality keep the rich rich while the poor continue to struggle. Though her hypotheses about hiring practices are refutable, Kisha's point about practices of inclusion remains evident. Later, Kisha adds in a consideration of how race may be relevant to her previous assertions about hiring and home options. She voices the following:

some people are racist and they won't hire black people just because of their race which will kind of make it harder for them because they can't find a job as easily. If they can't find job easily they can't get money as easily and then they can't get a house as easily....people are racist and some people don't want black people living in a house that they own...

Students like Marcus also suggest that disparities and patterns of exclusion exist along racial lines. Related to Kisha's commentary about cycles of poverty, Marcus expresses a viewpoint that is critical of the wealthy whom, in this case, are white people.

Marcus: Like, because of like Caucasian people. Like, they have a lot of money. And I'm just saying like they have like a lot of money. Like, they just probably like just buy, like just waste their money on stuff that they don't really need.

Natalie: So, they spend their money on things they don't really need?

Marcus: Yeah.

Natalie: So what? Why does that bother you?

Marcus: Because people need money. People need money so they could stay alive...

In Marcus' discussion, he faults the white and wealthy for an assumed misuse of resources. Although Marcus does not employ the word "racism", his reference to

“Caucasian” people implies a racial binary¹²⁹. He also suggests that if resources were distributed more equitably, people who need money would have a better chance of survival. Rather than condemn the poor, Marcus blames others who are technically better positioned to help but instead default to self-indulgences.

Child Lisa’s discussion of the homeless is consistent with Kisha and Marcus’ empathetic analyses. In the example that follows, Lisa challenges prevailing assumptions about those of the street seeking donations:

Lisa: I think that people that can’t afford homes and food, basically homeless people, some of them might die because some people—I heard in my hair salon that I go to—I heard them people, they were saying, that homeless people, when people give them money, that it was their fault that they are homeless. And when people give them money they just want to buy them beer.

Natalie: Wait, who said that?

Lisa: Some ladies at my hair salon.

Natalie: And then do you agree with them?

Lisa: No, because they might not have enough money, they didn’t have a job, and they lost their house. And what if they had children and they need to feed their children? You don’t know if they’re going to buy a beer. If they went into a store they might have been buying food for their children.

Above, Lisa rejects the ladies in the salon’s portrayal of the homeless. While they seem to assume that individuals are using money gifted to them for unworthy causes, Lisa believes otherwise. Furthermore, Lisa shifts the blame from individual pathology (e.g.

¹²⁹ In addition to the wealthy-poor divide

dishonesty, manipulation, irresponsibility) to circumstances not necessarily attributable to individual shortcomings. Particularly compassionate, is her concern for the children whom might be reliant on the charity of others.

A Note on Accountability: Politics, Police and Students' Disdain towards Leaders

In Chapter 5, I commented on Ms. Jamie's and the school's instruction on the topics of localized environmental justice and the water crisis in Flint, Michigan. In the interviews from Mission City students, *every* child mentioned local water access problems and/or the Flint Water Crisis as an example of a major community issue. Their discussions of Flint and water in general reflect a major area of departure between Mission City and John Hope School of Excellence. Though a small subset of JHF students referenced the problems in Flint, they did not do so casually i.e. without the same level of depth nor sophistication. Absent from their analyses was any discussion of water access in Riverview. And, when Hope students did mention Flint, they did not position the government as responsible for the creation of the problem.

Contrastingly, through their discussions of water, Mission City students offered undiluted critiques of Flint's mayor (Snyder), the Mayor of Riverview and other appointed officials. As evidenced by their articulations, Mission City students are highly skeptical and dissatisfied by local leadership. And, they voice their dissatisfaction readily. During Jack's second interview, he shares that in regards to Gov. Snyder, "I know where he lives". When I asked him to tell me more about Snyder, Jack continues, "First, he's not doing anything about the Flint water crisis...". As evidenced by both Jack's tone and language, his first comment was interpreted to be somewhat of a challenge. Jack knows where Snyder resides, and consequently, could show up to his home at any moment to

confront him. In his second statement, Jack contextualizes his discontent towards Snyder, deeming him unresponsive to the city's critical needs. Gabby's portrayal of Snyder is consistent with her peers. She explains, "wasn't he the one who said he didn't know that water was not poisoned which I think he will have to have control over that because he's a governor...But anyways, I think that Rick Snyder had control over that and he's a very selfish person and I think that all he wants is money...I think that's the only reason he ran for governor". Juliana also characterizes state governmental officials as ineffective on the basis of what she's heard from others, namely about issues related to water. She states, "...I've heard a lot of things about them not really helping.... State officials—[they're] not really helping with the problems we have in our state".

Darui critiques both Snyder and an appointed leader in Riverview, concluding that they made "bad decisions". In regard to the Riverview official, Darui explains, "he risked the lives of people so that he could get their money". Darui continues, another thing is how people, like Rick Snyder put other people in charge when they don't want to deal with something. Like how Rick Snyder said "oh well we don't have enough money, and I don't want to do all this, so I'm going to put [someone else] in front". Darui offers specific criticisms. First, he illustrates his understanding of money as a motivator for disingenuous leadership. Next, he makes claims against Snyder for skirting his responsibilities and demonstrating flippant disregard for residents. Consistent with her classmates' impressions, Diamond asserts that the Mayor of Riverview "does not care" in light of his response to the issue of water access in the city.

In addition to citing Flint and Riverview's water problems as rationale for their unfavorable assessments of leadership, MCS also offered other forms of critiques. For

example, Mackenzie questions the mayor's competency as it relates to crime in the city. "But to me, with all the crime happening, he's not really doing anything...I'm not saying that he should do this for every single little crime", Mackenzie explains. Mackenzie emphasizes here that her expectations are realistic. While she doesn't expect for the mayor to abolish crime completely, she does make evident that he is currently not doing enough to attend to the issue.

Darui, Marcus and Lisa illustrate how racial prejudice sometimes factored into student's critiques of leadership. In the cases of Darui and Marcus, they both name police as falling short of their responsibilities. Darui distinguishes between, "All the activists and the people who stand up for all the wrong" who are doing a good job and "people like the police". Darui explains, "People like the police. They are here to protect us, but a lot of the Black people keep getting shot down because of them". In light of the recent and highly-publicized murders of unarmed Black men and women by law enforcement, Darui acknowledges a contradiction between their charge to "protect and serve" and the frequent occurrences of police-inflicted violence. Marcus speaks to the specific and tragic death of Tamir Rice, a child shot down by police while playing with a toy gun at the park. In the following excerpts, Marcus frames the police officer's actions as problematic and unfounded:

Now, in [Riverview], like a kid, he is playing like with a toy gun and the cops killed them....But the cops killed him because they had thought it was real. Like the cops didn't prove he's [not] innocent. Like the boy family, they prove their innocent, that it was a toy. They found that it was a toy at the end, but it's like they had thought it was real...And there was two cops. And there was only one like kid... Like why do police

officers like just don't like tell them to put the guns down first. So they can see like if it's fake or real.

Interestingly, Marcus describes the incident as occurring in Riverview, though it actually happened in Cleveland. One explanation is that Marcus simply misspoke. But the manner in which Marcus shared his opinion also indicates that he felt passionately about this topic, *as if* it did in fact happen in his own community. In his statements, Marcus is concerned about the fact that the officers' did not properly investigate prior to opening fire. According to Marcus, this is even more disconcerting given that the two police officers outnumbered the boy.

Finally, I return to Lisa's discussion of abandoned homes in the preceding section of this chapter. In her discussion, Lisa comments that, "somebody tried to make a meeting and talked to the city to try to get them torn down", referring to adults in her neighborhood. Later, Lisa critiques the city's slow response to the residents' requests. Importantly, she attributes their apathy to racial bias against African Americans. Lisa voices this concern in the following example:

Sometimes I don't think that because some of the houses just got old. And I think some problems is because the city could have torn some of the houses down like we wanted, but they didn't actually come. About most of the houses because, maybe, because it was a black neighborhood....mostly Black people live there.

Diamond's characterization of the Riverview mayor is consistent with Lisa's understandings. "I think that since [the mayor of Riverview] is White, he treats Black people different", Diamond explains. Indeed, MCS children demonstrate high levels of skepticism and disapproval towards formal leadership. Furthermore, they often situate

racial biases as a factor contributing to leaders' inattentiveness and/or incompetency. In the next section, I briefly reiterate Mission City students' tendency towards framing racial inequality as a contemporary concern inextricably linked to their constructions of relevant constraints in their city and neighborhoods.

"I think that's a form of racism..": Racism as Proximal, Enduring and (at times) Systemic

I think people go sometimes and predominantly black neighborhoods. People are coming like, "Oh, these people probably don't pay their water bill. They probably waste all of their water and don't pay anything." So they charge more or just because they want all of the money.....Praise the little boy who got shot, he was Black and the police officer said that he was going to shoot them. And he wasn't, he was the little boy with like a nerf gun. And they're like, "Oh no, he's going to shoot this, kill him boys." But he didn't said that....I think they were genuinely afraid because they were like, "Oh, black boys are dangerous and hostile (Iris, interview)

In the opening excerpt from Iris, she discusses two current issues (water shut-offs and police brutality) as raced (i.e., as indicative of broader and systemic racial inequalities). As evidenced in the prior sections on crime, poverty and leadership, Mission City students often situate race/racism as relevant to their understanding(s) of social problems. While John Hope students most often rejected the significance of widespread racial prejudice in the contemporary era, Mission City students readily conceived of and articulated these intersections during their interviews. Whereas Hope children represent a racism as distal viewpoint, Mission City children endorse a *racism as proximal* perspective. More specifically, the students of MCS are highly-attuned to the

enduring nature of racism, particularly as it pertains to water regulation/access problems and policing.

Darui offers perspectives on how racism is relevant to the *current* water access problems in Riverview. When I prompted him to reflect on whether or how race might be relevant to his discussion of local problems, Darui replied thusly:

Well when people's water was being shut off. In the movie that we watched in [Ms. Jamie's] class the White lady—[they were] going up to the White lady and they're about to turn off her water she said don't do that and so they left her and then they went to her neighbor who was Black and she walked over and said hey don't do that but they just kept going....I think that's a form of racism because when the White lady asked them to stop, they stuck with her house and then went on to her Black neighbor's house and didn't stop.

Darui observes what he characterizes as differential treatment on the basis of race. In the case of the documentary, Darui and many of his classmates began to take note of how the experiences of white residents seemingly contrasted with that of African Americans in the city. Darui concludes that this type of prejudice embodied by city officials is “a form of racism” that exacerbated the already problematic issue of the water shut-offs.

Echoing her peers, Starr reiterates the salience of race as it pertains to policing. “Like, when on the news, when a police shoots a black person for no reason, they make it sound like the black person did something wrong and to cover up their--what, the police man [did]. Or they might treat you badly because you're black”, Starr explains. Her words demonstrate an understanding of (innocent) Black lives as vulnerable to violence at the hands of police with impunity. Importantly, Starr's comment implies that these

cases are recurrent, indicative of a pattern of misconduct. Also evidenced here, is Starr's critical consumption of the news. She states that "they" (possibly the police, media or both), "make it sound like", further indicating her viewpoint that the truth is being misrepresented.

Children also offered generalized statements that affirmed the proximity of race and persistence of racism. Though many of the comments were less tied to a specific topic, they are important insofar as they further illustrate students' day-to-day impression of racism as ever-present. Craig commented that, "some people still don't like Black people". Diamond elaborates on this feeling that racial discrimination is alive and well in the following exchange:

Diamond: Sometimes, I think White people is not over Black people -- or is not over what they feel about Black people.

Ms. Natalie: Can you say more about that?

Diamond: Like, I feel like, they're not -- they're not happy with this.

Natalie: Uh-huh. What makes you think that?

Diamond: Because we're not their color--And -- or we just don't act like them.

In Diamond's initial comment, she compares a previous era to the current one. White people are "not over" it, likely prejudiced views. According to Diamond, they (as a generalization) still harbor biases, in part because of Black people's failure to assimilate.

And finally, Gabby voices a perspective that spans virtually all of the aforementioned social constraints. Quoted at length below, Gabby discusses the pervasive implications for racist ideologies:

I think that white people don't like black people just because they had a different skin color. And so I think that white people have more power over black people in ways because they're richer. They have more money and then they have the power to make up a complaint to get you in jail. And I think that black people and stuff like that happen to you. Then if you have a good job, you lose your job, you lose your house, you have no money and if you have kids, it's really hard because --if you have no money, you have no food, you have no water....

She later articulates the following:

Because like in the old days.... I think some of that stuff, some people were in that movement and some people--Still carry that with them and I think that white people and other people just don't like black people because they're not the same thing, same skin tone, just basic stupid stuff like that.

Gabby highlights a number of aspects thought to be linked to racial biases. She sharply notes the black/white wealth disparity. Moreover, she names power as something that is can be wielded in ways that work to disenfranchise African Americans. Gabby does not overstate the losses that can, and have resulted from racial prejudice. As per Gabby's assertions, "still carry[ing] that with them" can amount to more than just interpersonal differences. For Gabby and many of the MCS students, racism is not isolated to the "old days"—it undoubtedly manifests in the contemporary era.

Do you see what I see?: Describing and Positioning (Black & Future) Selves

Mission City children's identification of social problems coincides with the conceptions of children at John Hope School but with two important departures. First, although they recognize individual agency, they are highly critical of institutions and

formal leadership. Next, they frame current social issues in Riverview as instigated by prejudice against Black people. One might expect then, that these students' awareness of big, broader structures would result in the children feeling increasingly overwhelmed, exasperated and perhaps even apathetic. Such is not the case. Like their peers at JHF, Mission City students voice ambitious hopes and dreams as individuals. They see immense potential in themselves to actualize personal goals in spite of the problems of their city and communities. And, as Black children in particular, they make communal connections to their families, a rich history of racial progress and the beauty embodied by people of the Diaspora. In this section, I discuss how MCS students' conceive of self and their own individual capacity to achieve creative and ambitious goals. Furthermore, I show how this positive, agentic self-concept is also evidenced by their conceptions of themselves as African Americans.

Though all the children in this study voice ambitious professional goals, the children at Mission City reference future work that is comparatively less-traditional than their JHF counterparts. Many MCS reference multifaceted careers as entrepreneurs, creative/culinary artists, and athletes *in addition to* standard elite professional tracks (e.g. doctors, lawyers, etc.). Juliana, for example, aspires to be a, "fashion designer, a doctor...and like just be able to help people". She envisions establishing mutually-beneficial relationships in her work that would allow her to feel supported and offer support to others. "Well, I would at least want to have people help me and I -- and then I will turn around to help them...sometimes like I might need coworkers, so that we can work together....So we can work together and combine our artwork, so that we can create clothes", Juliana explains. Evidenced here, Juliana sees the benefits and necessity of

collaboration, one of the Habits of MCS. Lisa's career goals also balances industriousness with creativity, this time in the culinary and performance arts. She articulates the following in her initial interview:

I want to be a chef or I want to be a singer...Because I feel like I like cooking and I like creating different foods. I created a certain type of popcorn. It's called volcano Popcorn and I put a lot spicy things into my popcorn make it different. And I'm good at cooking different things. I'm good at cooking rice, and noodles, and I almost made a pizza—I think I made a pizza before. I want to be a singer because it's fun and I think I will get paid for it because I think I have a good voice

Lisa explains how her experimentation with food and ability to create new things brings fulfillment. Later, Lisa also discussed using her skillsets to open a restaurant. Though she anticipated that it may be a challenge pleasing customers and solidifying positive online reviews (i.e. via YELP), Lisa felt confident in her ability to reach her goals.

Other students like Jack discuss turning current hobbies and talents into future jobs. Jack, a self-taught boxer, hopes to be “a famous boxer, police officer and race car driver” one day. When I asked him to share his future plans, Jack beamed with excitement. “I got a lot of things to say”, was his initial reply. Jack explained that through his research and the process of teaching himself the fundamentals, he became increasingly more interested in boxing as a career option. The frequency with which MCS students referenced less-traditional and increasingly artistic careers, suggests a potential relationship between the school curriculum and children's aspirations. Recall

that MCS has curricular offerings like “Zeal” and the after-school programs which allow children to explore various interests and talents¹³⁰.

Even in instances where MCS identify a single, standard profession, they often express a desire to pursue highly-specialized facets of the work. For example, Craig, like many others at the neighboring school, desires to become a police officer. But Craig then contextualizes his statement, “But not with the gun. I want to hack into stuff. I want, I want [to be one of] the computer ones”. Though Craig wants to use technology to fight crime and “help people”, it’s unclear that he really wants to be a police officer. More likely, is that Craig is interested in law enforcement via the CIA or FBI, but labeled this work as falling under the umbrella of the police. Finally, Darui discusses his intent to become a “physicist”. Darui provides the following explanation for his selection, “I’m just really interested in science and I want to discover new worlds and discover new worlds and learn if there really are aliens or not”. Despite not knowing anyone who is currently employed as a physician, Darui is enthusiastic about making discoveries, new inventions and pursuing his various questions and curiosities.

Students’ race-drawings demonstrated both individual and collective articulations of identity and agency. First, a small group of students depicted themselves “just being me” in response to the prompt, “What does being Black/African American/Biracial mean to you?”. Similarly to some of the students at Hope, Kisha and Jeff draw themselves as the focal point and sole object in the illustration. Kisha regarded the racial identifier as a

¹³⁰ Refer back to Chapter 3 for additional context on the Zeal course offering.

label that “doesn’t really mean anything in particular...like it describes who you are”. .
Still, both Kisha and Jeff represent themselves as happy and satisfied with who they are

Figure 7.1: Cluster- MCS Who I Am



Kisha



Jeff

A larger cluster of MCS students portray African Americans as a group. Moving from illustrations about family and personal ancestry to offering characterizations of Blacks as a people, student drawings highlight cultural associations. The first subset of these drawings, pictured below, specify familial and ancestral bonds. Jack, Gabby and Starr all express how Blackness is represented by the bonds between family members. According to Jack, being Black means “spending time with your family”. Gabby’s drawing shows her loved ones, all with braids and/or locs, hairstyles she associates with members of the African American community. Finally, Starr references those ancestors who informed history and paved the way for her existence. Important here, is the ways that Blackness is taken up as being rooted in relationships among individuals. Students are thinking about themselves as Black in relation to, as opposed to independent from others.

Figure 7.2: Cluster- Familial Race Drawings



A second subset of students assign generalized, positive descriptors to Black people in a collective sense. Students envision themselves as being a part of a group that is intelligent, social, kind, respectful and strong. These portrayals of Blackness are generally consistent with the articulations of all MCS students. Though the children frequently demonstrate awareness that others may hold deficit views of African Americans, the students themselves often reject these notions. Illustrations from Darui, Craig and Mackenzie further evidence this orientation. At first glance, Darui's drawing appears similar to the "just who I am group". To clarify, the figure in Darui's drawing is not him. Rather, it is an anonymous person representative of Black people writ large. Darui explains that the adjectives he strategically placed around his drawing apply to every Black person that he knows. Therefore, they were the words that came to mind in response to the prompt. Mackenzie and Craig similarly characterize Black people in a positive light, as indicated by their references to being "good" and "strong".

Figure 7.3: Cluster- Positive, Communal Race Drawings



Finally, Mission City students associate being Black or African American with engaging across difference. While John Hope students placed emphasis on Black people being agentic and/or triumphant in the past, MCS children depict the continual work of critical reflection and engagement as raced in the present. “They fight for their rights...it means like you can fight for your rights and you can speak up”, Marcus explains. Though he makes mention of the past fight for voting rights, Marcus’ drawing shows Black people (and those of other races) all voting together in the current day. From Marcus’ words and his drawing, we get the sense that the struggle is not over. Related to the racism as proximal finding discussed in a previous section, Marcus asserts that even now, African Americans can and should exercise their right to fight injustices and speak out. Iris and Lisa’s drawings portray precisely what Marcus alludes to. In both of their drawings, actors are actively opposing oppression. Iris draws a person in a bubble being attacked by various marginalizing “isms” being directed at them from non-Black outsiders. The first initial of each “ism”, e.g. r=racism, s=sexism, p=prejudice”, signals the nature of the attack. To be clear, Iris is confident and proud to be Black. At the same

time though, she is aware of the frequency and pervasiveness of stereotypes and prejudice. Thusly, she sees everyday as an exercise in combatting the negative images directed towards her and others. Lisa's drawing is broken up into two vignettes. The upper left half contains the black power fist and a cheerful girl with an afro. On the bottom right though (difficult to see because of the colors used), she illustrates herself standing up to a bully. Lisa recounted her experiences in a previous school wherein she was teased for being Black and wearing a "poufy afro". Here, Lisa illustrates the moment when she finally confronted her bully. "This is her and this is me and this is when I was finally going to stand up for—I wasn't scared of her anymore because I was there for like two years and I just got tired of her doing that so I just got mad at her and told her not to do that anymore", Lisa explains. Lisa shows herself being strong and challenging the biases of others, not disconnected from the symbol of Black power also prominent in her drawing.

Sometimes, children's portrayals of Blacks engaging across difference was more reflective and illuminating than confrontational. Students would often reference "being different" or noticing differences as something that they associated with being African American. Juliana's drawing represents this process of learning about cultural differences in a very creative way. Loosely informed by her own experiences learning from others at MCS, she constructed three children engaging in friendly conversation. The three characters- one African American, one Latino and one African, are all "surprised" after their discussion. Through conversation, the three individuals reached a better understanding of each other's views and culture. Juliana depicts a generative interaction

wherein all parties walked away with newfound respect for their differences and similarities.

Figure 7.4: Cluster- Blacks Engaging Across Difference



Marcus



Iris



Lisa



Juliana



Diamond

***“It’s kind of hard just sitting down and watching”*: Black Child Agency as Collective, Empathetic and Transformative**

In the preceding sections, I have shown that MCS children possess a keen awareness of local problems, often exacerbated by biases and racial prejudice. Students offer detailed critiques of racism, water access, violence and crime. And, they foreground in these critiques the role that systems, policies and formal leaders have played in creating and/or enabling problems. In their articulations, though MCS students acknowledge individual agency and deviance, they often do so in empathetic ways that

consider context and individual motivations. Through their drawings, I provide evidence to further suggest that Mission City students are oriented communally and with racial pride. They are already beginning to consider how they might play an active role in engaging across difference and if necessary, in continuing to forge ahead in the fight against justice. For the remainder of this chapter, I discuss MCS children's conceptions of their own agency in response to the constraints laid out in previous sections. More specifically, I provide evidence to show that while the students at JHF tend to express very pragmatic views, MCS students are increasingly idealistic and empathetic. Whereas Hope children privilege individual acts of helping, children of Mission City envision forms of collective action oriented towards cultural and systems level changes. Finally, because Mission City students are inclined to critique and question current norms, in posing solutions, they seem less concerned with acquiescing the status quo. MCS children often propose solutions that involve confrontation and/or a reimagining of current (and unequal) circumstances.

Though most of the subsequent discussion is focused on children's conceptions of change agency in the future, it is important to note that MCS students already see themselves as capable of making a difference. In their interviews they often reference their own attempts, as children, to resolve issues in their communities. As Diamond explains, "It's kind of hard just sitting down and watching [things] not get any better...It's kind of hard sitting down or watching people sit and watch life not get better--Just get more worse". So, as a segue into analyses of agency in the future, I begin first by highlighting the ways that students are already taking advantage of opportunities to act, intervene and make a positive impact.

In Jack's apartment complex and the surrounding complexes, he notes the prevalence of conflict between children. During his interview, he describes his efforts to ameliorate this problem through dialogue with other young residents. Consider the following statement from Jack:

I was like -- everybody, everybody. This needs to be a better community -- I was like, everybody -- this needs to be a better community. And then, and then like it started to get better a little bit and then it went back worse... like guys, we need to get a better community before like another conflict ...all you guys get bullying the other, other complexes, then they're right by us. Then -- and if we get shot up or die or something, because some people got guns in them. So -- and if we get shot up or die, what's going to happen?

Though Jack highlights the worst case scenario as a deterrent, his intent to improve social relationships and prevent violence remain clear. Jack freely voices his discontent with the current circumstances, and even reflects on the extent to which his decision to speak up produced the desired effect. Juliana also shares an anecdote wherein she participated in group conversations aimed at improving community conditions. Juliana describes her experience thusly:

--me and my cousin and all the kids around the corner, we would talk and we would talk about how -- why we would want to stop all the gang fighting, the shootings and everything because when that -- when people shoot, they take the lives of innocent children and grownups and that makes me feel sad.

In the above excerpt, Juliana explains that her concern for the victims slain as a result of "all" of these problems has fueled a desire to talk to other children and family members about how they might rectify the issues. It seems that these conversations involving

Juliana are ongoing and stem from a belief that collective brainstorming can be generative.

Finally, consider the following example featuring Craig:

Craig: Say, I was at a place and--A pizza place...And I came in and order some pizza and it took five minutes. These two guys came in with guns and I was talking about them saying, What if this person get hurt? And you're going to go to jail and that's not a good thing and maybe, maybe they will walk away.

Ms. Natalie: Okay. Now, in real life, I want you to be careful with that, okay?

In the preceding excerpt, Craig outlines a hypothetical situation where he steps in to reason with an assailant. Though this did not actually happen, Craig offers this as a possible way that he could help to address and prevent a potential crime. During the exchange, I intervened and later followed up to ensure that Craig knew that he should not, under any circumstance, attempt to engage with an armed robber. Still, I include this example because it underscores the theme of empathy and tendency of Mission City students to take an active stance, even in the face of danger.

***“they just don’t like helping other people...They just think about theirselves”*: Agency as Empathetic and Collective**

In earlier sections, I argue that Mission City children convey sentiments of empathy when discussing persons experiencing hardships. These feelings of compassion carry over into their discussions of agency. What’s more, there is evidence to suggest that students’ recognition of their own empathy produces a desire to act on behalf of others. Students’ accounts are markedly less pragmatic and more idealistic than their peers at John Hope School. Rather than privilege the reasons why people ought to “worry about

themselves”, MCS students advance the idea that we all *should* be concerned with the well-being of others. What’s more, students suggest that there is power in collective action and often speak to their desire to organize and collaborate with others to enact social change.

In their interviews, Marcus and Gabby critically assess “Big, rich people” whom despite their privilege, are perceived as not doing enough to help people in need. “All they care about is money and running the world so they can rule people around. They’re the evil witches and we’re their service”, Gabby explains. Similarly, Marcus explains to me that, “it seems like kind of sad...Like some, like, they help people and some don’t...Because some people, they just don’t like helping other people...They just think about their self”. Implicit in both Marcus and Gabby’s commentary is that people, particularly those with sufficient resources, should be inclined to give to others. MCS students often reject the idea that individuals should prioritize themselves without considering the problems of those around them. Like Marcus, his peers often express sadness and concern for the well-being of others, so much so that it cultivates in them a desire to offer help.

The following excerpt from Lisa provides insight into her empathetic conceptions of change agency:

Everyone should help solve [local] problems because if they were that person that had the problem, or if you are the person that had the problem, you should want to fix it and you should help and try and fix it...I don’t know. I don’t know that as a kid, but when I get older I would want to help people and making the problems better.

Lisa's articulation is consistent with Gabby and Marcus' critiques, though her message is directed at everyone, i.e. not exclusive to the rich. Lisa suggests that even issues that appear to be individual can impact the collective. Because all of us have or may experience problems, according to Lisa, it is in all of our best interests to devise solutions to issues even if not directly impacted by them. Starr conveys a similar understanding, "I feel like we should all help each other with our problems and you know-- try to fix them ourselves...it's not just about helping the country, it's about helping people that need help. Yeah helping people that need help and its helping another person so they can pass it on". Here, service to others is framed as something that begets more helping. The implications extend beyond an individual action. Likewise, Juliana explains, "...I'm thinking everybody in the world [should help] because that's happening to everybody. It's not just happening to this specific person. It's happening to everybody. So if everybody teams up against that one person or one group, we are sure that we--the people, are going to win the case".

In reference to the water problems in Flint and Riverview, students frequently voiced compassion for those without access to clean water. I note that, particularly when it came to their discussions of water, students' speaking volume increased and/or their tone became noticeably more impassioned. As Jack expressed, "Like the Flint water crisis, like -- there's probably people already dead because the Flint water crisis is so bad, you barely could get water-- and they still charge you for poison, poison. You have to pay your water bill for poison", his whole demeanor changed. The following exchange between Craig and me is another relevant example of a student becoming moved by his/her own recounting of a social issue:

Craig: When, when people water was getting shut off, they were -- they, they wouldn't let -- the people that shut their water off get by and, and they said that that was a destruction. And so they sent the people to jail because they did not have no water....That was not fair just because they should do -- let their water run....They said that, that the other people that was living there before, now that person got to pay the bill....Because when the other people that were living there before them, now they got to pay their water bill so that's not fair. And so--

Natalie: It wasn't fair? Did that make you want to do something to help?

Craig : Yeah.

Natalie: Like what?

Craig : Mannn, I wish I was the government so I can just help--

Here, in his outlining of events, Craig conveys outrage in response to the city's handling of the water shut-offs. He repeatedly highlights instances that are "not fair", and provides a rationale for why shutting off residents' water is unjustifiable. Finally, he expresses a desire to be an active governmental official, presumably so that he could directly and swiftly rectify the problem.

Recall Juliana's earlier comment wherein she asserts that "everyone" should "team" up to secure a win for the collective. In addition to empathetically acting *on behalf of* others, Mission City students articulate a desire to organize and act *with* others. Most often, children suggest forms of engagement that require people to come together and act as a collective. This includes, but it not limited to, group protest, collective brainstorming and, community-based initiatives. As explained by Gabby, "If there was like a really, really big group of people that, like a big group of people, that all worked together for *fighting* for people. Like a bunch of people from every state or city and we

could all work together and try to fix everything”. Mackenzie, in the following exchange, also discusses the potential in people gathering together in pursuit of a common goal:

Mackenzie: Well, I think those problems [in Riverview] can be solved because if people, like -- how would I put this? Well, to me, if I can solve the problem, I would gather the community and others from other communities, and like, ask -- well, asking probably won't work.

Natalie: You say asking probably won't work. Why do you say that?

Mackenzie: Because most people, they will listen and say that, "Yeah. Okay. I will stop doing this and stop doing that." But they might go right back into it.

Even though Mackenzie questions the long-term effects of bringing people together and encouraging them to modify behaviors, she still proposes this method as a viable course of action. Later in the interview, Mackenzie, inspired by the marches during the Civil Rights Movement, also names group protest (against violence) as a strategy she might employ in the future. Similarly, Diamond articulates a desire to play a role in obtaining “justice and making more freedom” by encouraging people to, “to get up on their feet. Not just sit down and watch T.V. And [say] I'm sleepy. Like, help. Help save the world”. Diamond asserts that people should be working to “Get each other together...And talk -- so they could talk with each other”. According to Diamond, these conversations between people resolve conflict and motivate people to engage with problems and be their best selves. Diamond and others also highlight letter writing initiatives and hotlines as ways that many people can band together and have their voices heard.

It is important to reiterate that MCS are accustomed to interacting with community organizers and activists. Representatives from community organizations frequently talk to students about their work in the community¹³¹. During the unit on the Flint Water Crisis, students watched documentaries and had the opportunity to engage with a panel of local activists about their various efforts to advocate on behalf of the people of Flint. Many of their teachers and even some of their parents have organizing experience. And finally, as indicated in Chapter 5, there are instances of Black students' joining forces within Mission City to prompt changes in policies or the curriculum. Consequently, children have observed and/or learned about effective forms of collective action.

Imagining Agency as Transformative and Confrontational

In addition to noting children's inclination to pursue collective and communal forms of change agency, Black students at MCS also advance approaches to problem-solving that disrupt and/or seek to transform current conditions. Not disconnected from students' skepticism of formal leadership discussed in a previous section, Mission City children often appeared to be less concerned with acting in alignment with these leaders (e.g. the mayor, governor). Rather, in many instances, children identified a need to confront these very leaders and demand that they be held accountable to a higher standard. While JHF students most often focused on changing individuals, MCS students

¹³¹ Kisha describes a fruitful community initiative, "Well, in the community, there's lot of people that have like gardens and stuff. So, they'll grow the food and then maybe they throw like event where they'll give away some of the food. Or they'll make a whole bunch of food out of that food, and then they have everybody come eat for like a dinner party or something. And so they kind of like help people out like if they don't have enough food, they'll give you something out of their garden or they'll you something that's healthy".

voiced a desire to impact institutions, policies and influence ways of thinking at a broader scale. Though some of this has been discussed in prior sections, I offer two additional examples not related to the topic of water justice in Riverview or Flint.

In this first example, Kisha proposes a systematic solution to wage gaps and homelessness. Rather tending to the needs of individuals, Kisha discusses how raising minimum wage policy has the potential to improve the lives of many:

Kisha: The jobs..they can raise the minimum wage just a little bit.

Natalie: Tell me about that. What do you know about raising the minimum wage?
What's that all about?

Kisha: Like what is the minimum wage?

Natalie: Yeah, tell me about it.

Kisha: I know it's like the least amount of money you can pay somebody.

Natalie: Okay.

Kisha: So --

Natalie: And you think we should raise the minimum wage? Why?

Kisha: So then everybody has like almost -- that they almost all makes the same amount of money. And because of we raise the minimum wage, people, like if you raise it to \$10 or \$11 an hour, then people probably won't pay you over \$17 now depending on what job you have. So then everybody will kind of be on the same scale with their money and everybody can get a good house.

Kisha reasons that a widespread policy change is an effective method of combating homelessness. Here, Kisha also talks about redistributing resources and leveling the playing field for workers. This proposition from Kisha does not assume that the current standard used to determine wages is right or normal. In the event that the current law is

proven to be inequitable or insufficient, Kisha advocates for changing it to better suit the needs of citizens.

Iris provides another example consistent with this idea of challenging current systems of inequality. "... I can like start small. But then give my opinions out there and I can challenge things....Financial systems and justice system. Any kinds of systems that I and the majority of other people think are unfair". For Black people in particular, Iris stresses the importance of speaking out against inequitable systems, particularly if many people recognize the system(s) as falling short of the ideal. "don't let them know that you're against and what you're here for and because you'll get ahead.... So, if black people--we have to stay quiet to get ahead. That's the message. But I think we need to speak out, get loud, stand up", she explains. Iris implies that a better world requires people to voice concerns and challenge an unequal status quo.

In addition to the examples outlined above, I observed students in the classroom offer remarks consistent with the idea that confrontation is sometimes required to perpetuate change. I recall one young boy (not interviewed) insisting that his class march to the governor's private residence and throw snowballs. This attack would, in theory, convey power and prompt urgency. Though I laughed in the moment, I also understood his concern and desire to become involved as genuine. In a video project, students also scripted in a scene where residents confronted police officers and city officials and as a consequence, were arrested. It is my understanding that students saw this act of protest as heroic and a viable political strategy for enacting change. MCS students, even as young

children, demonstrate an inclination towards collective, critical action. They imagine a social landscape where people can question and resist pre-existing policies and practices.

Chapter VIII

Discussion & Implications

This research was conducted in an effort to better understand the relationship between critical emancipatory school models and the development of political agency in African American children. Though there is extensive, robust theoretical literature that makes a case for the necessity of these liberatory approaches to education, the empirical literature provides insufficient insight into the enactment of these models. As such, we know little about whether or how students' worldviews and conceptions of their own agency may evolve as a consequence of their participation in these types of learning environments. What's more, existing scholarship does not account for how various iterations of liberatory pedagogies, bound by common assumptions but distinct in practice, may produce nuanced effects in students. In this work, I investigated two school sites serving predominately-African American children. The first, John Hope School, is an African-centered school that makes explicit Black students' connections to the Diaspora and celebrates a long, rich lineage of African American trailblazers, innovators and freedom fighters. The second institution, Mission City School, foregrounds place and critical community-building. Here, adults seek to instill in students a deep sense of purpose and responsibility to solve local problems. In Chapter 2, I hypothesized that the differential emphases of the place-based and African-centered school models would

animate Black students' visions and agency in particular ways. Such was the case, albeit not always as I anticipated. In comparing these two schools, Mission City and John Hope, situated only minutes apart in the city of Riverview, I found compelling and contrasting evidence related to children's framing of local problems, discussions of race and the salience of racism, and, in their imagining of viable solutions (including but not limited to their own sense of individual and/or collective agency).

Though I acknowledge in this work that schools are only one of many contexts that shape and are shaped by young people, this work underscores the salience of school as a site for students' intellectual, social and political development. In their interviews, students at each school frequently invoked similar language as their teachers and classmates when describing social conditions, concerns and perceived obstacles. Likewise, the Black children in this study repeatedly referenced commitments and ideals consistent with those very same adults entrusted with their care. This work shows that schools can and do inform students' understandings of morality, social constraints and possibilities, sometimes in unanticipated and perhaps less-*sustaining*¹³² ways (Paris, 2012).

Finally, this work demonstrates a need to clarify the intended function of liberatory pedagogy as it relates to Black children's development and well-being. As evidenced by this research, schools and educators do not necessarily agree on what constitutes emancipatory practice. Relatedly, they do not always share in visions and

¹³² Paris' (2012) frames culturally- sustaining pedagogy as curriculum and instruction that supports the cultural, linguistic and social competencies of students' communities while also forming a bridge of access to the dominant culture. As I discuss in a later section, JHF in particular struggles to balance sustenance (of youth culture, African cultural practices) with their push to socialize students into the dominant cultural framework.

understandings of the best means by which Black children can hope to make a difference and/or secure good lives for themselves and those around them. These contrasting and at times, competing Black visions, are not inconsequential and speak to larger social dilemmas (Dawson, 2001). While educators at JHF and MCS schools may agree on the need to combat oppression writ large, it becomes less clear how and when students should join in the fight towards justice. That these educators are also grappling with the need to protect both the physical bodies and spirits of Black children, also raises interesting questions about how to structure critical pedagogy at the elementary school level in ways that preserve the sanctity of Black childhood.



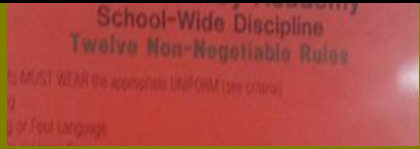
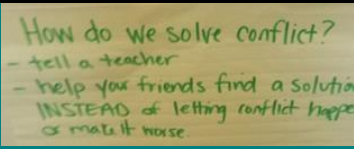
In what follows, I reiterate the main findings of this study, its contributions to the field, and implications for schools, communities and teacher practice.



Recollecting Two Distinct Learning Environments

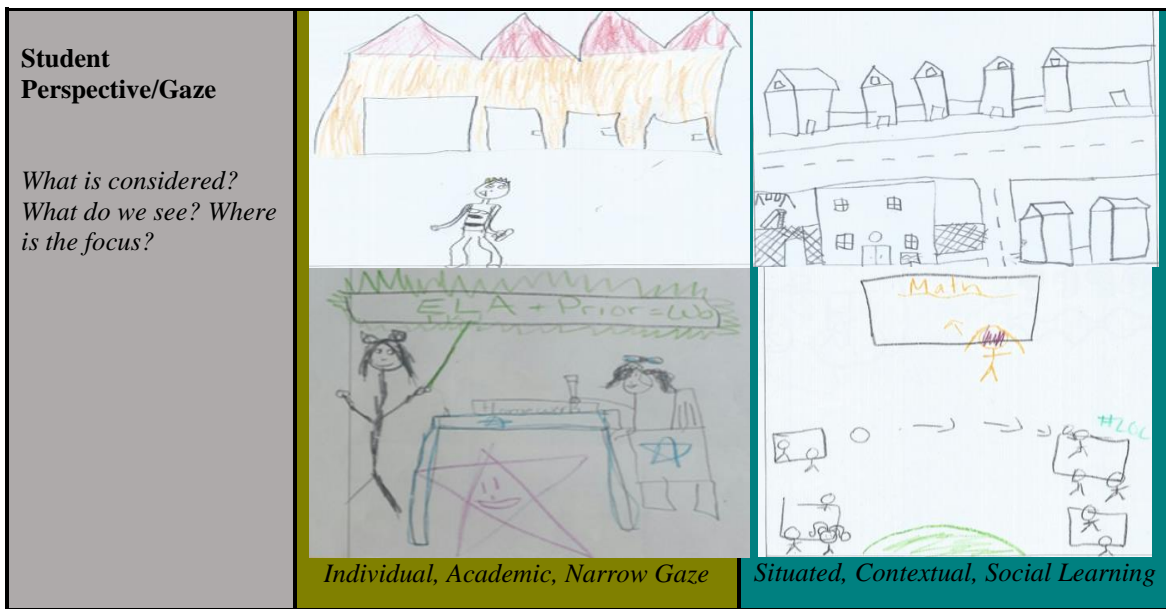
In chapters four and five, I provided rich description and analyses of the two school sites relevant to this research: John Hope Franklin School of Excellence and Mission City School. Though there are many discernable points of contrast, my intent has been to make evident those distinctions that, as per my findings, come with their potential implications for the positioning, critical analyses, and political agency of the Black children who call these schools home. Indeed, the preceding portrayal of these two educational environments, differing in pedagogical emphases but with similar commitments to enriching and protecting enrolled students, foreshadows the areas of distinction most evident in the articulations of Black children. My findings suggest that, although schools do not engage with children in isolation, they should not be taken for

granted as inconsequential to students’ social and political development. Table 8.1 compiles key data points from each school, organized side-by-side to emphasize the areas of contrast. A comprehensive discussion follows.

Table 8.1: GALLERY & Summary of Comparative Features- Two Distinct Schooling Environments

<p><i>Educative/Institutional Dimension</i></p> <p><i>Level of Analysis</i></p>	<p>John Hope Franklin School</p>  <p><i>Logo- Afrocentric, Traditional, Historical Figure</i></p>	<p>The Mission City School</p>  <p><i>Logo- Child & Adult, Communal, Informal</i></p>
<p>Educative Process--Actors</p> <p><i>Who? With whom?</i></p>	<p>I will have faith in myself I will succeed and most of all I’ll reach my goals. I promise to accept responsibility For my duties, and my own actions I have self-respect and self-control I CAN LEARN! I WILL LEARN! I MUST LEARN!</p> <p><i>Academy Creed- Individual Locus</i></p>	<p>This place is an oasis, a garden of smiling faces, [MCS] is a community where friendship, love and grace is. We’re full of positivity. And we practice empathy. To understand how others feel, if you’re hurt we want to help you heal. We will be kind. We will be safe. We will take care of this place.</p> <p><i>School Song – Communal Locus</i></p>
<p>Process—Positioning, Manner</p> <p><i>According to what rules?</i></p>	 <p><i>Traditional, Hierarchical, Deferential, Firm Non-Negotiable Rules</i></p>	 <p><i>Less Traditional, Democratic Co-Constructed, Shared, Fluid Community Agreements</i></p>
<p>Process—Manner, Orientation</p> <p><i>How do we engage? What is our disposition towards participation?</i></p>	<p>“We can’t always be free with our work...we have to follow the rules sometimes, and we can’t always do it how we want and be free with it” (Angel)</p> <p>“There's one thing that – this is what I don't like. They tell you what color shoes to wear....Because I want to be able to wear whatever shoes I want to</p>	<p>“...we don't have to wear uniforms.-- they let us express our self or express how we feel in our type of clothing. And I am really happy that we -- it's not even to be free. It's to be – we get to be free-er” (Diamond)</p> <p><i>Flexible, Expressive, Less-Restricted</i></p>

	<p>wear. (ND: <i>Mhm. Okay. Do – why do you think that they have you all wear a uniform?)...To be respectful... Like, not wear all that colorful stuff. ...But you could wear it at home. I understand that. You wear uniforms, so I understand that.</i>” (Malia)</p> <p><i>Discipline, Ordered, Contrained</i></p>	
<p>Product--Exemplars</p> <p><i>Who represents the ideal? Who serves as a model to emulate?</i></p>	 <p><i>Black Elite, Historical Figures</i></p>	 <p><i>Children, Current Students</i></p>
<p>Product/Outcomes— Sites of progress</p> <p><i>Where is achievement and progress located?</i></p>	 <p><i>College, Transcendence</i></p>	 <p><i>Neighborhood Evolution, Legacy at Home</i></p>
<p>Object of Preservation— Hyperawareness</p> <p><i>Which aspects of self/child are prioritized/protected with militant vigilance?</i></p>	 <p><i>Protected Bodies</i></p>	 <p><i>Protected Spirits</i></p>



First situating JHF as a figured world, I took to unpacking the key features and norms that shape pedagogical practice, interactions and student perceptions. John Hope School of Excellence, upholds versions of the African rituals of Harambee and pouring of libations. Harambee serves a dynamic purpose in setting the tone for the week. Importantly, it brings the school village together and reminds students that a rich legacy of achievement is evident in their ancestry. Also critical, is that Harambee is a ritual of self-determination. It follows a regimented schedule and by the staff’s own omission, is regarded as an opportunity for students to center themselves and practice discipline. Finally, Harambee empowers individual children to commit to being respectful to elders and ever focused on achieving success. This is a departure from other, less behaviorally and more communally-oriented iterations of Harambee (Dance, 2001).

Around the school, a sea of red, black and green washes over the lockers and walls. Images of black panthers, famous African American leaders/trailblazers, the Pan African flag and Historically-Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) adorn bulletin

boards and signage. It has an aesthetic that is ripe with symbols that carry with them the presumption and the message of Blackness. But outside of school, members of the JHF community are deeply aware of the ways in which Blackness is perceived by the broader society. Teachers, and Mrs. Taylor in particular, recognize the broader context wherein the black body is both feared and in danger, black minds are underestimated, and poverty is a powerful and cyclical force.

The JHF emphasis on self-determination comes with it a culture of restraint, of caution and attention to deference. Adults serve as arbiters of order and decorum. JHF upholds a set of non-negotiable rules and teachers constantly reiterate to students, the importance of being adaptable (i.e. code-switching)--acting in a manner consistent with normative conceptions of professionalism. Children generally do not question this, and accept that their teachers, as trusted elders, have their best interests at heart. In turn, Hope teachers progress through the curriculum at a rapid pace. They balance no-nonsense teaching personas with *othermothering* (Case, 1997) to meet the academic, and emotional needs of children. The academic practices, though inclusive of casual impromptu cultural references/ elements such as signifying (Lee, 1993), are largely traditional.

Discipline in school is seen as an opportunity to prepare for future expectations. School then becomes the place where children practice following rules and “fitting in” to society. Being “free” comes with a negative association, indicative of a lack of focus, respect and/or commitment. Interestingly, though educators hope to instill a sense of strength and pride in Black children, they do not make explicit any desire to cultivate any inclination towards activism. JHF, even as it affirms the racial and cultural identities of

students, does so without disrupting the status quo. Racism is not discussed explicitly in the classroom, except when teaching students about the history of African Americans.

From students' illustrations and discussions, it becomes evident that the "self" in self-determination is understood at the level of individual. Student drawings privilege zoomed in representations of individualized interactions without consideration of the surrounding context. Educators focus on academics and fostering independence.

Similarly, children are prompted to look to examples of the Black elite, exceptional and isolated figures in history, as models for success. Finally, in addition to embodying these figures, and earning the grades and test scores required to transition to elite colleges and universities become the ultimate indicators of success. At JHF, "it's cool to be smart", to have the "right" answers and to complete assigned tasks swiftly and independently. It is suggested that, embodying smartness in this way will prepare students to rise, to ensure upward mobility and transcendence from the threat of poverty.

John Hope aims to maintain a school community based on tradition, order, respect and the highest standard of Black achievement. Meanwhile, the founders of Mission City School aspire to a school that is intentionally non-conformist. Actors in the space are frequently in conversation, reevaluating and reshaping the practices of the school. This state of being in constant flux is what is expected and normal. A hallmark of MCS is the convening of members of the school community. Each day begins with a Morning Meeting and all-school meetings are scheduled on a regular basis. Volunteers from the outside community regularly transition into and out of the school context. They function as teachers, chaperones, support staff and friends to the children in attendance.

While JHF students see visual reminders of the past and images of Black trailblazers, MCS see on their walls their own reflections and creations. Samples of student work (mostly artistic) are displayed with prominence. Photographs of exemplary students become features on bulletin boards and model desirable dispositions. And finally, brightly-colored murals with characters that bear a striking resemblance to students cover building and room walls. On the murals and in classrooms, students can be observed engaging in collaborative projects. All of these aspects contribute to a child-focused environment.

Mission City School provides many opportunities for students to exercise choice and inform the design of the learning environment. Educators want children to have free time and ample opportunities to socialize and explore. Students do not always make sound choices and often find themselves in conflict with one another. When this is the case, adults at Mission City encourage students to come up with solutions to their own problems as preparation for solving problems in the larger society. In relation to the Hope School of Excellence, Mission City teachers are significantly more flexible when it comes to the enforcement of rules and policies. Students help to co-construct and revise community agreements. And, if children make a reasonable case for amending policies, adults in the school are generally open to incorporating their feedback.

Where JHF often conveys a high level of seriousness, MCS exudes a deep commitment to cultivating a space where children can be expressive, curious and carefree. Though developing an inclusive and enriching collaborative learning environment is of the upmost concern, MCS often achieves this through affirmations of individuality. Instruction generally takes place in small groups suited to the individual

needs of children. And in instances where the whole-group is engaged in specific lessons or activities, students have ample opportunities to speak and respond to questions. It is important to note that MCS educators frequently design lessons that incorporate place-based content and/or current events. While JHF may signal their commitments implicitly during instruction, MCS often employs pedagogy that is explicit in its intent.

Students' drawings of Mission City depict dynamic social learning environments. Rather than illustrate one instance or object in isolation, children at MCS often craft multiple vignettes on one page. From students' illustrations, it becomes evident that children are considering the relationship between school and the surrounding neighborhood context. Where JHF often shut its doors to outsiders to protect the children, MCS takes pride in its accessibility both as it pertains to students and community members.

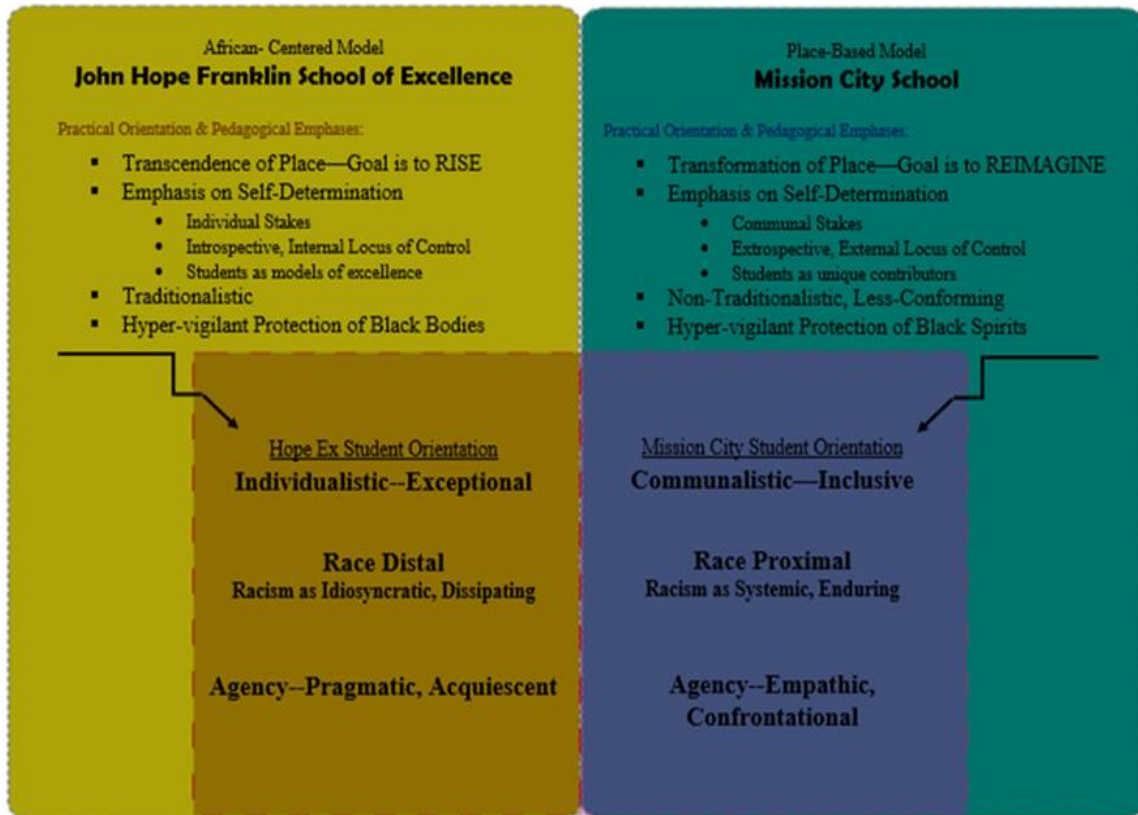
Returning to the Research Questions- Key Findings

The differences between JHF and MCS are animated through Black students' discussions of opportunities, constraints and their own agency. Enrolled students privilege worldviews similar to those endorsed within the school environment. Though the children at each school imagine similar community constraints, they differ in their framing of and response to these issues. MCS students' articulations evidence a more communalistic orientation. This manifests in three distinct ways. First, children often attribute the root causes of social problems to institutions and systems, rather than to individuals. Next, MCS children demonstrate increased empathy for persons experiencing hardship, prompting them to want to act on problems, regardless of whether

or not these problems impact them directly. Last, Mission City students imagine ways of engaging with and/or ameliorating social issues that necessitate forms of collective action.

Contrastingly, Hope students are significantly more individualistic and pragmatic in their worldviews and conceptions of agency. Because the children there feel strongly in individuals' (and their own) capacity to overcome obstacles, they tend to deemphasize the salience of structures as they assess social problems. Young people at JHF are seemingly less concerned about societal transformation writ large and more inclined to favor individual acts of kindness and mentorship. Finally, due to their resolute trust in persons of authority and suggested belief in the utility of rules/laws, JHF children generally propose solutions that, while thoughtful, are acquiescent to the status quo. These findings are summarized in the graphic below.

Figure 8.1: School/Agentic Child Relationship Conceptual Illustration



There is a major disjuncture as students across these two schools conceive of the social constraints most relevant to Black people. At JHF, children by and large do not consider race to be a significant factor in the contemporary era. They understand both overt racism, and its systemic manifestations, as horrible relics of the past. When Black people experience problems, it is most often due to their own poor choices, inadequacies and/or merit. Contrastingly, MCS students see racism as intersecting with virtually all major issues impacting African Americans in Riverview. While JHF children endorse the understanding that racism is dissipating and idiosyncratic, MCS students seem to be more inclined to believe that the fight for racial equality never ended. For the students of MCS,

news reports, public discourse, poverty and criminality are rife with deficit representations of Blackness that contradict their own conceptions of reality.

The findings of this dissertation suggest that when schools privilege individual or collective forms of agency within the context of school, children's' perceptions and priorities outside of school can be shaped and/or constrained by these institutional ideals. When students attend schools that socialize Black students as members of an exceptional group, their own self-confidence may hinder them in their ability to fully consider the potential significance of context and systemic inequities. Alternatively, Black children who are prompted to privilege collective progress may be overly-optimistic and dangerously self-sacrificing in the name of justice.

These schools are imperfect and sometimes fall short of even their own ambitions. They are also incredibly complex sites for student development. Adults from MCS and JHF both balance awareness of the status quo and what is necessary now with hope and longing for something better. Though I critique these schools, I understand that both are the products of a society that is raced and unequal. A history marked by hegemony and continual efforts to disenfranchise Black people have resulted in educators being tasked with making very difficult decisions about how to ensure that Black children from diverse backgrounds have access to opportunities. This project is a contribution to the discourses that aim to illuminate and rectify the tensions between educating for the world as it currently exists, and teaching towards an ideal world.

I pause here for a moment to remind both myself and readers that, even as I stand behind the findings outlined in this research, I do not offer these analyses in an attempt to label or denigrate any of the participants. The teachers and administration at both JHF

and MCS were both incredibly gracious in allowing my access into their schools, lives and classrooms. Never on any occasion did I witness adults act with malice towards the children. Every day, despite sometimes being tired, frustrated, ill or overwhelmed with issues in their own personal lives, educators showed perseverance in their work and loving dedication to their Black students. Though I didn't always agree with their approach¹³³, it was always evident that adults across these school sites acted with the very best of intentions. And, teachers' willingness to engage in critical conversations with me about their own practice are a testament to their commitment to continual growth as professionals.

In regard to the child participants, this is not a longitudinal project, and I make no hard claims about who these particular children will be in the future based on their responses. They are 10 and 11 year-olds who can and likely will change their minds. For most of the students at MCS and JHF, my study afforded a unique opportunity for them to share their not always fully-formed ideas and articulate opinions in relation to community and opportunity. The children, by and large, rose to the occasion. They spoke freely and often persevered through moments of frustration, struggling to find words to convey abstract ideas. I thank them for giving us the chance to listen and learn from them, and to think about how schools and adults can better support them as they develop.

Even taking into account the developmental stages of the child participants, it remains that these two groups of students often told very different stories about the same phenomena. And, if the conceptions that they show evidence of here continue to be

¹³³ I also learned a great deal from their expertise and methods, ideas I would take into my own classroom.

cultivated and affirmed, these students will go on to advance distinct worldviews reflective of the schools they attend. This study begins to illuminate how processes and practices in school, even in schools with liberatory aspirations, can produce outcomes in young children unanticipated by the theoretical scholarship. In the following piece, I bring the substantive findings of this study into conversation with the preexisting literature. More specifically, I discuss how my analyses support, extend and complicate discourses on liberatory pedagogy, Black children, and the role of context. Throughout, I offer critically-hopeful commentary on the significance of the sites, John Hope and Mission City School as we think about the broader educational and political landscape. Finally, I point to areas where future research and professional development are warranted.

Reconciling the Theoretical & the Practical

In Chapter 2, I offered analyses on Critical Emancipatory Pedagogy, emphasizing the theory behind African-centered (CREP) and Place-based models (CEPP). Neither Mission City School nor John Hope Franklin perfectly embody the ideals set forth in the literature. Though I assumed that this would be the case, it is worth discussing where and how each school, as an empirical example, affirms and/or challenges existing scholarship.

Mission City School enacts a place-based model with relative fidelity. Recall Tedla's (1995) criterion for assessing the development of community mindfulness within the context of CEPP. "...we need to regularly ask ourselves, "Are my actions/thoughts/motives beneficial? ...if the community knew my thoughts/actions/motives, what would they say?", Tedla (1995) writes (p. 23). The

frequent meetings at MCS appear to support children in cultivating an awareness of the feelings and opinions of others. Additionally, MCS students often made mention of the schools' explicit commitments to empathy and inclusion, both integral to the enactment of critical pedagogies of place. Though Trinidad's (2011) work did not involve Black children or traditional schools, my findings were consistent with those from her study of critical place-based learning opportunities. Like the Native Hawaiian youth in Trinidad (2011), when engaged in collaborative projects that centered local issues, Mission City students demonstrated an increased propensity towards local, collective activism. Particularly in the case of water justice/access, Black children at MCS articulate impassioned responses with an eye towards solutions.

Relatedly, MCS further demonstrates how schools can support young people in developing collective forms of agency (Kirshner, 2007). The collective focus of the school as an organization, is taken up by the students and applied to circumstances beyond school (Kirshner, 2007; Youniss & Hart; 2005). Similarly to what Bellino (2015) characterizes in her comparative study of Guatemalan youth as a "justice-oriented" (in Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) school model, Mission City teachers encourage students to analyze and raise concerns about the injustices that they see and experience. And just as importantly, adults support students as they imagine and act out strategic responses to these very issues. When the children decided to initiate a silent protest, they were not punished or reprimanded in any way. Likewise, I never observed teachers discouraging students' suggestions that members of the community, to include children, organize or practice civil disobedience towards local officials. This ability to practice intergenerational collaboration and facilitate shared decision-making processes (Camino,

2005; Youniss & Hart, 2005), is particularly compelling given the age of the children. Where other scholars have noted the possible tensions between adult expertise and student empowerment (Kirshner, 2008, Rogoff et al, 2003), MCS appears to be successful in achieving and sustaining equilibrium.

The findings at MCS also speak to the salience of school, regardless of students' histories of participation and/or familial background. Families opted to send their children to MCS for varied reasons. First, there are families drawn to the schools' proximity and convenience. Many Mission City students live within walking distance of the school. The ability to walk to school, if need be, relieves some of the pressure for lower-income families who may struggle with reliable transportation. Next, there are students and families drawn to the school's commitments to inclusivity. Mission City does not turn students away based on behavioral or academic needs. Finally, there are the families that sought out Mission City in light of its mission. These families, often led by matriarchs or patriarchs with experience in grassroots organizing, see MCS as an extension of their own political ideologies. Across all of these cases, I found students to be united in their assessments of social issues and their own agency.

Clearly, MCS has curated an environment that is attentive to the social and political dynamics of the school. The successes of MCS coincide with the literature on youth civic engagement and activism programs. Still, existing scholarship offers less insight into the challenges associated with school-based CEPP models. In reflecting on the findings from this study and case of Mission City, I highlight two areas of inquiry where future exploration is warranted. The first area relates to student success via traditional academic measures. While many scholars have insisted that academic rigor be

central to our understandings of good teaching and student empowerment (Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2014), it has been less clear how this rigor is/should be assessed in the context of CEP classrooms. Furthermore, because CEP is intentionally disruptive of the status quo, it stands to reason that traditional measures of achievement would be inadequate in capturing student learning. But, by definition, public schools like MCS are not independent entities who can disregard policies and other formalities. Even as a charter, MCS must navigate state and authorizer mandates. Though they are much more autonomous than most schools in Riverview, there is a level of accountability expected by various funders, board members and administrative officials. At the present moment, Mission City staff is thinking through a strategy to opt-out of state standardized tests. Until this goal is achieved, the school runs the risk of being dissolved (in the future) if ever they fail to demonstrate adequate improvement on standardized exams. As a public charter school whose ability to operate is at the discretion of the state and the charter authorizer, student performance on standardized tests is often a key determinant of a school's longevity. My point here is that much of the literature on youth agency explores extracurricular programming and/or local partnerships with community-based organizations. But, schools often function quite differently than community-based organizations (CBOs). Where CBOs can often write and rework curriculum to their own specifications, schools face penalties and closure for under-emphasizing the rote learning captured through standardized exams. CEP schools need additional support in order to reconcile the possible tensions between what public schools are required to teach, narrow assessments used to capture student learning, and, critical pedagogical approaches that facilitate and encourage agency.

Next, the case of Mission City raises interesting questions about how race and pluralism intersects with place-based models. Ginwright (2004) critiqued Afrocentrism for its “single-minded focus” and disconnectedness from the low-income, urban Black experience. He then advocated for what I later describe as a more place-based approach to Black education, which takes into account students’ daily lived experiences. Privileged in Ginwright’s (2004) account, are analyses of African American students in all Black schools. Similarly, most of the literature on critical place-based pedagogies studies young people who are of one racial group, and, who share residency in a particular community. Mission City School, though predominately Black, has a presence of middle-class white students and mostly white teachers who live in and around Riverview. On the one hand, the racial and class diversity coupled with the school’s collaborative focus, increases opportunities for cross-cultural connections. Students see raced dynamics play out in school and as such, are primed to think about how race operates outside of school. At the same time, the demographics have produced racial tensions and intensified many African American students’ desire for ethnic and cultural affirmations specific to the Black experience¹³⁴. Mission City staff, must think intently about how and what should be sustained in the context of school (Paris, 2012). Given that students’ race/class identities (among other things) may contribute to different assessments of *place* and their role in communities, they have the added challenge of affirming children’s cultural knowing (across racial, class and neighborhood lines) and reconciling student practices when they are in conflict.

¹³⁴ I speak to this briefly in Chapter 5. In addition to students’ inquiring about the possibility of more African American teachers, children also mentioned a desire to form a step team and dance team that incorporates synchronized movements and music generally regarded as culturally-Black.

John Hope demonstrates less fidelity to Afrocentric school models. Although they incorporate the virtues of Ma'at and Nguzo Saba as a means of cultural solidarity (Karenga, 1966), these principals, by and large, do not permeate classroom instruction. So, while the school makes an effort to draw from cultural resources, they default to the traditional and will sacrifice commitments to African-centeredness for standard academic achievement. Where John Hope is successful, is in its consistency in perpetuating positive, recurrent images of Black people and leaders. These referents affirm students, and work to restore a sense of history and heritage (Potts, 2003). Hope school is also very effective in cultivating individual, personalized agency in its Black students. While it is encouraging to see the children be so confident in school, this confidence is hinged (at least in part) on notions of Black elitism. Elitism contradicts Afrocentrism/CREP's goal of bringing continuity and solidarity to people divided by the institution of slavery (King, 2005; Lee, 2005). Students believe strongly in their own capacity to rise against all odds and so, they attribute the hardships experienced by others to individual deficits, lapses in discipline and self-determination. As they are less likely to see personal hardships as indicative of political issues, Hope students seem to have developed less critical social capital (Ginwright, 2007) than their peers at MCS.

I would liken the pedagogy enacted at JHF as a blend of Afrocentric education and no-excuses schooling (Seider et al, 2016). Characterized by stricter discipline practices and highly-structured learning activities, no-excuses schools appear to be at odds with critical pedagogies. Yet, Seider et al (2016) assert that sometimes, no-excuses schools can successfully lay the foundation for sociopolitical development by prompting students to achieve a "positive sense of self" and "social and material rewards" (Watts et

al, 1999) in Seider et al, 2016). Though JHF may currently exhibit a tendency towards “personally-responsible” citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004 in Bellino, 2015), this does not mean that they will never exhibit a more collective orientation towards political engagement.

John Hope Franklin School of Excellence also brings to bear the importance of context in shaping schools. I consider here how the educational landscape and history of Riverview schools are relevant in my analyses of JHF and its fidelity to the mission. In my conversations with JHF teachers and leaders, it became evident that many of them would like to see the school return to its former “glory days”¹³⁵. This restoration would include more fluid integration of Afrocentric ideals. As a public school tied to the district, JHF has struggled to maintain command over its own curriculum. Over the years, school closures, district mandates and shifting demographics have contributed to a dilution of the mission. Interestingly, though teachers hold to the tenets (of ACE and CRT), they don’t always feel at liberty to express these understandings in practice. In part, they are concerned about the perceptions of both the district and families, particularly those families who opted into the school only because of closures/district consolidation. The literature on race-based schooling has not always taken into account the ways that context and policy circumscribe possibilities for liberatory pedagogies (Ginwright, 2004). More studies should explore how broader policies, discourses and social phenomena are germane to the implementation of effective critical pedagogical models. And in the case

¹³⁵ See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the school’s evolution post-school mergers.

of schools, what role do they play in shifting ideologies so that others might be less-ignorant and more amenable to their work?

What is Revolutionary?: Black Visions in Classrooms

At the onset of this dissertation, I asserted that critical pedagogues were bound by the following common assumptions:

Tenets of CEP

1. Hegemony and oppression are ubiquitous within society. Schools have played an active role in producing and sustaining inequities.
2. There is no neutral education. All education is political. Critical emancipatory pedagogues take the stance of being justice oriented, anti-oppressive and anti-hegemonic. The aim is to eliminate subordination in schools and society (scholars are doubtful that this goal will be fully actualized)
3. Teachers are regarded as transformative intellectuals (i.e., key actors/facilitators in shifting paradigms in relation to tenets 1 & 2). Schools (and school officials) are obligated to reflect upon and challenge the status quo when it works to systematically disenfranchise individuals and/or groups.
4. All students hold viable intellectual and cultural resources that warrant equitable respect and public recognition in classrooms and beyond.
5. Education is to be a freeing and empowering practice. It should provide persons (e.g. teacher, student) with the tools to critically examine their world and pursue/solidify their own social-emotional, intellectual, cultural and political and economic well-being.

In light of the findings of this study, I conclude that greater specificity is required in the literature as it relates to these overarching tenets. Take for example tenet #5, which states that education is to be a freeing and empowering exercise. The Black students and teachers in my study demonstrate that visions of “freedom” and “empowerment” can contrast significantly across contexts. Though all definitions are rooted in hopefulness (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Kelley, 2002), there is the potential for competing conceptions of what these words mean and how best to achieve them (Dawson, 2001).

At John Hope, students embody a type of freedom informed by *nostalgia* (Baker, 1994). With nostalgia, the horrors of racism become relics of the past and the need for

mass revolution is diminished. One could argue that children at JHF are free to worry only about themselves and to carry on as individuals, without shouldering the huge weight of oppression on their shoulders. The children, by and large, do not seem to be burdened by negative public regard (Sellers et al, 1998) or the threat of racism. When coupled with their high private regard for themselves as African Americans, JHF children may feel less stressed and enhanced overall-wellbeing (Caldwell et al, 2002, Sellers et al, 2006). So while they will more than likely have to contend with the persistence of racism in the future, students do not carry with them the heavy cognitive and emotional load in the present. Furthermore, I note that to the teachers at John Hope, upholding a standard of Black excellence, even according to traditional measures, *is* revolutionary. They recognize that low expectations characterize many Black students' educational experiences (Ferguson, 2003; Lee, 1995; Rist, 1970), and strive to counteract that in their practice. Black educators there, and across many schools in the nation, employ this emphasis on achievement in an effort to affirm children and increase the likelihood of students' upward socioeconomic mobility (Seider et al, 2016).

Contrastingly, At MCS, visions of freedom for Black students are rooted in and informed by *critical memory* (Baker, 1994). Baker (1994), describes critical memory in this way:

Critical memory judges severely, censures righteously, renders hard ethical evaluations of the past that it never defines as well-passed. The essence of critical memory's work is the cumulative, collective maintenance of a record that draws into relationship significant instants of time past and the always uprooted homelessness of now (p.3)

It is this orientation that inspires in them the inclination to question, and the desire to enact collective (as opposed to individual) changes. MCS children imagine that they are free to resist and to attend to broad political issues, regardless of whether or not they experience these issues in their personal lives (Hamilton & Flanagan, 2007). Proponents of CEP would likely lean towards the visions of freedom advanced by the Mission City School staff and children. And yet, many outside of that community might see JHF, with its focus on empowerment and success via traditional pathways, as an exemplar in this respect. Even if there is agreement that students should act as political agents and disrupt the status quo, it is important to recognize that this is just one dimension of freedom relevant to the experiences of Black children. The cases of JHF and MCS prompt teacher-scholars to engage in conversation about the often-conflicting conceptions of freedom and, to delineate the implications associated with these varied ideologies.

Implications for Black Childhood & Critical Child Studies

As mentioned in earlier sections of the dissertation, critical emancipatory pedagogical practice, along with its role in facilitating Black student agency, has been understudied at the elementary school level. While this has implications for our knowledge around Black youth's sociopolitical development and positioning more broadly, it also obscures the potentially important relationship between Black childhood, political agency and classroom teaching. The dynamics of age and social status are not inconsequential to our understandings of emancipatory pedagogy, especially in the case of African American children. Black boys and girls alike have been subjected to adultification in both schools and public discourses (Ferguson, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2011;

Morris, 2007). Additionally, studies have found that Black children are punished harshly, perceived as less innocent, and their ages often overestimated (Goff et al, 2014). Dating back to the African Holocaust of enslavement and labor mandates for Black children barely able to talk/walk (King, 1997), Black childhood has come with it a heightened level of precariousness. As Black children's histories of participation in this country have often resulted in limited access to whimsy, the state of being a carefree Black girl (or boy) emerges as both a privilege and an act of resistance.

On the one hand, *as Black people*, children require access to educational opportunities that will prepare them to intervene in “patterns of material, cultural and spiritual deprivation” (King, 2005). On the other hand, there have been recent calls to reclaim childhood for Black children (Dumas & Nelson, 2016; Meiners, 2017). The imperative to preserve and/or reclaim African American childhood innocence is potentially incongruous with the desire to foster a critical awareness of oppression in young students. *What then constitutes a viable approach to critical emancipatory pedagogy as it relates to the empowerment and edification of Black children? Can young students grow in political consciousness and awareness of social inequities in ways that preserve the sanctity of childhood innocence? How are critical educators imagining Black childhood towards this end?* This project can be used in the service of thinking about these questions.

John Hope and Mission City represent different priorities as it relates to Black childhood. John Hope sets up an educational space where students' bodies are highly regulated. A number of studies explore surveillance and the over-emphases on discipline in classrooms serving Black children (Epstein et al, 2017; Ferguson, 2001, Fine, 1991;

Skiba et al, 2002; Tyson; 2003). Typically, the scholarship frames the enactment of authoritarian approaches as inequitable, i.e. as repressive practices that reify a racist status quo (Farmer, 2010; Love, 2014).

The case of John Hope highlights another dimension to relevant to our thinking about how discipline is employed in Black classrooms. Teachers there seem to be genuinely fearful, not of Black children (Love, 2014), but of what might happen to their Black students if they are not constantly aware of and responsible for their bodies (Coates, 2015). At John Hope, how Black bodies are perceived matters. Students, in theory, can minimize potential dangers by acting in disciplined and non-threatening ways. With this view, teachers protect their students by enforcing strict policies and reminding children to be hyperaware of how their dispositions and actions may be received. This is one way that they show love and care in the era of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice and the countless instances of Black children being slain and/or persecuted while doing child-like things¹³⁶ (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Although I could make the case that the actions of JHF educators are misguided, to do so would over-simplify their motivations and subsequent behaviors. As it stands, the literature on emancipatory pedagogies does not adequately account for the ways that teachers of Black children may feel obligated to protect, with militant vigilance, the bodies of Black students. With so much emphases on liberating students' minds, we lose sight of the very real dimension of physical safety (and protection from racist outsiders) informing teachers' behaviors.

¹³⁶ Martin was walking from the store,

At John Hope, school is a place where Black children learn how to thrive and survive. Blending into the dominant culture, is a means of securing social capital and keeping oneself out of imminent danger. This stance is not particularly progressive. It is also inconsistent with practice, as Black people are still slain and accosted by police even while acting as model citizens. Still, I argue that scholars and practitioners would benefit from further interrogation of this phenomena. If Black teachers are unable to reconcile fears of placing Black students' physical bodies in harm's way, it is less likely that they will enact pedagogies that afford opportunities for Black children to be physically and politically free. This concern also applies to families concerned about students' physical well-being.

MCS teachers more-closely approximate what I imagine to be a suitable balance between the preservation of Black innocence, fun, structure and critical problem-solving. Adults manage to engage Black children in discussions of very serious issues, while providing frequent breaks from these activities and incorporating play throughout. I maintain that successful models of CEP for Black children necessitate a dual focus on critical social analyses and folly. Keeping in mind all of the ways that Black childhood is threatened, a liberatory educational approach that does not attend to children's developmental and social-emotional needs is simply not liberatory. This is why studies of sociopolitical development in young children are abundantly important. While this dissertation serves as an entrée into analyzing how notions of Black childhood may be consistent or inconsistent with critical pedagogy as theorized, more research is required in this domain. In particular, future scholarship should moves towards a framework for critical emancipatory pedagogy and youth sociopolitical development that names Black

childhood (and the reimagining of Black childhood (Dumas & Nelson, 2015) as a core analytical consideration.

Last, I see this study as making a case for more explicit thinking around methodologies and methods that humanize young children whilst still being consistent with the aims of critical ethnographic research. In studying spaces of pedagogical possibility, it is essential that we too, as education researchers, create liberatory opportunities for young people to voice their own impressions related to life and learning. And also, that we be prepared to honor and engage with children's articulations in their deeply complex, impassioned and sometimes ambivalent forms. In conceptualizing this project, I drew heavily from my experiences teaching elementary-aged children. I wanted students to feel affirmed during their interviews, to feel smart and articulate even during moments of uncertainty. The drawing activities provided another platform for children to voice complex ideas (Grover, 2004; Koh, 2010). I took these drawings (and students' discussions of them) very seriously.

While previous studies involving adolescents offer many examples of engaged research that is innovative and empowering for Black adolescents (see Akom et al (2016) and YPAR 2.0 as a recent example), empirical scholarship involving Black children provides little insight into new and developmentally-appropriate methodologies that support similar aims. Consequently, I emphasize here that key aspects of this research, namely- *relationship-building, play and creative arts*- supported young participants in making latent considerations about race, community, and opportunity more explicit. I see the tools effectively employed throughout this research as contributing to the field in the area of child-centered research. Though not without limitations, these strategically-

employed elements prompted Black children's thinking around their own ability to enact change and thrive despite adversity. More work should be done in an effort to delineate additional, generative tools that are effective in capturing Black children's knowing.

Final Word- *Which is better?*

On a multitude of occasions i.e. during the conceptualization, enactment and final stages of this study, I was posed with the question of "which school is better?". Given the comparative nature of the project, questions of this sort should be expected and welcome. Admittedly though, I have at times been resistant to respond, sometimes even (particularly in the data collection phases) boldly dismissing the question all together. When I initiated this work, I committed to being balanced and open in my analyses. Within both schools, I presumed that neither are perfect and that there would be compelling evidence in each of both hope and struggles. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1986) speaks to this very idea in her essay on goodness in schools:

The assumption is that no school will ever achieve perfection. It is inconceivable that any institution would ever establish an equilibrium that satisfied all of its inhabitants, where values closely matched behaviors, and where there was no tension between tradition and change. Even the most impressive schools show striking moments of vulnerability, inconsistency, and awkwardness. (p.14)

Yes, if given the choice of where to send my own (future) Black child, I would likely preference one school site over the other. As a former classroom teacher well-versed in the dominant culture and traditional indices of academic learning, I see MCS as affording

something unique, a welcome supplement to my own efforts to socialize and educate my child(ren). Still, I recognize that all families don't have this choice, nor do they have access to the same resources that I and my own children will likely be privy. Rather than identifying which school is better, my default stance has been to highlight when and where John Hope and Mission City are embodying and/or aspiring towards goodness (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1986). A goal and a challenge, has been to think about how the schools in this study reflect a genuine and imperfect effort to respond to pervasive social problems. What can be learned from their attempts as it pertains to society, equity and Black children's holistic development? So, even as I critique the tensions and inconsistencies of each school, perhaps one more than the other, I do so while still acknowledging their capacity to do *good*. Such capacity is evidenced every day.

Still, we must recognize that what is considered "good" for Black children, and when, can vary considerably. In this concluding chapter, I have addressed some of the tensions embodied by JHF and MCS. More precisely, I have highlighted schools' vigilant protection of Black bodies versus Black spirits, and, the pursuit of Black excellence via traditional achievement versus the cultivation of critical social capital and interrogation of the status quo. Teachers, researchers and families must engage in honest dialogue about what is afforded and/or constrained by a mutually-exclusive commitment to any of these stances. It is not unreasonable that many Black people would want to follow traditional pathways and worry (primarily or exclusively) about themselves and their own families. It is not unreasonable that parents and teachers of Black children would be concerned about the risks of taking a hard stand against inequitable institutions, as there are many examples of freedom fighters who have lost their lives, met fierce opposition,

and/or fallen short of the goal. And yet, there are many examples in history that show how many, banded together in solidarity, can enact positive changes in society. There are stories of trauma and revolution that remind us both of enduring inequalities and our potentiality as civic agents. Finally, there is data that consistently shows that being excellent, while Black, often does not come with it the promise of economic and social freedom. As critical pedagogues, it is our obligation to make sense of all of these truths and uncover strategies which honor a range of concerns and commitments.

A final word and challenge to schools, scholars, families, politicians—to all of us, is to pursue something better with a sense of urgency. Are we truly listening and learning from others' efforts to uplift individuals and inspire collective action? How can we capitalize on the moments of goodness and educational justice in ways that beget more of the same? My hope is that this work illuminates some areas where we might begin to focus our attention.

Appendices

Appendix A: Leader Interview Protocol

- Leader Background Information
 - What is your role at the school? How long have you served in this capacity?
 - What brought you here? How did you come to enter into this role? [address leader's background, credentialing, past experiences, personal/professional interests, relationships]
 - As the [insert role], what are your top priorities?
 - How did _____ become your top priorities?

- School History & Mission
 - I'd like to know a little more about the history of the school: Can you summarize the school's history?
 - How did [school name] come into existence?
 - Did you play any part in establishing or reforming the school?
 - I've read the website and published materials, but I'd like to hear you talk about the school's mission in greater detail. Please tell me about the vision and mission for the school.
 - How do you feel about this vision/mission?
 - Given this mission, what are the goals for student learning (content and otherwise)?
 - Do you have additional or personal goals for student development?
 - What kinds of community members do you hope students will become? Citizens? Global citizens? Does your vision for the school include consideration of these things?
 - In what ways do you see the school's programming, curriculum & instruction as supporting the mission? [Ask for specific examples]
 - How do the curriculum/co-curricular resources embody/relate to the schools' mission?
 - What are some areas wherein you believe the school is thriving?
 - Can you identify areas of potential growth and development?

- School Environment/Stake-holders
 - What makes the [school name] school environment unique?
 - What kinds of opportunities are presented here, that might be difficult to find in other schools/spaces?
 - Can you talk a little bit about the teachers here? What are they like?
 - How do you identify/ recruit teachers? Other staff?
 - How do they become oriented to the school's mission?

- What kinds of supports do you offer them? (i.e. coaching, professional development, evaluation procedures, curriculum consultation). Do you provide a curriculum or other resources?
- If you wanted someone to better understand the school's mission and curriculum in practice, who would you have them observe? Why?
 - Can you give me an example of upper elementary classroom instruction that you see/saw as being very aligned with the school's approach to teaching & learning?
- Who are your students (& their families)?
 - Can you speak to the demographics, cultures, backgrounds, experiences represented here?
 - Are there things that many of your students/families seem to have in common?
 - What are the primary needs?
 - What are their strengths?
- How do families become oriented to the mission and culture of the school? What about students?
 - Have you experienced any push-back in trying to orient families/students?
- Can you describe a memorable interaction that you've had with students (and/or families) that speaks to the school's mission?
 - Why does this particular instance resonate with you?

Appendix B: Teacher Interview Protocol

- Teacher Background Information
 - What is your position at the school? How long have you served in this capacity?
 - Walk me through your journey into teaching: How did you come to enter into this [current] role? [Should address teacher's background, credentialing, relevant past experiences, personal/professional interests, relationships]
 - Can you tell me about this school specifically?
 - How would you describe the schools' mission?
 - Was the schools' mission a factor in your deciding to work here?

- Approach to Teaching/Teaching Identity
 - If I asked you to describe yourself as a teacher with only one word, what word would you choose?
 - Can you tell me more about why you chose the word [...]
 - What is your teaching philosophy?
 - What people or experiences have influenced the development/evolution of this philosophy? In what ways?
 - Has your employment at [school name] school had any bearing on your development as an educator?
 - How much do you think your teaching philosophy aligns with the schools' mission/goals? What is well-aligned? Where do you diverge?
 - Can you describe a lesson you've taught that embodies your approach to teaching?
 - Did you design this lesson? In general, how does curriculum development occur at _____ school?
 - What things are you, the teacher, doing and thinking about during this lesson?
 - What are students doing? What does learning look like in this space?
 - In this study, I am interested in how elementary-aged kids in your classroom (and Detroit) are thinking about the world, many of those students would identify as Black and/or African American. Does the race/ethnicity of your students factor into your teaching/teaching philosophy?
 - What about Black children in particular, does your teaching philosophy include unique attention/awareness to Black students' development or experiences in your classroom?
 - What are your greatest strength(s) as an educator? What is an area that you're hoping to develop further?

- Classroom Environment

- What does a typical day in your classroom look and feel like?
 - What are students doing? How are they participating?
 - Do you have specific expectations in terms of behavior? Please explain.
 - What opportunities are there for students to shape/influence the classroom environment?
 - How do you think students' experience your classroom?
 - What's your relationship like with your students? How do you think they would describe you as their teacher?
 - How do students interact with one another? What are your goals for them [students] socially? As community members? Citizens? Global citizens?
 - When they are out in the world, how do you want them to be/act?
 - Do you offer any guidance in reaching these goals?
 - What are some of the biggest challenges that you contend with in the classroom space?
 - How about your students, what are some of the biggest challenges that they face, both inside and outside of schools?
 - Do believe that Black students have to contend with any additional/unique constraints?
 - Do you think that your beliefs or understandings about challenges faced by students impacts how you teach them? Do your beliefs play out in your practice? In what ways?
- Relationships/ Community Connections
- What resources do you draw upon in planning lessons/teaching? (leadership, community, students, texts, online content)
 - Does the school offer any specific supports in the development of curriculum?
 - How do you engage parents and/or community members?
 - Do you see a connection between what you do in the classroom, and the greater society? Please explain.
 - How do you see your instruction as supporting students as agents of change in the community, country or globally?
 - What specific strategies do you employ in an effort to support students as engaged citizens or as social and political beings?

Appendix C: Child Interview Part 1/2

➤ Introduction

Hi. I want to thank you again for agreeing to talk to me today. As you know, I come from the University of Michigan and I am working with your school to get a better understanding of how children learn and grow. We want to know what kids here think about school. We also want to know more about how students understand the world around them.

In this conversation, you are the expert. There are no right or wrong answers. I'll be recording our discussion to make sure I don't miss anything important, but all of your responses will be kept CONFIDENTIAL. This means that I'll won't tell anybody (teachers, parents, classmates) what you've said. You don't have to worry about getting in trouble. What we talk about won't impact your grades.

One last thing: You can choose not to answer any question that you don't want to or ask me to explain more if a question isn't clear. You can also stop the interview at any time, and for any reason. Make sense? Do you want to continue with the interview? Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Student Interview (pt. 1, Background & School Experiences)

➤ Student Background Information

- Let's begin by you telling me a little bit about yourself: Can you give me 3 or 4 words that describe who you are?
- Sometimes people use race or ethnicity to describe themselves. Has anyone ever talked to you about race/ethnicity? What did you talk about?
 - How would you describe your race or ethnicity? (provide list of options, if necessary)
 - For you, what does it mean to be a _____ person?
 - What do you like about being Black/African American?
 - Is there anything that you don't like?
- What are some of your favorite things?
- What do you want to be/do when you grow up?
 - Why do you want to do that kind of work?
 - Do you think being _____ will be easy or hard? How so?
- For you, what does it mean to have a "good life"? What does a good life look like?
 - Do you think that it is easy or difficult for kids to grow up and have good lives? Who/what will help you? What might make it difficult?
 - Do you think that (Black*) people have a harder time getting the things they want in life? How so/Why not? *use their term if another is offered*
- Let's talk a little bit about your previous experiences in school. How long have you been a student here?
 - Why did you or your family pick this school? If you changed schools, do you know why?
 - (if applicable) How does _____ school compare with your previous school?

➤ Experiences in (Current) School

- How would you describe this school to someone who's never been here?

- What do you think are the big goals of the school? What is important here?
- How about your classroom, what's your classroom space like?
- What words would you use to describe your teachers?
 - How about [focus teacher] specifically, how would you describe her?
- What are the kids here like?
- What is your favorite thing about this school?
- What's your least favorite thing about this school?
 - Why do you see _____ as being a problem? Can this issue be changed/addressed? Who is responsible for fixing the problem?
- Can you tell me about a time that you felt smart in school?
 - Pride?
 - Sad/Unhappy?
 - Free, i.e. like you had a choice (or choices)?
 - Frustrated?
 - Like a leader?
- Please describe an important lesson that you've learned at this school. (if they offer something academic, ask about other important lessons about being a person, member of a community, etc)
 - Who taught you this? How did they communicate this to you?

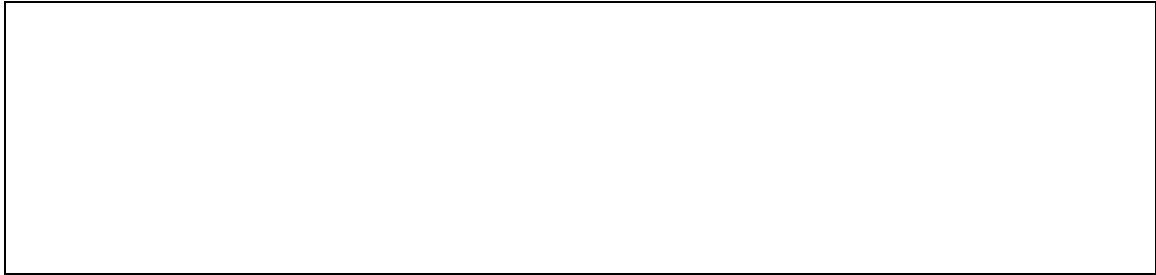
To get a better picture of what it is like to be a student at your school, I'm going to ask you to draw me a picture. You don't have to worry about how the picture looks, just draw things to the best of your ability. You can use stick figures and words as well. {Students will have a copy of the prompt below. Drawing/writing materials will be provided}

Today's Date: _____

My School Space

What is it like in school?? Draw a picture in this box.

What did you draw? Explain your picture in the space below.



(pt. 2, Community, Nation & World)

For this second part of the interview, I'm going to ask you questions about your community nation and world.

➤ Thoughts on Community

- For you, what is “community”? (try to capture both geographical and fictive conceptions)
 - Who is a part of your community?
- What is good about your community?
- Are there problems in your community or things that you worry about? Name a couple.
- Who is affected by these problems?
 - Why do you think _____ people have these problems?
 - Does race or ethnicity have anything to do with it?
 - Do you think that people might have things harder in your community because they are Black? If yes, how so?
- Let's talk about one of the problems you mentioned. How do you think the problem of _____ can be solved?
 - Is there anything that you can do to help, either now or in the future?
 - Are there other things you might change?

There's been a lot going on in the news related to Black people and their experiences in the country and world. I want to learn about how you're thinking about what's going on with people outside of your community.

➤ Reflections on Nation & World

- What are some big issues that are going on right now in the country? The world?
 - What about big issues faced Black people?
 - Black people have different problems than others?
 - How did you find out about these issues/problems?
 - Do people talk to you about things like this? Who?
- Do you think that Black people have it easier or harder than others? Where? When?
 - Do you think that you, as a Black person, might have to do things differently to be successful?
 - How does this make you feel?
- Who should help to solve the big problems that you named?
 - How would _____ help to make things better?
- Do you think you can make the country better? How so?
 - What about the world? Are there things you hope to do to make the world a better place, for Black people? others?

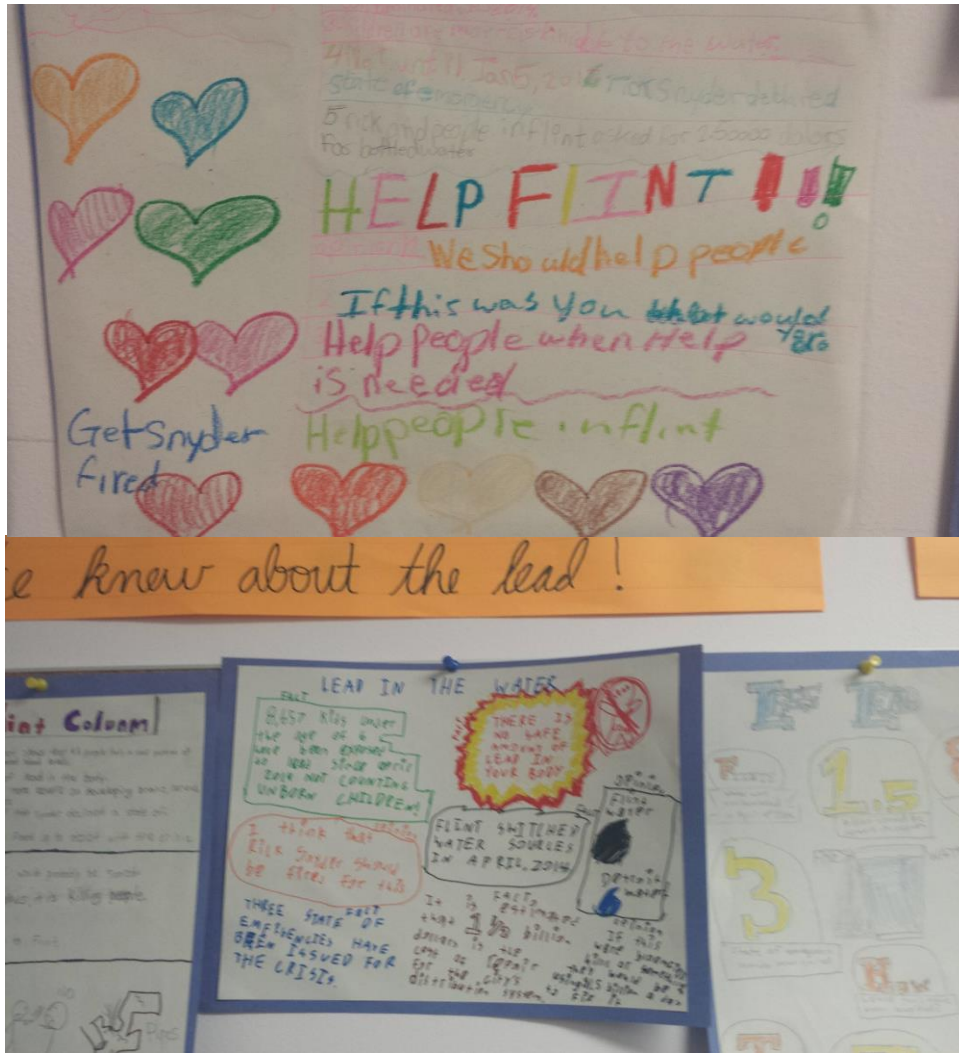
Today's Date: _____

More about Me

What does being Black/African American mean to you?? Draw a picture in this box.

What did you draw? Explain your picture in the space below.

Appendix D: Flint Posters



8,657 children has been exposed to this disease. Snyder declared state of emergency. Snyder now about the water. The good thing is that there had been using Lake Huron.

NO!!!

WE NEED HELP!!!!

Flint

No Snyder, No Snyder
 No Snyder, No Snyder
 No Snyder, No Snyder
 No Snyder, No Snyder

Gets fired

STOP CRISIS!
 by Adanya Lewis-E

Flint's water has been contaminated with lead since April 2014.

Flint's pipes are corroded with lead.

The People of Flint want to see Snyder's e-mails about the crisis.

There is no safe level of lead in your body.

I Feel Sick! I Feel Sick! Flint's Adanya

People have consumed a lot of water. People might not get the water because they're not interested.

Lead Poisoning

Lead (Brain)

Lead Poisoning

Poison

Child with Lead

Dead

Flint

Boooooo!

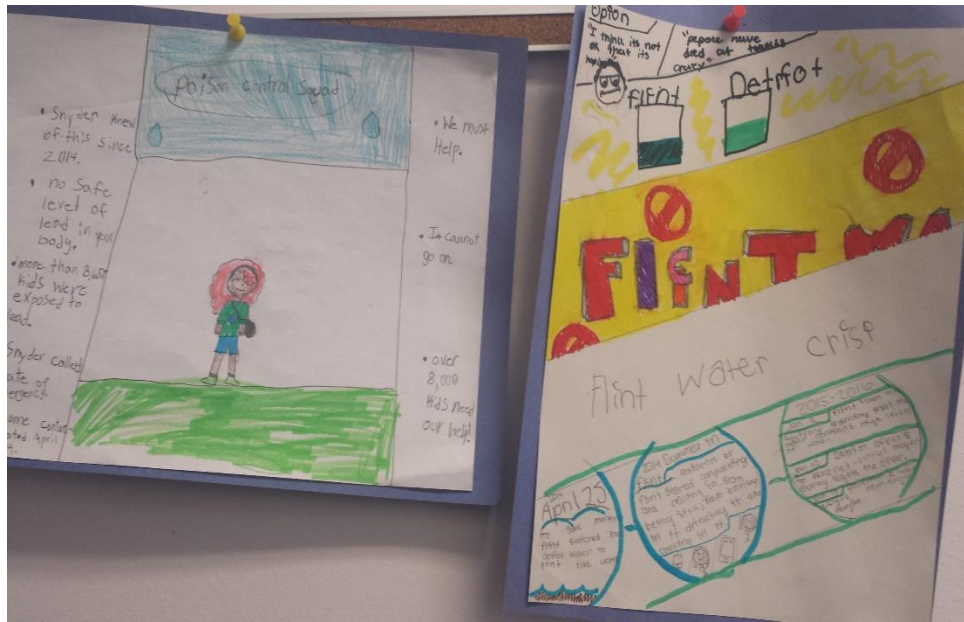
Flint Water Crisis

fact 1
 fact 2
 fact 3
 fact 4
 fact 5

My Opinion 1
 My Opinion 2

Water Every One Deserve Clean Water


HELP



Q Flint Water Crisis


Facts
 they have old pipes
 the government knew
 that lead was in the water

Opinion
 I am mad at the
 government



BREAKING NEWS

1. 8,657 children have been poisoned by flint water
2. The Flint water has been poisoned since April 2014
3. Thousands of children have been exposed to lead
4. Celebrities have been upset about Flint water
5. Flint switched water sources to cut



8x5=40 9x6=48

BREAKING NEWS

8,657 Children Have been poisoned by high levels of lead in their bodies.

The flint water Has been poisoned since April 2014.

An estimated 1.5 billion is the cost of repair for the city's ~~repair~~ damaged distribute system to Flint

Three state of emergency Have been issued for the Michigan city of Flint

Thousands of children Have been exposed to lead

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