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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

**H.E.L.L.A: A Bay Area Critical Racial Affinity Group Committed to Healing,  
Empowerment, Love, Liberation, and Action**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

EDUCATION

by

**Farima Patricia Pour-Khorshid**

September 2018

The Dissertation of Farima Patricia Pour-  
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Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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2018

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H.E.L.L.A: A Bay Area Critical Racial Affinity Group Committed to Healing,  
Empowerment, Love, Liberation, and Action

by

Farima Patricia Pour-Khorshid

Abstract

Despite repeated pleas for diversifying a predominantly White U.S. teacher workforce, a significant teacher diversity gap persists in almost every state of the country (Boser, 2014). Teachers of Color who enter the profession with commitments to social justice, in particular, face an array of racist structural and interpersonal challenges often leading to their burnout and in some cases push out from the field (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). In response to neoliberal, color evasive, and apolitical approaches to teacher support, educators and organizers have reclaimed and reframed their pedagogies through critical professional development (Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015) to center healing from the damaging impacts of oppression (Ginwright, 2015; Pour-Khorshid, 2016). This three-year ethnographic case study (Yin, 2003) of a California racial affinity group of 12 critical educators of Color (CEoC) committed to healing, empowerment, love, liberation and action (H.E.L.L.A.) offers insights about alternative approaches to teacher support rooted in critical-healing praxes (Cariaga, 2018).

Relying on ethnographic approaches such as participant observation (Wilson, 1977), semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002), and *testimonios* (Pour-Khorshid, 2016) as focal methods, I utilized grounded theory (Straus & Corbin, 1998) to examine: (a) the nature of learning and interactions that unfold over time, and (b) the

personal and professional impact that members experienced through their participation. The findings from this research illuminate how the group explicitly centered 12 members' experiences, needs, and collective knowledge to (a) engage in fugitive learning as an act of political and pedagogical resistance to White Supremacy; and in so doing, (b) cultivated a sacred space for soul care and collective healing. I conclude by discussing how and why critical racial affinity group spaces for CEoC offer a more holistic approach to support their personal, political, relational, and pedagogical growth and well-being.

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my baby brother, Mazyar “Mike” Pour-Khorshid, Jr., may he continue to rest in power with our daddy and countless other loved ones who have transitioned from this world. I started this PhD journey just a few months after he passed away and I endured so much pain as I attempted to finish what he was so proud of me for pursuing. I hope to inspire the world through the legacy that he left behind as I continue sharing his revolutionary love through my work.

*I hella miss you hermanito lindo, you will forever be my source of strength and inspiration. I am forever grateful for the 25 years I was blessed by your existence.*



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There are so many souls that I must acknowledge for pouring love into my life in order to make this journey possible for me. I am because we are and in the words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

Ubuntu—is the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality—Ubuntu—you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.

My existence would not be possible without the radical love that Emilia and Mazyar Pour-Khorshid experienced when they decided to trust their hearts and marry outside of their race and religion, despite the struggles they knew that they would face as a result. While my father's death and absence later impacted my family significantly, his spiritual presence and love also influenced us well after he left this physical realm and I'm eternally grateful for that.

To my mother, you are the the most incredible, funny, witty, strong and loving woman I have ever known and you are who I aspire to be like every single day. I have witnessed you navigate so many tragedies and so much trauma throughout our lives as you moved through grief and physical suffering in ways that taught me so much about the strength that women of color— particularly mothers of color— have had to develop and embody while living in a world that does not stop for your pain.

To my baby brother, whose spirit and love now guides me in all that I do. Your death was the most intense pain I have ever experienced in my life, and yet the intense love that I got to experience as your older sister during your 25 years of life planted so many seeds in my heart and soul that continue to flourish into my purpose and calling every day. I am forever grateful for having the honor to experience your existence and my heart yearns for the moment that we can be reunited once again.

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To my family and village of *tias* and *tios*, *primas* and *primos*, *madrinas* and *padrinos*, who are too many to name but who I also cannot imagine my life without. When my father died, Tio Leonel, Tia Ruth, Tio Tito, Tia Chilo, Tia Chepita, Tio Roberto, Tia Rosalina, Tia Isolda, Baba, Tia Dora, Tia Izayda, Tia Julia, Tia Chavela, Tia Marlene, Aunty Kianceh, and many others, made their presence in our lives felt. My family was always there through all of the tragedies and triumphs in our lives. Our parties, trips, and gatherings at Hometown Buffet have always kept me grounded. I feel so lucky to be as close as I am with them.

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tragedy and I contemplated quitting many times before I had even started the journey. You reassured me that you would support me and I truly believed that your actions were spiritual signs from my brother because after all, what PhD advisor that doesn't even know you yet would go out of their way like that? There were moments when I'd call you or come to your office weeping or furious or anxious and you were always my safe haven within an institution that I often felt suffocated in. You have always cared more about my humanity and well-being than my production as a grad student and you always gently pushed me to keep moving forward and to finish this PhD. You never judged me and you've supported me through some of the most difficult moments of my graduate school journey and life and for that I am forever grateful. I love you dearly.

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To my mentor/comrade/friend Dr. Antonio Nieves Martinez, thank you for teaching me so much in the short years I knew you and built with you. You've also taught me so much through your work and organizing but also through your absence, the common denominator has been radical love. I still think about what that means when I think about the day I heard the heartbreaking news that you were no longer with us. May you rest in peace with all of the other revolutionaries that we love and miss and that are now in paradise, free from all forms of oppression.

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Thank you all for existing in this world, I am nothing without you.

## Chapter One: My Positionality and Journey as a Graduate Student/Teacher/Organizer of Color Committed to Social Justice

I cry. I write. I organize. I teach. I cry some more. I keep writing. I process. I force myself to rest. I dream of my angels who once had warm blood and thick skin, who would breathe life into my being and reminded me of what is possible. I hear their voices and see their faces in my slumber and I wake up with dried tears that feel like cracked skin. I struggle to get out of my bed, the weight on my chest feels like a thousand oceans of tears that submerge me. My body struggles and surrenders at the same time. I pray and ask for strength to get up, to shower, to get dressed, to give my very best to small children who carry the same oceans to school with them instead of superhero backpacks and lunch pails. I hug them, I love them, I remind them that they are not alone.

As I leave my kindergarten students, I ask my angels for the strength to navigate university institutions so I can offer my best self. I extend my hand to help my university students as they ride out their high tides and as their waters collide with mine. They cling to me like I am a life vest, yearning for help to stay above water, seeing other professors from the distance as they write behind computers caring less about their safety, about their well-being, about their humanity. I hug them, I love them and I remind them that they are not alone.

When I finally get home, it still feels like safe harbor even when it is flooded with intergenerational trauma and the new generational loss that's become so constant that we've become numb and learned to laugh through our broken hearts. I extend my hand to remind my family that we can navigate these waters together as long as

we continue to hold on to one another. I hug them, I love them, I remind them that they are not alone. We ride the waves together as their waters collide with mine.

I find my way back to solitude. I'm confronted by emails and deadlines that keep rising as my head plunges. I'm tired, I just want to reach the shoreline, these waters are too intense, these waves are too much. So I weep. I write. I respond to more messages. Then I push everything and everyone away to find calm. They worry but I can finally exhale.

I search for purpose as I struggle with what it all means. I float. I reflect. I try to rest, to love myself unconditionally and to remind myself that I am not alone. I pray to dream of my angels who once had warm blood and thick skin, who breathed life into my being and reminded me of what is possible. I hope to hear their voice in my slumber and wake up with dried tears that feel like cracked skin. I pray that the same salt from this ocean that stings me can also heal each wound in this dialectic.

I can hear them whisper a thousand loving questions through the waves, which forms each tide:

*Did you know that the depth of your oceans create fugitive paths for others in search for their own freedom? Sometimes these waters can drown you when you risk traveling alone, but other times it leads you to new shores so that you don't choose to stay dry in a false sense of safety? Don't you know that while you may be wounded, you inspire others by your relentless pursuit to heal? Don't you know that your healing and your hurting does not have to be a binary—you can be hurting and healing just like water is both hydrogen and oxygen, it is a "yes and" not a "yes but." Don't you know that traveling so many oceans has taught you patience and presence and perseverance? Don't you know that you will not die from those toxic spills of White supremacy as long as you do not drink of its water?*

So I listen and I receive. Sometimes it feels like I'm drowning. Sometimes it feels like I'm floating and once every blue moon it feels like I'm walking on water, it depends on the day, or the hour, or the moment. I find the strength to keep swimming as I hear their voice whisper in the wind to guide me:

*Always remember that water and oil will never mix. You do not have to swim like they swim. You do not have to rush across these endless waters, you can swim at your own pace and at your own capacity because when you are not at ease then you manifest dis-ease and you deserve longevity. The world needs you to survive. Embrace the depth of your pain-because it is yours and no one else's. Find purpose in your ocean, in all of its grief, its calm, its depth, experience the fullness of its range. But for now, it is ok to just float, look up towards the sky, and remember that we are with you, allow the sun to kiss your eyelids, and dry your tears until they feel like cracked skin. Find gratitude in each tear, release it with love and compassion, it will sometimes sting your wounds but remember it also heals them because your pain is your power and your power is in your healing.*

### **Teaching to Heal my Younger Self**

Little did I know that being a Kindergarten teacher would help heal the little girl inside of me, the one that I carry every single day, in and out of the classroom. This little biracial Nicaraguan and Iranian girl's father was robbed and murdered right before she started preschool. Her mother was left to care for a five-month-old, a three-year-old, and five-year-old in a country where she was still read as "illegal" by Eurocentric standards. By the time I started kindergarten, I struggled deeply with separation anxiety and at my developmental cognitive level, I worried that my mother would die from a broken heart. This constant fear and grief translated to defiant behavior as soon as I started school and I was deeply misunderstood by most of my teachers. I vividly remember my kindergarten teacher pinning "naughty notes" on my back as the school system unapologetically and publicly humiliated me for my

oppositional behavior on a daily basis. Just like that, as early as five years old, I hated school. My dysfunctional relationship to schooling worsened over time, especially as I encountered more traumatic experiences, more disconnected teachers or long-term subs, and more Fs on my report cards throughout my development as a young woman of Color.

By the time I turned 14, my mother was disabled and could no longer work so my sister and I started working to help pay bills. My *abuelita*, who left Nicaragua to help care for us when my father was killed, was dying in the hospital. Since she spoke Spanish but not English, my family members and I took shifts to be with her—we continually advocated for her and made sure that she was treated like a human being since she had been mistreated so many times there already. I chose the night shift with her and I would go directly to the hospital after working evening shifts at a neighborhood pizza shop. Doing any homework at the hospital became an impossible feat because each night my *abuelita* wept and yelled in anguish about the ants that were eating her legs and would beg for someone to take them off of her. I would feel so helpless because I knew those ants were actually Gangrene and her legs had already been amputated but the morphine took her to a different reality.

I struggled with depression, sleep deprivation, anxiety attacks, and suicidal ideation. On most mornings I would arrive late and since the school policy required teachers to lock their doors after the bell rang, all tardy students had to report to the cafeteria and wait as each person's name was documented for Saturday detention and then sent back to class, even though by the time we returned, class was essentially

over. At that point, Saturday detentions had become unfeasible for me as I was ordered by the court to be on juvenile probation after being caught for stealing that year. I was required to do mandatory community service every weekend under the supervision of probation officers, which was an alternative to serving time within the juvenile hall. I vividly remember us in assembly line packing socks, toiletries, and batteries—we wrapped them in Christmas paper for juvenile inmates—or traveling in the big white van with other youth, all wearing our bright neon vests to clean up nearby recreational areas and parks.

Fed up with administrators and teachers who would not hear me out, I organized a student walkout my junior year. The tardy policy was impacting so many of us in ways that were punitive and that created more harm. I ended up in the local newspaper the next day and only then was the school administration willing to finally hear us out and negotiate alternatives. That year I was taking mostly remedial classes with teachers who were easily frustrated with my “attitude” when I would critique their pedagogy and complain about the countless worksheets that were meant to keep me quiet and busy, not thinking or learning. I will never forget when one of my high school teachers kicked me out after I complained about having to watch another movie which had nothing to do with the class subject—the next day she told me that if I did not come back to her class for the rest of the semester she would still give me a C on my report card. Needless to say, I did not return to that pointless class and I still passed.

I almost didn't graduate because I had to take algebra class three times in high school. Each time I took the class, it was taught by long-term substitutes who had no idea how to teach the subject and who were really only there for crowd control purposes. While I did have a few great teachers, I knew something was wrong with my high school experience. Too many of my friends were eventually kicked out or had dropped out which led to an array of heartbreaking outcomes for them, and I held a lot of resentment towards the school, district and education system. However, ethnic studies, in many ways, became my saving grace. It was through the PUENTE Program that I met a Latinx professor from a local university who was recruiting high school seniors to apply for her university partnership program. At the time, there was a severe shortage of bilingual teachers in California and her grant would support students like me through a teacher pipeline model.

Meeting her changed my life. Somehow, she convinced me that I was not only capable of going to college but that I was also desperately needed in the profession. Just like that, my struggles throughout my childhood and adolescence could suddenly be assets that would help me support other struggling youth in my own community. The fact that I was able to garner funding and support for college surpassed any dreams that I had conjured up for my future.

The night before my high school graduation, I was daydreaming about what my life might be like as a college student when I was suddenly held up at gunpoint. In a split second, my excitement quickly shifted to terror and I thought I was going to die. The proximity of the gun on my face, neck, back and chest pressed and slid

down slowly as this man, with his face covered, sexualized my teenage body. I gave him whatever money I could because I was fearful for my life, this faceless man triggered my deepest fear, that I would be robbed and murdered just like my father had been. He took the money, slapped my bottom and then took off running. I instantly fell to the ground and I wept and prayed in gratitude because I was alive. I called home immediately and I remember my brother and cousin running to the corner looking for that man. My heart raced as I feared that they would lose their lives trying to protect me. I got flashbacks of the drive-by that happened on our street the year before, and when my brother was jumped and held up gunpoint at that same corner, and the time he was robbed and pistol whipped in front of our home. As traumatizing as these experiences all were, I managed to enroll in community college courses immediately after my high school graduation. I wanted to become busy immediately so that I would have no time to feel fear, stress or anything other than focused on my new life transition.

While my university experience was also wrought with trauma, I learned to suppress everything in order to finish my degrees. Relying on past coping mechanisms, all I could do was focus on what I had control of and college became my distraction from pain. I had an end goal in sight and I learned to navigate and block out the microaggressions, the Whiteness that was embedded in every course, interaction, and crevice of the university institutions that I navigated. In my mind, once I finished my degrees, they would solve most of my problems. After finishing my teacher credential, I finally started teaching kindergarten and I felt a natural high

from serving in my own community. I went into the profession with a deep commitment to being an advocate for students like me; I was determined to become the teacher I always wished for, unapologetically utilizing all of my complex multicultural and Bay Area swag that I embodied. Becoming an educator became my life's purpose and the belief that I could become an agent of change who could potentially impact the lives of students and families in my community made me feel a sense of empowerment I had never felt before until I was quickly caged by the bars of our education system.

I was hired to teach late into the school year because there was an “overflow” of ELL kindergarteners at the school, so I was given the staff lounge as a classroom. I had very few materials or books, I racked up thousands of dollars on my emergency credit card for classroom materials, and I often stayed really late working in my classroom every day until the janitor would leave. I wanted so badly to make that staff lounge look and feel like a loving, safe space for my babies. I had even enacted a Dora the Explorer alter ego for my students, which instantly excited and engaged them. These precious children carried so much with them daily, just like my own friends and I had carried throughout our schooling experiences. It was incredibly difficult teaching children whose personal and collective struggles and stories often triggered my own unhealed trauma.

These struggles and stories were not ones that were documented in cum folders; they were stories that I learned through my relationships with my students, their families and caretakers. No one prepared me or taught me how to care for

myself or for my students through their/our trauma and I found myself often struggling to process their/our realities. When I did witness other adults at the school—particularly White teachers and administrators—punitively punish and belittle children from my community I felt enraged but I did not have the tools to address colleagues in a “professional” manner, whatever that even means. I remember one night, as I was in my classroom prepping for the next day, my heart started racing uncontrollably and I began gasping for air, I tried counting in my head to calm myself down and then praying desperately for help as tears flowed down my face because I felt as if I was going to die. While I had many anxiety attacks throughout my life, this particular one was the first that I had after graduating from college. I felt deeply frustrated by the realization that my degrees did not in fact solve my problems like I thought they would.

Eventually, after my second year teaching, California’s budget cuts and massive teacher layoffs resembled the evictions, displacement, and gentrification in the Bay Area today. When I received my pink slip, I felt so devalued by my school district especially because I was a product of it. I went to elementary, middle, and high school within this school district, and I even went to junior college and graduate school in my community, too, but that did not matter. The lay-offs were based on my seniority—I was a second-year teacher, so I was disposable. I wept in my classroom, in my car and in my bedroom for days. I worked so hard, I gave my all, my heart was deeply connected to this work and I felt helpless. I did not know how I was going to tell my students and families that I would not be returning the next year. When I

finally told them, their rage touched my heart. Some of the parents organized and brought their kids to the school board meeting and spoke out against my pink slip advocating for my rehiring. I felt so humbled and empowered by these parents and their kids, our kids, right by our side holding protest signs, some that had their tiny hand prints, their large shaky backward-written letters and colorful drawings of me smiling next to them.

The same parents who were often silenced, disregarded, and disrespected in this country were now unapologetically advocating for me in their vibrant English, because their words were far from sounding “broken.” Their love and courage reminded me of why I could not quit. That radical love pushed me to get back up, wipe my tears, and keep fighting. Although I did not get hired back at that school the next year, I am now in my eleventh year of teaching in the community that I belong in, despite the powers that be which almost pushed me out.

### **From Research to “Me-search”**

I write this dissertation as an educator and organizer of Color who is committed to social justice and who knowingly works within a system that has always served as a perpetual reproduction site of structural violence and harm. I know this because I have survived this education system as both a student and teacher of Color navigating inequitable policies and school practices, White-washed curricula, racist teachers and administrators and culturally biased assessment measures for most of my life. I have experienced firsthand how schools lack fundamental services, resources, and support for both students *and* teachers that are

the most marginalized within them. As a PhD student, I began to research how teachers of Color are impacted within the profession and in so doing I began to read about some of my own experiences in the literature and research that I read. I became engulfed in trying to understand the myriad issues impacting teachers and students of Color from communities like mine because the more that I read, the more I was able to finally name and understand my own experiences. I wrestled with the complexities of feeling validation that my struggles were documented and simultaneously feeling deep sadness that these realities were and still are so common.

Throughout the six years that I have been a PhD student, I have remained in the classroom by teaching part-time at an elementary school in my own community. I grew increasingly frustrated with the unhealthy norms of productivity expected and normalized in both elementary and university institutions, despite trauma impacting people spanning all ages. In my kindergarten class, my precious five-year-old students carried the weight of poverty, of navigating several foster homes, homeless shelters and Child Protective Services, of trying to understand why their parents/loved ones were incarcerated or addicted to drugs/alcohol, or how to stay safe in the midst of domestic violence or state sanctioned violence, or how to be healthy while lacking access to healthcare, or any of the endless ways in which the symptoms of structural violence lead to constant fear, stress, anxiety, depression and confusion. Meanwhile, within the same week, I taught undergraduate sections where some of the most brilliant students of Color were living in their cars, surviving off of canned foods, sending money to their family and struggling with their mental health, traumatized by

sexual assault, all while trying to stay afloat academically. These undergraduate students were once kindergarteners that carried similar stressors back then too. All of these struggles disproportionately impact marginalized people from communities like mine, where the cycles of poverty and the symptoms of structural violence repeat from generation to generation. Yet still we rise, with all of the brilliance and resilience that we've also inherited from our communities and our ancestors. These struggles have never been foreign to me—in fact, because they are so familiar I was and still am often triggered by my students' realities.

My last year in the PhD program I had to take a leave of absence for various reasons so my health insurance was cut off and I could not afford healthcare as a part-time teacher. During this time, a close mentor/comrade/friend of mine died from suicide, my mother's health declined and was in and out of the hospital, my Iranian grandmother passed away, I watched social media videos daily of loved ones in Nicaragua fighting for their lives as people all around them were tortured and murdered daily, I was sexually assaulted, and I was falling apart as I tried desperately to finish this dissertation. I had to find ways to take care of myself as I was falling apart. Luckily, my advisor has always seen me and treated me as she would her own family, from the very beginning of my PhD journey she comforted me as I wept in her office grieving my baby brother, navigating microaggressions, imposter syndrome and struggling to stay afloat. Her ability to treat me like a human being and support me emotionally and academically through so many hardships played a significant role throughout my graduate experience and my life.

The reality is that I have always had to find people and spaces outside of school institutions to help me navigate my mental health struggles and trauma. As a teacher, I learned to do the same because there is rarely ever time or space for people of Color to feel human within education institutions. We are expected to be “professional” to produce outcomes and to operate through transactional relationships based on professional title(s) rather than our humanity (Ginwright, 2016). We are expected to conform, to be desensitized to the ways in which the education system inequitably supports, measures, sorts and pathologizes marginalized students and educators of all ages. We are expected to not only know how to navigate students’ trauma, as well as our own, with no resources or support to do so, but also to be numb and to meet deadlines. We are expected to disconnect our hearts from our learning because emotional intelligence is not considered as “rigorous” as traditional cognitive forms of intelligence. These expectations are colonial in nature and they go against all of my values as a human being and yet, I remained in the profession for over a decade.

Gloria Anzaldúa (2009) taught me how “awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads” (p. 310). I am frequently reminded of my own internalized oppression. For more than half of my professional career, I learned to master the guise of professionalism by repressing my pain and performing in ways that felt dehumanizing. I learned how to maneuver within and through professional spaces at the expense of sharing my truths

and showing up fully as myself, exacerbating imposter syndrome on all fronts of my teaching and graduate student journeys. However, through my graduate studies, I learned how professional development, at its core, often focuses on preparing educators to more effectively teach by taking up standards, assessments, curricula and strategies that maintain White supremacy,<sup>1</sup> not dismantle it or aspire beyond it.

I am always reminded of the privilege that I have as a first-generation college graduate, a privilege that many people of Color in the U.S. are/were not afforded. This privilege is what pushes me to stray away from what is expected of me as a “professional” in the field. Professionalism, from my experience, has been code for respectability politics<sup>2</sup> that often reinforce colonial, capitalist and assimilationist logics, which continue to oppress marginalized people. My positionality within the profession resulted in me having to seek out support as I navigated the harm that I experienced within and outside of schools. It was in and through grassroots social justice teacher collectives and spaces like the ones described in this study, that inspired me to foster the kind of learning conditions that I needed when I was

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<sup>1</sup> I utilize the term White supremacy to describe a) the “socio-political economic system of domination based on racial categories that benefit those defined and perceived as White. This system rests on the historical and current accumulation of structural power that privileges, centralizes, and elevates White people as a group”; and b) the assumed superiority of individuals and ways of being that are perceived or identified as White and hence, the societal standard (DiAngelo, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> The term *respectability politics* was articulated by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) in her book, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, to describe how in the context of Black American history, some Black people consciously hid or set aside cultural practices and ways of being that were thought to be looked down upon by the dominant society and culture as a way to integrate into it.

younger and that I still need now as a woman of Color: a humanizing space to feel seen, heard, valued, loved and empowered. These elements nurture conditions for envisioning and aspiring toward liberatory possibilities within the realm of education and beyond. For these reasons and more, I was inspired to co-create a critical racial affinity group for educators of Color to support one another and in so doing, it evolved into a space for collective healing, which became the focus of my research and “me-search.”

### **Teachers 4 Social Justice and H.E.L.L.A. Snapshot**

I have been a grassroots organizer within the Teachers 4 Social Justice (T4SJ) Organization in the Bay Area for over six years. My identity—as a daughter of immigrants, a first-generation college graduate, and a teacher of Color—has made my journey as a teacher-organizer complex. My lived experiences, struggles and growth have afforded me unique entry points into participating in critical professional development spaces through grassroots teacher-led organizations.

I initially heard about T4SJ from another teacher who was facilitating a workshop at the annual conference on October of 2012. I had just come back from living and teaching in Nicaragua for over two years because my baby brother, Mazyar Pour-Khorshid, Jr., had died unexpectedly, just three days after his twenty-fifth birthday. The pain of this tragedy had overwhelmed me—I shut down, I couldn’t eat, I stopped speaking to family members and friends, and I reached a very dark place. That summer, an acquaintance got my phone number from a friend and called to inform me that he had become an elementary school principal in my district and

urged me to come work at his school. Reluctantly, I returned to teaching in my community shortly after my brother's death, despite the fact that I was struggling with grief and depression.

That year I remember crying regularly in my classroom during recesses, lunch breaks and afterschool. I hated how toxic the staff lunchroom was and how enraged I felt as I would hear particular colleagues speak about students from my community as though they were worthless or burdensome. Many of them reminded me of the teachers that I hated when I was a student. The mandatory district and school sponsored teacher professional development I sat through added layers of frustration to my experience because of the ways in which my "professional learning" maintained and perpetuated White supremacy. I began to feel as though teaching was worsening my mental health as I began to lose sight of my purpose, after all, what good would teaching be within a system that was fundamentally flawed and harming me and others every single day.

Upon a friend's recommendation, I decided to attend the T4SJ annual conference and I had a transformative experience. I left feeling inspired and rejuvenated by the people I met, the workshops I attended and the materials I acquired throughout the day. The conference program listed various teacher study groups offered during the academic school year so I decided to sign up for a monthly drop-in "salon" the following month. I attended and was surprised by the level of commitment and depth that the participating teachers in this group demonstrated throughout the gathering. After a long school day, they actively and

eloquently discussed and critiqued a range of topics in education. In so doing, they revealed an impressive depth of knowledge that I was hungry for. As a diverse group of educators, they held different positions in schools, taught a variety of grade levels, included veterans and newcomers, and came from a variety of communities and districts throughout the Bay Area.

This environment allowed me to engage in conversations with other educators that shared the same commitments to social justice and challenged me to think more critically about current educational reforms, practices and issues that I was not yet aware of or had considered. The facilitator of the group also happened to be a former teacher from the high school I attended, he recognized me immediately, which afforded me a deeper level of connection to the group. A few months after joining the organization, I was invited to their annual core organizer retreat where I transitioned to an “inner core” member/organizer. Since then, I have developed very close relationships with members in the organization and I have taken on many more leadership roles over the past six years. Through my own development within this social justice teacher collective, I, in turn, became deeply committed to organizing spaces to support educators in reimagining what education can look like from an anti-racist and liberatory lens. My role and relationships within T4SJ later led to my involvement and leadership within national grassroots collectives such as the Education for Liberation Network and Teacher Activist Groups (TAG), as well as the local grassroots collective, People’s Education Movement, Bay Area. My involvement within and between all of these grassroots collectives not only sustained

me in the profession but also gave me hope and a vision to aspire beyond what I was facing as an educator and as a person of Color in America.

### **The H.E.L.L.A. Educators of Color Group**

One of the many roles I play within T4SJ, and more specific to this study, is that I serve as a co-facilitator and co-founder of the first racial affinity group within the organization. I initially shared my idea of creating a racial affinity group within the organization after attending the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice in Los Angeles, California. This institute is a three-day critical professional development experience tailored for teachers of Color who are committed to racial justice and who have already developed a level of racial literacy to engage with critical race theory in their work. The experience at the institute ended with participants spending the last day strategizing and developing an action plan toward racially transformative praxis in our work. While I knew that I wanted to create a racial affinity group, I had not yet fully developed what it could look like, especially considering that all study groups in T4SJ must be collaboratively co-developed and co-facilitated with another experienced core member.

During the 2015 T4SJ annual retreat, two other women of Color comrades wanted to join me in this endeavor, they are both my co-facilitators and are also participants in this study. We discussed various possibilities for the theoretical foundation and structure of the group sessions and we drafted our vision and ideas in a shared Google doc that we all have access to. The study group's name

“H.E.L.L.A.” came out of a conversation regarding how the term *hella*<sup>3</sup> proclaims an identity and sense of belonging to the Bay Area and yet, in professional spaces the word can simultaneously be perceived as unprofessional. I felt that it would be fitting to center our linguistic capital and Bay Area cultural ties by reclaiming the word for our group. H.E.L.L.A. is the acronym for the group’s ideological and pedagogical commitments to the following learning tenets: Healing, Empowerment, Love, Liberation and Action. Considering that only 17 percent of the teaching profession identify as teachers of Color, these stats make the name of our group ironic, at times depressing but inspiring all at the same time. There are not “hella” teachers of Color in the quantifiable sense but there absolutely are H.E.L.L.A. teachers of Color when it comes to the political stances that we take in and out of the classroom.

H.E.L.L.A. educators of Color was conceptualized to represent people of Color in the field of education who do not ascribe to the dominant culture and who actively resist colonial, neoliberal and White supremacist ideologies that are embedded in the policies, pedagogies and practices paraded as commonsensical approaches to improving education. The educators of Color who believe that true education should aim toward self-actualization, determination and world change. The ones who believe that their own learning and development should not be sanitized, standardized or corporatized professional development but instead, a kind of human development centered in Healing, Empowerment, Love, Liberation, and Action. I

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<sup>3</sup> *hella* is an all-purpose word popular term originated in the Bay Area that is synonymous with "very" or "really," but more importantly, it serves as a form of cultural identification and affinity with the Bay Area (Urban Dictionary, n.d.).

believe that we are the unicorns of our profession. We engage in a politic of radical teacher learning because we understand that “radical simply means grasping things at the root” (Davis, 1990, p. 14). These roots, both literally and symbolically, are important to consider: the actual origin and cause of a particular struggle, as well as the symbolic part of a seed’s development that functions as a means to anchor and support growth and life. In H.E.L.L.A. we center our stories- our beautiful, painful, complex *testimonios*, dreams, lessons and action plans. We center our struggles, across the intersections of oppression, in order to collectively and critically examine what these roots are and in turn, become rooted by one another.

As all other study groups that are part of the organization, H.E.L.L.A. was intended to be a one-year study group experience for the 2015–2016 academic year but extended to its third year during the 2017–2018 academic year. Our hope in creating H.E.L.L.A. was to explicitly support Bay Area critical educators of Color (CEoC)<sup>4</sup> in sustaining and further developing their commitments to empowering, anti-oppressive, and transformative pedagogies and practices, which in turn could help sustain them/us in the field. Taking a racial affinity group approach was needed particularly because of the ways in which Whiteness, which I will describe further in Chapter Two, derails important learning experiences that CEoC seek to engage in.

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<sup>4</sup> I utilize the term Critical Educators of Color (CEoC) to describe a range of educators (e.g., P–16 educators, community-based educators, school specialists) who have critiques of U.S. schooling and are motivated to serve as agents of change within the field of education.

This approach was also important so that CEoC could share their racialized experiences and critical perspectives without feeling tokenized, attacked or simply uncomfortable around White peers, which was a common shared experience among H.E.L.L.A. members. My role as a co-facilitator within this affinity group included listening to the needs and reflections from all group participants in order to co-construct a productive learning experience and structure for our sessions together. I also actively contributed to the group, sharing my own personal experiences and perspectives as a teacher of Color in solidarity with the other members.

It is important to note that in this dissertation, I chose to center the experiences and voices of the participants in this study and omit my own, even though I was also an active participant within the group. My reason for doing so was to highlight the perspectives, experiences and leadership strengths of the other CEoC in the group who have essentially taught me how interconnected our lives and our experiences are across the intersections of oppression. I have shared snap shots of some of my own lived experiences and positionality in this chapter to offer context about what brought me to this work and what has ultimately shaped my research and “me-search.” This research is not objective, I believe that it is my responsibility to use my knowledge about and experience with navigating structural violence through schooling and the larger society, to inform my purpose as an educator, community engaged researcher, emerging scholar and grassroots organizer committed to healing justice. In the past, my responses to recurring and complex trauma have often teetered between self-destructive responses and avoidance. I became so used to

trauma that I learned to smile through my grief when I would teach and organize, I could even drop a quick tear and wipe it before anyone noticed. While my grief often felt all encompassing, I've learned from Audre Lorde (2004) that "pain is important: how I evade it, how I succumb to it, how I deal with it, how I transcend it" (p. 16). My hope is that sharing my truths and the truths of my H.E.L.L.A. comrades will support other CEoC, to find paths of healing possibilities as they navigate an education system that was never designed to support our collective well-being.

Ultimately, my own struggle(s) led me to seek out alternative spaces to support me intellectually, pedagogically and spiritually. These larger multiracial networks and collectives of like-minded critical educators planted the seeds for me to address a gap within those teacher activist spaces. For educators that yearn for healing-centered spaces, I hope they can find inspiration and paths of possibilities to collectively create healing centered critical racial affinity groups within their own contexts. This dissertation, then, is written for educators and organizers around the world who dedicate their hearts to healing themselves alongside others. I believe this "lovevolutionary" endeavor serves as a catalyst to disrupt the cycles of oppression and reimagine new ways of being in the world with one another.

## Chapter Two: Statement of the Problem—Issues Impacting the U.S. Teacher Diversity Gap

There is a significant teacher diversity gap that continues to grow in almost every state of the country (Boser, 2014) and the attrition of teachers of Color in the field is higher than their White counterparts (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Indeed, for the past few decades the profession has been dominated by a majority of White teachers; today over 82 percent of the workforce identifies as White and while these numbers have slightly fluctuated each year, they continue to remain virtually the same (Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015). Beyond the problematic racial demographics of the field, an unintended consequence of preparing and supporting equity-oriented teachers has been the overwhelming presence of and focus on Whiteness. Whiteness is a social construct that upholds White identities, histories and ways of being as the norm while ignoring the social, economic and political inequities that White people benefit from at the expense of marginalized people (Matias, 2016; Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2001).

There are clear gaps of understanding regarding the subtle and not so subtle mechanisms that facilitate racial oppression and White supremacy in K–12 schools as well as in higher education institutions. Picower (2009) argues that the biggest misconception about White supremacy is that it is enacted violently and maliciously as overtly racist acts. As she stated, White supremacy is also enacted in everyday practices and beliefs upholding Whiteness as the standard, which perpetuates racism regardless of the intentions of its actors. In Kohli, Pizarro, and Nevarez’s (2017) review of research on racism manifested in K–12 schools over the past decade, they

concluded that our country is faced with “a new racism” which is “evasive, subtle, and challenging to identify because it is normalized and hidden under the guise of multiculturalism, colorblindness, and everyday individualized interpretations of policy and practices” (p. 195). Many education scholars have documented how White supremacy manifests in nuanced ways within policies, practices and curricula posed as race neutral and equity-centered within the field (Cross, 2005; Gillborn, 2005; Kohli et al., 2017; Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Urrieta, 2006). In this political moment, the subtlety and guises of racism is also deeply manifested in a U.S. neoliberal<sup>5</sup> education climate shaped by corporate interests, ahistorical and apolitical curricula and standards, and an overemphasis on technical skills, high-stakes testing, and accountability (Au, 2016; Giroux, 2004; Lipman, 2013; Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Stovall, 2013; Zeichner, 1993).

Racism, sexism and other forms of oppression that manifest within education have led teachers who are committed to social justice to engage in:

Day-to-day processes and actions utilized in classrooms and communities centered in critical analysis, action, and reflection (praxis) amongst all educational stakeholders with the goal of creating tangible change in their communities, cities, states, nation, and the larger world . . . through the raising of social, political, racial and economic consciousness. (Katsarou, Picower, & Stovall, 2010, p. 121)

In light of these political pedagogical and professional commitments, Martinez, Valdez, and Cariaga (2016) argue that because contemporary apolitical and

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<sup>5</sup> Apple (2009) defines neoliberalism as a phenomenon in which economic and social relations are structurally and ideologically driven by the demands of the market. In the context of public education, it operated as a tool to serve the interests and power of the elite by maintaining dominance over disadvantaged groups.

technocratic approaches to teacher support maintain and perpetuate the colonial project, critical educators are left feeling further marginalized and alienated in schools and within the profession. The authors describe this form of teacher alienation:

The process taken to maintain power through normalizing a particular set of cultural beliefs and practices while simultaneously marginalizing groups that fall outside of the established norm. Thus, alienation is justified by a group's inability to fit within socially constructed notions of "normal." (p. 301)

Lamentably, educators of Color in particular who aim to serve as change agents become "change(d) agents" due to oppressive and inequitable conditions they face which taint their visions of transformative possibilities within schools (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). For example, Achinstein et al.'s (2010) review of research reported that the most common explanations for leaving schools reported by teachers of Color were due to "low expectations or negative attitudes about students of Color, lack of support for culturally relevant or socially just teaching, and limited dialogue about race and equity" (p. 96). In response to these problems, Social Justice Educators of Color (SJEC) across the country have sought out or created grassroots collectives that engage in critical professional development approaches to sustain them intellectually, ideologically, pedagogically, spiritually and professionally within the field (Pour-Khorshid, 2016; Strong, Pittman-Polletta, & Vasquez-Garcia, 2017). However, because there are few studies of grassroots critical racial affinity groups, this three-year ethnographic case study serves to explore the utility of such spaces and how they support the retention, growth and well-being of the teachers of Color who participate in them.

### **Explanation of the Study**

To capture the experiences, perspectives, context and practices within a critical affinity group composed of twelve educators of Color, I conducted an ethnographic case study over the course of three academic years. I employed ethnographic methods through sustained participant observation within the group in order to better understand the nature and essence of this grassroots racial affinity group space, which I co-facilitated as a fellow member within the collective. I sought to understand the needs of critical educators of Color (CEoC) who are committed to social justice praxis and explore how they benefit personally and professionally from their participation within a critical racial affinity group. As a practicing CEoC who also identifies as a grassroots organizer and community engaged scholar, my research serves as a tool for people across the country who aspire to create a racial affinity space rooted in justice centered praxes. The following questions guided my study:

- What is the nature of learning and interactions that develop within a grassroots racial affinity group?
- How does participation impact members' personal and professional lives?

Grassroots affinity group spaces for CEoC serve as an alternative approach to support, explicitly centering racial literacy development and racial justice praxis. What I aim to do in this study is twofold: to explore the complex, intersectional lived experiences of educators of Color committed to social justice and to explore practices that support their healing, growth and empowerment in their work inside and outside of the classroom. Paying particular attention to the ongoing interactions, dialogue and activities within these spaces was essential in capturing the nature of learning that

was co-constructed over time, which many argue is missing in research on teacher education and development.

### **The H.E.L.L.A. Educator of Color Group**

For more than 18 years, the Teachers 4 Social Justice (T4SJ) grassroots organization in the Bay Area of California has been engaging in and facilitating various critical study groups, nationally recognized social justice education annual conferences, as well as various events and forums for educators and organizers committed to social justice in the field and in the community (Pour-Khorshid, 2016; Ritchie, 2012). T4SJ is volunteer-run with a collective mission to provide opportunities for self-transformation, leadership development, and community building for educators in order to affect meaningful change in the classroom, school, community and society. T4SJ exists within a multiracial, multilingual and now gentrified Bay Area in California and offers a range of study groups throughout the year where participants commit to once a month over one academic year. This case study is of T4SJ's first critical racial affinity study group co-created by and for practicing educators of Color.

This critical racial affinity group is named after a popular term originated in the Bay Area and is mostly used throughout northern California, *hella*, which is an all-purpose word commonly synonymous with "very" or "really," but more importantly, serving as a form of cultural identification and affinity with the Bay Area (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). H.E.L.L.A. as an acronym stands for the group's guiding personal, political and pedagogical commitments to Healing, Empowerment, Love,

Liberation, and Action. H.E.L.L.A. was intended for a range of educators (broadly defined) who identified as a person of Color committed to social justice and who had at least three years of experience working in education-related positions within or outside of schools. I, along with two fellow comrades and co-founders who identify as women of Color, decided that the term “educator” would include a range of education stakeholders and service providers such as afterschool educators, community organizers, administrators, teacher educators, school counselors, and school specialists serving within under-resourced communities. By opening up the study group to multiple types of education stakeholders, we believed that we could collectively explore how the various types of work that we all do within public education intersect.

The group was capped at a maximum of twelve participants, including myself. All participants applied to participate in H.E.L.L.A. through an open application process that was shared via the organization’s email blasts, social media pages and word of mouth. Our hope was that as a collective, we could explore our racial identities, lived experiences, political orientations and commitments as people of Color working towards personal, social and systemic transformation through a social justice lens.

It is important to note that all H.E.L.L.A. members were already part of the T4SJ network in one way or another through either attending the annual conferences and events, participating in other study groups in the past or following the organization’s work via email blasts and social media. Each participant

independently sought out and applied to join this racial affinity group among several other multiracial study group options offered at the time. Considering how gentrification in the Bay Area, as well as a predominantly White teaching profession more broadly, impacts the racial demographics as well as the learning dynamics within social justice teacher collectives, access to a critical racial affinity group implied a form of support tailored for like-minded people of Color (POC). Both T4SJ and H.E.L.L.A. were necessary spaces for members, however, H.E.L.L.A. provided them access to a network of educators of Color to build with, which was especially important for members who constantly navigated predominantly White spaces or apolitical multiracial spaces. Having access to a group of similarly minded people of Color evolved into a space that felt much different than other practitioner spaces they navigated, for reasons that will be explored more deeply in the following chapters.

### Chapter Three: Review of the Literature—Teachers of Color Matter

The racial demographics of the teacher workforce, as well as the experiences of teachers of Color, have been largely shaped by a history of structural oppression within the profession. Even after several decades, the profession is still mostly White and female and the presence, experiences and contributions of teachers of Color within the field are still taken for granted. In this chapter, I begin by briefly describing the term “teachers of Color” (TOC) and synthesizing the research regarding the need to diversify the U.S. teacher workforce. I then review the literature concerning some of the barriers that impact TOC, particularly those that are committed to enacting social and structural change within the field. I follow with literature addressing how and why contemporary approaches to professional development within schools have fallen short in supporting critical<sup>6</sup> TOC. Next, I review the literature on alternative, critical approaches to support social justice-oriented TOC in the field. Lastly, I argue from my synthesis of the literature that there are particular issues and needs that should be considered in order to support and retain critical TOC through more holistic approaches.

#### **Who are Teachers of Color?**

Throughout this dissertation I utilize the term “teachers of Color” to describe credentialed teachers who identify as non-White people of Color or mixed-race people of Color who share a racial identity tied to a history and experience of

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<sup>6</sup> I utilize the term “critical” teachers of Color to describe educators who have critiques of U.S. schooling and are motivated to serve as agents of change within the field of education.

marginalization and subjugation. Similar to Kohli and Pizarro (2016), I capitalize the word “Color” when I describe students, teachers and people of Color “to legitimize the collective identities of those within this grouping” (p. 82, footnote 1). People of Color are often grouped together to distinguish the differences in experiences and identities impacted by systemic racism compared to the dominant culture and identity that White people benefit from. The term teachers of Color includes indigenous or mixed race American or undocumented people that come from a historical lineage of oppression and subjugation as people of Color. While there is a robust literature about the experiences of specific racial and ethnic groups of teachers such as Black teachers (Foster, 1997; Mosely, 2018; Nyachae, 2016), indigenous teachers (Hall, 2012), Latinx teachers (Murillo, Villenas, Galván, Muñoz, Martínez, & Machado-Casas, 2009), Asian and Pacific Islander teachers (Pang, 2009; Subedi, 2008) and more, I combine these groups because they all identify as non-White teachers of Color, and because I wish to focus on the experiences of all racially marginalized educators in the field. In so doing, however, I also attend to other forms of marginalization as they intersect with race.

### **The Need for a More Diverse Teacher Workforce**

The nation is becoming increasingly diverse, so much so that the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2017 National Population Projections estimated that the United States will become “minority White” by 2045 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). However, our country has not made much progress in ensuring that the racial demographics within the teaching profession is representative of the diversity that exists within public

schools. Researchers have documented the importance of diversifying the teacher workforce including factors such as TOC having stronger commitments to serving students of Color and teaching in hard-to-staff schools (Kokka, 2016; Villegas & Irvine, 2010); serving as role models to both students of Color and their White counterparts (Cole, 1986; Graham, 1987; Guyton et al., 1996; Irvine, 1988; Johnson, 2008; Jones et al., 1999; King, 1993; Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Waters, 1989); serving as cultural bridges for students of Color (Achinstein et al., 2010; Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Irvine, 1988, 1990; Villegas & Irvine, 2010); and serving as social justice advocates (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Gay et al., 2003; Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012; Irvine, 2003; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Quioco & Rios, 2000; Villegas & Lucas 2004). Research has also documented a positive impact that student-teacher racial matching has on student achievement overall (Dee, 2004; Driessen, 2015; Easton-Brooks, 2013; Eddy & Easton-Brooks, 2011; Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015).

### **Teachers of Color as Role Models**

Allen (1994) developed three particular classifications to unpack the notion of the minority role model teacher: "ethical templates," where teachers of Color model ethical standards through their behavior and ways of being; "special achievement" where teachers model for their students that they too can aspire toward special achievements; and "nurturers" where teachers provide additional support for students' particular needs via mentoring, tutoring, counseling, cultural affirmations, and more. Several studies have reported on TOC that pursue the teaching profession primarily because they want to serve as role models and exemplars of possibility for their

students (e.g., Guyton et al., 1996; Johnson, 2008; Jones et al., 1999).

Studies have also shown how TOC serve as role models to both White students and students of Color because they represent positive racial/ethnic successful adults that contribute to society and particularly for students from impoverished communities who do not have many role models that look like them (Cole, 1986; Irvine, 1988). Villegas and Irvine (2010) reviewed the role model literature and found that teachers of Color are believed to motivate students of Color to strive for social success, boost their self-worth and self-esteem, and decrease the sense of alienation that students of Color experience in schools (Cole, 1986; King, 1993). However, the very notion of “role model” should be interrogated and questioned through a lens of Whiteness and respectability politics. That is to say, we need to consider how the criteria of “role model” is shaped by hegemony and Whiteness as standards.

### **TOC as Cultural Bridges and Brokers**

Scholars have also documented how the cultural and linguistic mismatches between White teachers and students of Color can impede their academic achievement and engagement (Gibson, 1997). With that view in mind, TOC have been conceived of as cultural and linguistic bridges that serve their students’ socio-emotional and academic needs. Achinstein et al. (2010) found that a primary reason TOC remain at their respective school sites was a commitment to working with students from non-dominant cultural and linguistic communities to serve as “cultural and linguistic resources to youth and their families . . . [and] to give back to their

communities by making a difference in the lives of students of Color” (p. 86).

Gomez, Rodriguez, and Agosto (2008) conducted a study that focused on Latino male teachers’ life histories and found that these TOC’s own experiences with U.S. immigration; learning English as a second language; and experiences of discrimination by White people throughout their childhood, adolescence and even within their field placements and university classes shaped their commitments to serving as cultural bridges for their students. These preservice TOC’s ethnic, cultural and linguistic knowledge played significant roles in their ability to support their students. Gomez et al.’s study concluded that teachers of Color demonstrated a commitment to supporting students of Color to navigate schooling, academic achievement, as well as bridging students’ families in meaningful ways to the classroom and school.

Irvine (1988) found that teachers of Color have “cultural synchronicity” with diverse learners compared to their White counterparts, which positively affects student academic achievement. Research has also shown that TOC have played the role of *Cultural Brokers* for diverse students because they tend to be more knowledgeable and comfortable with the languages, styles, values and norms from their students’ backgrounds, and by “using their cultural expertise, they help students make appropriate adaptations and transitions into mainstream culture” (Villegas & Irvine, 2010, p. 184). As cultural brokers, TOC help students navigate the culture of schooling when school practices and environments are antithetical to those of their own families and communities. In assuming the role of cultural broker, TOC provide

students with substantive guidance, identifying/providing opportunities for their advancement, advocating for them with other colleagues and administrators or pushing back against harmful policies and practices that do not serve their interests, and developing close familial-like relationships with students (Irvine, 1990).

Other scholars have suggested that teachers can foster hybrid pedagogical spaces that enable students to mobilize their own cultural and linguistic resources, moving beyond unidirectional notions of serving as cultural bridges for students of Color. For example, Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Tejeda's (1999) ethnographic study of a second and third grade dual immersion classroom highlighted how the classroom teacher, who was a native of Mexico but primarily educated in the United States, fostered an in-between or *Third Space* for her students and their families. That is to say, because of her bicultural knowledge and bilingualism, this teacher drew upon her students' cultural and linguistic resources strategically to engage them in a cycle of learning and transformation (p. 290). Although the teacher in this study had only been teaching for two years, she was theoretically grounded and committed to Freirean pedagogies as well as cultural-historical theories of learning and development which also helped in facilitating ongoing access to each other's linguistic, cultural, and cognitive resources, which extended beyond the classroom walls.

The roles that TOC play in regards to cultural brokering and bridging provides students of Color with the support needed in order to survive and thrive within schools and classrooms that are predominantly White and racist in particular. For

TOC who have had to find support and resources to help them navigate U.S. schooling for themselves, research has shown how supporting students from backgrounds like their own is an important feature of their work.

### **Teachers of Color Committed to Social Justice and Activism**

Some TOC explicitly pursue teaching as a form of activism and researchers have reported on their humanistic commitments to reverse inequities and create change for marginalized students and communities (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Gay et al., 2003; Irvine, 2003; Villegas & Lucas, 2004). Teachers from marginalized backgrounds have particular orientations and commitments to social justice related to personal experiences with oppression within schools (Pour-Khorshid, 2016). Scholars have documented how TOC who have experienced cultural disconnects in their own education have a heightened awareness and commitment to rectifying educational injustices (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). TOC committed to social justice see their role in the classroom as a tool and opportunity to transform lives and activate people to join them in working toward transformation in education and society (Quiocho & Rios, 2000).

When educational policy harms communities of Color, educators of Color committed to social justice often organize and mobilize locally but also nationally through grassroots collectives such as Teacher Activist Groups (TAG) and Education for Liberation network (EdLib) in order to build support in combating harmful attacks against marginalized students and communities. TOC in grassroots social justice collectives dedicate time and space outside of their work hours to engage in activism

with other TOC allies and comrades. Even so, scholars agree that there must be more local and national efforts to offer support in actualizing and sustaining all teachers' social and racial justice activism and agendas (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Pour-Khorshid, 2016; Strong et al., 2017).

### **Student-Teacher Racial Matching and Academic Achievement**

Students of Color directly benefit when they have a teacher that shares their racial/ethnic background and indirectly when they go to schools where there is a higher representation of TOC (Dee, 2004; Driessen, 2015; Easton-Brooks, 2013; Eddy & Easton-Brooks, 2011; Egalite et al., 2015).

Dee's (2004) quantitative study examined the test score data from Tennessee's Project STAR class-size experiment, which randomly matched students and teachers within participating schools and found that the students that were matched with a teacher who shared their racial identity significantly increased their math and reading achievement. Eddy and Easton-Brooks (2011) also examined the effects of ethnic matching, in addition to gender, school poverty, and school community on mathematics achievement scores longitudinally by using a data set of 1,200 African American students from early childhood to fifth grade. The researchers utilized a two-level growth model and value-added modeling (VAM) techniques to examine how influential teachers were on student achievement scores. Their findings of student-teacher ethnic matching revealed that a student having at least one ethnically matched teacher between kindergarten and fifth grade made a significant impact on their mathematics achievement. This data did not specify any particular pedagogical

orientations to raise student achievement, only that the racial matching alone demonstrated higher academic achievement.

Egalite et al. (2015) analyzed student achievement outcomes using a large administrative dataset provided by the Florida Department of Education and followed students in elementary through high school grades over a period of seven years (2001–02 through 2008–09). Over all, student–teacher ethnic matching was found to have positive reading achievement impacts for Black and White students, as well as significant math achievement impacts for Black, White, and Asian/Pacific Island students. When they examined the effects of race matching by students' prior performance level, they found that lower-performing Black and White students appeared to particularly benefit from being assigned to a race-congruent teacher. The results for Black and White students were the strongest for elementary-aged students whereas the results for Asian/Pacific students were the strongest at the middle/high school level.

Driessen (2015) conducted a review of twenty-four quantitative studies focusing on primary and secondary education in the United States to investigate the relation between teacher and student ethnicity, and cognitive and non-cognitive student outcomes. The author found that there was very little empirical evidence showing a stronger degree of ethnic matching between teacher and student, whether by one-to-one coupling of a teacher and student of Color or by a larger distribution of TOC at an ethnically mixed school, leading to predominantly positive results. The researchers did, however, attribute greater positive results to subjective teacher

evaluations than to objective achievement outcome measures. They concluded that more research is needed in this area overall.

While several studies demonstrated positive effects of racial matching on student achievement, there are no specific mechanisms that empirically explained why (e.g., Dee, 2004; Egalite et al., 2015), but there were hypotheses that suggested correlations such as serving as role models, sharing similar cultural practices, language, understandings, and much more.

### **Structural Factors Impacting People of Color in the Teaching Profession**

While there is empirical evidence suggesting that TOC assist in alleviating severe teacher shortages particularly in hard to staff schools because of their commitments to teaching low income students of Color (Achinstein et al., 2010; Kokka, 2016; Villegas & Irvine, 2010) they are often confronted with systemic barriers. I will begin this section by describing some of the structural barriers and gatekeepers that impede people of Color from becoming credentialed teachers. I will then follow with a section describing how, historically, TOC have been pushed out of the profession through segregation and desegregation of schools. Lastly, I will describe contemporary examples of how TOC are still confronted with several structural barriers that impact their retention and well-being within the field.

### **Structural Barriers for Teachers of Color Entering the Teaching Profession**

Achinstein et al. (2010) found that while many states have teacher recruitment policies that aim to diversify their teachers, there currently are no national policies that do so. Villegas and Irvine (2010) recommend that matters of teacher diversity be

taken up by the federal government, which would require “sponsoring programs that aim to prepare qualified TOC and supporting partnerships between and among different organizations/agencies (e.g., school districts, four-year colleges, two-year colleges, teachers’ unions) specifically intended for this purpose” (p. 188). However, if and when partnerships such as these are available, students of Color are less likely to get admitted to teacher education programs and have higher attrition rates when they do get admitted (Bennett, Cole, & Thompson, 2000). American standardized tests have been argued to be culturally biased gatekeepers for TOC trying to enter college (Branch, 2001; Cochran-Smith, 2005; Villegas & Clewell, 1998). Further, prerequisite exams and applications are costly, and accessibility to the often geographically distant locations of credential programs is often difficult because they are mostly far from the communities where TOC live and want to teach in. In addition to costly and culturally biased exams, TOC have little access to resources that would help them pass required exams such as tutors, test prep, and more (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; Sleeter, Kumashiro, & Neal, 2014; Kohli, 2014).

Aspiring teachers of Color that successfully navigate prerequisite hurdles to teacher education programs are faced with learning content proposed as facts on the examinations, such as history, for example, when the “correct answers” reinforce and privilege dominant narratives that people of Color do not ascribe to. In Kohli’s (2014) study examining the impacts of internalized racism on TOC, she shared what one teacher had to say about the California Subject Examinations for Teacher’s (CSET) History exam:

I didn't pass the social studies CSET; I'm taking it again. [There was] not one question about Africa for World History. How insulting. How dare you talk about the world, and not talk about Africa? As though we're irrelevant. I think that that probably has something to do with my motivation to study for the test. Here I am, I have to learn everybody else's history but my own in order to pass. In a sense it's brainwashing of some sort. They're telling me that this is what's important. And if I didn't have the consciousness or pride that I have now in who I am, that could very easily skew me to think that European history is more important and this is the history I need to be focused on. (p. 379)

Kohli (2016) argues that predominant explanations of why TOC are not attracted to the profession or leave at high rates (e.g., low pay or limited resources) fall short in addressing the root problems that impact TOC committed to social and racial justice: racism and inequality. Utilizing Critical Race Theory to analyze narratives from 218 racial justice-oriented TOC working in urban settings, she found that all of the participants expressed a strong dedication to working in urban schools with underserved youth to serve as mentors, advocates, and allies and were committed to providing racial justice pedagogy for marginalized students of Color. However, she argues that the racial gap in the profession has less to do with individual choices to leave the field and much more to do with hostile racial climates that “significantly contribute to the stress and dissatisfaction that TOC face in their professional lives,” especially when they are committed to enacting their values towards racial justice in their work (p. 21). Understanding the TOC shortage requires a historical and political analysis of events, structures and cultural factors that impact their recruitment and retention. More specifically, the issues mostly impacting TOC committed to social justice are due to White Supremacy in the profession and society at large.

## **Teacher Education Programs and the Centering of Whiteness**

Studies have shown that teacher preparation programs overwhelmingly focus their support and teaching on preparing White teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse communities (Sleeter, 2001). Since teacher education programs have such high enrollment of White pre-service teachers, the experiences and perspectives of TOC are largely absent in the research. According to Kohli (2009), teacher education spaces fail to support TOC who already possess a personal understanding of race and racism. As she argues, teacher education privileges Whiteness, including western values, as well as dominant narratives and ways of being. Consequently, discussions about race and racism get derailed by emotionalities of Whiteness such as White guilt, White tears, defensiveness, discomfort and dissonance (Matias, 2016). TOC are then rendered invisible due to the centering of White teachers' understandings regarding equity and diversity (Gomez et al., 2008; Kohli, 2009; Sleeter, 2001). This is further intensified by a lack of university faculty of Color in universities (Stanley, 2006) and a lack of programs specifically designated to support TOC.

White Supremacy is often thought of within the context of extreme and overt racist acts, however, it is also embedded in the subtle manner that “the systemic and historical privileging of Whites’ collective interests, accomplishments, values, beliefs, and interests (Hayes & Juarez, 2012, p. 2) have dominated people of Color since colonization. Leonardo (2005) describes White Supremacy as “a racialized social system that upholds, reifies, and reinforces the superiority of Whites” (p. 127). As

many scholars have argued, White supremacy does not happen accidentally, and it is no mere or innocent coincidence that it continues to reappear as if out of nowhere (Akintunde, 1999; Gilborn, 2005; Hayes & Juarez, 2012). The privileging of Whiteness in educational institutional spaces such as schools and teacher education programs is often normalized as a standard or way of attaining cultural capital within the dominant society.

Kohli (2009) utilized a CRT framework to center the *critical race reflections* of TOC and shed light on how their personal insights about the ways in which racial oppression operates in K–12 schools is often overlooked or ignored, along with their insights on how to transform classrooms and schools. She highlighted three main themes from the participating teachers' race reflections: the personal experiences of racism that women of Color endured within their K–12 education; the parallel experiences with racism they observe students of Color enduring in schools today; and racial hierarchies within teacher education (p. 239). Kohli states that the three themes point to a cycle of racism that continues to manifest in the educational experiences of Asian-American, Black and Latina/o people. The regularity and normalization of racism in the schooling experiences of marginalized students can potentially lead to internalized racism when they become adults and more specifically, classroom teachers.

Baszile (2008) also used Critical Race Theory (CRT) to frame her own counternarrative as an African American teacher candidate within a predominantly White pre-service program and illustrated how racism operates subtly through

common practices and activities thought to be racially neutral. While the practice of teacher reflection focuses mainly, if not exclusively, on changing teaching practices to positively impact student academic outcomes (Hankes, 1996), a common assumption is that reflection engages teachers on a journey toward self-understanding. However, Baszile, like other researchers mentioned prior, found that the majority of literature on teacher reflection concerning race focused heavily on how to support White pre-service teachers to teach in a culturally and racially complex world. She argues that the practices utilized to assist in teacher reflection have consequently worked to repress the racial experiences and identities of TOC who do not ascribe to the dominant discourses and constructions of the “good teacher” which she argues is deracialized. Her counterstory demonstrated how TOC who have personally experienced and grown up within the U.S. “White supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 1995), are deeply dysconsciously (King, 1991) entangled in multiple kinds of pathologies that masquerade as normal, even healthy behavior” (p. 382). Referencing Pinar’s (2004) call for autobiography in teacher education, she argues that it is essential that individuals embark on an ever-evolving process of, “coming to know ourselves not only as teachers, but as people with racial (gendered, classed . . . ) histories, hurts, and hopes for healing . . . which play into and out of our daily classroom interactions” (p. 383).

Considering the profession, as well as teacher education programs around the country are dominated by White people, people of Color are met again with minoritization as professionals or graduate students of Color in the education system.

Teachers of Color then, experience another form of marginalization entering into or continuing to navigate an education system that has harmed them through Whiteness embedded systemically, pedagogically and emotionally in schools.

### **Historical and Contemporary Examples of Teacher of Color Push Out**

Several scholars have utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze teacher diversity in the U.S. teacher workforce (Kohli, 2008, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2005; Sleeter et al., 2014).<sup>7</sup> In so doing, they address some of the root causes of the teacher diversity gap. Sleeter et al. posit that CRT allows for critical race-based analyses of how racism is a fundamental factor in our nation's teacher demographics (p. 4).

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<sup>7</sup> CRT was originally developed in the legal field to highlight how racism intersected with oppression within the law by scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberley Crenshaw and Richard Delgado (Kohli, 2008, 2009; 2012; Dixson, & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT was taken up in the field of education and has since then highlighted how racism intersects with issues in education. Scholars have come up with slightly different renderings of CRT's tenets, Kohli (2012) described them as Centrality of Race and Racism: All CRT research within education must centralize race and racism, as well as acknowledge the intersection of race with other forms of subordination; Challenging the Dominant Perspective: CRT research works to challenge the dominant narratives, often referred to as majoritarian stories; Commitment to Social Justice: CRT research must be driven by a social justice agenda. Critical race theorists define social justice research as work that (a) responds to the oppression of people of Color, which includes intersections between racism, poverty, sexism, and dehumanization; (b) aims to eliminate those oppressive conditions; and, (c) is centered around the empowerment, healing, and liberation of people of Color (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2005); (d) values Experiential Knowledge: CRT scholars believe in the power of story. Building on the oral traditions of many indigenous communities of Color around the world, CRT research values the experiences and narratives of people of Color when attempting to understand social inequality; and (e) is Interdisciplinary: CRT scholars believe that the world is multi-dimensional and research about the world should reflect multiple perspectives.

## **Education Policies Resulting in Teacher of Color Push Out**

Scholars drawing on CRT have found that while policies have been developed to advance racial equality, they have simultaneously negatively impacted students and teachers of Color in subtle and not so subtle ways. For example, one of the tenets of CRT, the centrality of racism in the history and social structure of the nation, directly challenges claims of “colorblindness” and meritocracy in the teaching profession by demonstrating how TOC have historically been pushed out of the profession, even in the so-called era of desegregation when, after the passage of *Brown v. Board Education*, over 38,000 Black teachers and administrators were laid off or fired from segregated schools and never rehired in integrated schools (Ladson-Billings, 2004). More contemporary examples of this dynamic can be seen in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans where over 4,000 public school teachers were fired, 70 percent of which were experienced Black teachers, because the city transitioned to a market-based system of charter schools (Lincove, Barrett, & Strunk, 2018). The new teachers who were hired post Katrina significantly changed the teacher workforce:

In addition to being less experienced, only 16% of new teachers held a master’s degree or above, compared with 68% of the pre-Katrina cohort. Over half of the new teachers were educated outside Louisiana, and over 60% were White, while the student population remained at over 90% Black students. By 2013, approximately 20% of new teachers had a master’s degree, 42% were educated out of state, and 59% were White. (p. 198)

Lincove et al. (2018) argue that the post-Katrina firing and the dismantling of public schools led to the hiring of teachers for charter schools predominantly from alternative certification programs such as Teach for America. Consequently, these

hiring practices were “responsible for this [demographic] shift rather than an exit of Black teachers” (p. 201).

Similar to New Orleans, Black and Latinx communities on the West and South sides of Chicago have been substantially impacted by school closures and turnarounds between 1995 and 2017 (Generation All Policy Brief, 2017). Stovall (2013) explains how educational policy in 1995 shifted Chicago Public Schools (CPS) mayoral control so that the mayor became the sole authority in choosing who serves on the school board which has power over the approval of financial, curricular, contract related and other school related decisions. This shift resulted in significantly decreasing the number of educators serving on the board and replacing them with board members “from business, legal and philanthropic sectors . . . and individuals or employees of entities that have contributed significantly to the mayor’s reelection campaign” (p. 35). This shift of decision-making power led to the neoliberal competition-based models and orientations to schooling which have also been taken up by cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Houston that aim to “connect education, housing, and business with the intent to foster long-term development” which have major implications for public education (p. 35).

For example, over the course of six years, the two Chicago education policies, Renaissance 2010 and the Plan for Transformation, resulted in the displacement of 178,000 African-American residents in city; 101 schools permanently closed, phased out, or labeled as turnaround where the existing staff was fired and an [External Management Organization] was hired to re-staff the schools; 99 of the 101 schools in

these categories were predominantly African-American or Latino/a (Lipman, Smith, Gutstein, & Dallacqua, 2012); and the destruction of over 80 percent of public housing stock whose population was 95 percent African-American (Stovall, 2013, p. 37). All of these policies negatively impacted students and teachers of Color.

### **Oppressive Teaching Conditions**

Ingersoll's (2003) study investigated the formal and informal organization of schools and the mechanisms by which administrators supervise and control the work of teachers in general. He offers an analysis of these tensions using a teacher disempowerment framework demonstrating that the increased focus on accountability and control of teachers' work is at the root of poor performance in schools. According to this viewpoint, too much organizational control and accountability results in hyper-standardization and factory-like, overly bureaucratized school systems which deprofessionalizes and demotivates teachers and ultimately results in school inefficiency and ineffectiveness (p. 191). Teachers feel disempowered with little control over their work and a limited voice in instructional decision-making. In contrast, if teachers have power in decision making through local adaptation, a more flattened hierarchy and a teacher-driven distributive leadership model, the profession could potentially move toward becoming more humanistic in orientation and organization. However, TOC leave the teaching profession at a rate 24 percent higher per year than their White counterparts (Ingersoll & May, 2011), which implies that there are additional, unique factors that might impact TOC differently in the field.

In an effort to understand these factors, Achinstein and Ogawa (2011) interviewed and observed seventeen novice TOC over the span of five years and found that these highly committed, well-trained, and credentialed teachers were frustrated by the conditions that they were forced to teach in, and shared various examples of the expectations that were placed on them to teach in inequitable ways while being closely monitored by administrators. This study found principle tensions that TOC faced corresponded to three dimensions of culturally responsive teaching: (a) cultural and linguistic relevance versus standardization, (b) community of learners versus teacher transmission, and (c) social justice versus enhanced test scores.

The teachers in this study reported on two specific ways that accountability-based programs and policies were enforced: (a) through fear of monitoring, and (b) through internalizing the link between testing and educational opportunity (pp. 28–30). The TOC who wanted to engage in culturally responsive learning activities found that they could not because of school policies and structural barriers. When discussing the implications of their findings, the authors call on policymakers to collaborate with TOC at the “policymaking table” in order to break down the “double bind” they have created for new TOC (p. 31). The authors argue that if novice TOC are *not* supported by other educators in “managing the bind,” then there is an increased likelihood that these teachers will lose their commitments for which they were recruited or leave the profession. The authors state that, “new teachers of color who sought to be agents of change in schools instead become change(d) agents subjected to change by the system within which they work” (p. 32).

The expectations placed on TOC to provide additional, uncompensated work because of their linguistic and cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) can become taxing and inequitably solicited, especially within under-resourced schools. For example, Amos's (2016) five-year longitudinal study following bilingual pre-service teachers from the beginning of their teacher education program to the end of their third year teaching, sought to investigate "how differences other than race, such as language and work experience, intersect with race in determining inequity" (p. 44). In so doing, he was able to expose how racism operates within the high demand and shortage of Spanish-speaking teachers. The participants' counternarratives revealed how they experienced "physical and psychological alienation" from their colleagues, a lack of support and access to professional networks and constant pressure to overcompensate at work due to "a carefully monitored surveillance system" where their credibility as teachers was often questioned (p. 51). These teachers felt that their schools took advantage of, and benefited instructionally and financially from, their linguistic capital through constant uncompensated language related tasks.

Amos (2016) recommends that schools investigate whether everyday taken-for-granted school policies and practices are truly race neutral, as in the case of free translation labor and Spanish curricula development from bilingual teachers. Furthermore, he argues that novice bilingual TOC become more susceptible to high levels of stress due to the unacknowledged double demands placed upon them which inevitably leads to the "revolving door syndrome" (p. 53). They concluded with a call for more research that compares and contrasts the experiences of White bilingual

educators and bilingual TOC to explore the role of race and racism in their teaching experience.

Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, and Freitas' (2010) research review on the turnover and retention of new TOC found that those deliberately committed to serving as change agents and advocates for low income students and families are often faced with teaching conditions that constrain them from redressing school inequities. According to this review, the most common reasons that teachers gave for moving from schools or leaving the profession was due to a lack of multicultural capital in schools fraught with low expectations or negative attitudes about students/families of Color; a lack of support for culturally relevant or socially just teaching; and limited dialogue about race and equity. TOC who are committed to being agents of change also often work within alienating conditions where their cultural resources are not recognized and where issues of diversity, antiracism, and social justice are ignored and undermined by those in power (p. 96).

Neoliberalism ideologies in education have normalized factory-like approaches in schools and in the profession in ways that commodify and even tokenize TOC in the profession. Sleeter (2008) states that teacher education can work against the negative impacts resulting from neoliberal ideologies in education by: implementing recruitment and admission policies that bring in more diverse teacher candidates; early fieldwork which supports teachers in inquiry-based learning that disrupts deficit theorizing; professional coursework centered in a socio-cultural framework; supporting teacher candidates in student teaching within diverse and/or

low income schools; and on-going professional development through practice-based inquiry and teacher activist networks (p. 1948). However, more research is needed around how school administrators and school districts can specifically support TOC through alternative practices and systems rooted by social justice-oriented principles and practices.

### **How Structural Barriers Impact the Well Being of Teachers of Color**

The various manifestations of racism in society and particularly, the structural barriers that people of Color face within K–20 schooling and as teachers in the profession, can inevitably take a toll on the material conditions as well as the physical, spiritual and psychological well-being of TOC in the field. TOC who are committed to justice work must not only have access to more equitable wages, but also support in unlearning internalized racism (Bivens, 1995; Kohli, 2008, 2014) and acquiring tools to navigate Racial Battle Fatigue (Pizarro, 2017) to sustain them in a profession where they often experience alienation due to sociopolitical dynamics (Martinez et al., 2016).

### **Inequitable Material Conditions**

TOC show higher attrition rates due to structural, policy-amenable conditions related to inequitable financial, human, social, and cultural factors (Achinstein et al., 2010). For example, research indicated that teacher turnover was highly impacted by financial conditions such as a lack of instructional and financial resources to teach; school-based factors such as a lack of professional knowledge, shared commitments, and ideological dispositions among teachers; as well as power dynamics which

affected decision making and relationship dynamics in schools (pp. 78–80).

Similarly, the Center for American Progress’s state-by-state analysis of TOC across the country found disparities in teacher pay by race (Boser, 2011). Recent Census data from the Center for American Progress showed that White teachers are paid \$49,570 on average, while African-American teachers are paid \$48,910 and Hispanic teachers receive \$49,260 (p. 9). This report concluded that the nation must take a two-pronged approach to improving teacher diversity by expanding effective recruitment programs while also improving the overall professional experience for TOC. Villegas and Irvine’s (2010) review of the conceptual and empirical literature indicates that more research is needed to gain a more nuanced understanding of the factors that may contribute to the retention of TOC in hard to staff schools, as well as research to learn more about how to effectively support and prepare TOC, particularly in using their cultural knowledge and expertise to support student learning.

Unlike teachers who come from affluent communities and families, TOC who enter the field as first-generation college graduates and/or from low-income backgrounds struggle to survive financially with such low salaries, insurmountable student loan debt and few resources to teach with upon entering the profession. For example, a former TOC who joined the profession through Teach for America did so in order to afford the credential to become a teacher. In the following excerpt from an article she wrote, she shared how financial conditions further alienate marginalized TOC within the profession:

Teachers from well-to-do families have the advantage of accepting a low-paying teaching position and still having money available to them through

other means. They have the comfort of knowing their families could help them out in the case of an emergency, or satisfy the occasional craving for luxury when they couldn't afford it themselves. Teachers from lower-income backgrounds do not have this same sense of security. Often, we are the ones responsible for supporting our families, instead of the other way around. In Teach for America specifically, 39 percent of their teachers of color received Pell grants in college, meaning their families had incomes roughly below \$23,000. I knew several teachers of color who had the responsibility of sending money home or otherwise contributing to paying family expenses. (Machado, 2013, para. 15)

Inequitable and unlivable financial conditions increase the likelihood of TOC attrition, especially for those teaching in gentrified communities and within hard to staff schools. These material conditions have implications for TOC's access to housing, transportation and health care, including but not limited to health insurance, healthy food, as well as access and time for health-related programs (e.g., nutritional guidance, mindful meditation, exercise courses, mental health support groups) resources and more.

### **Internalized Racism**

Teachers of Color who have had to navigate a racist society and who have experienced discrimination firsthand can internalize racist beliefs about themselves and others if they are not supported in developing a structural analysis of their experiences (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014; Hipolito-Delgado, 2010; Kohli, 2014). Cultivating opportunities for prospective TOC to critically reflect on, unpack and even heal from past experiences with racial trauma can facilitate transformative learning and development (Pour-Khorshid, 2016). Bivens (1995) explains how colonialism and White supremacy can lead to internalized racism when “a racial group oppressed by racism supports the supremacy and dominance of the dominating

group by maintaining or participating in the set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures and ideologies that undergird the dominating group's power" (p. 44). Unexamined bias can lead to deficit thinking and lower expectations of marginalized students (Kohli, 2009, 2014). The effects of racism in America shape the socialization of teachers, their personal frames of reference, and their perception of and interaction with culturally and linguistically diverse students. Considering how tests, curricula, practices and western ideologies that are taught in public schools often favor the dominant culture, TOC are susceptible to internalizing and reinscribing the same oppressive and racist ideologies and practices if they are not supported in unlearning them.

Kohli (2009) utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze the personal narratives of 9 women of Color within an undergraduate education program that articulated their intent to pursue a career as teachers in public education. She found that (a) whether subtle or overt, all the women in her study had experienced racial, cultural, or linguistic discrimination in their K-12 education; (b) almost all participants revealed that those experiences with racism led them to internalize a racial, cultural, or linguistic inferiority to White culture or English; and (c) these young women had very powerful ideas about how to structure classrooms that validate student cultures (p. 182). The participants in this study expressed that it was only later in their adulthood when they were invited to revisit their experiences with racism that they had begun to realize how deeply affected they were by them. These critical race reflections led them to think more deeply about how they could enact

culturally relevant, racially conscious teaching strategies in their own future classrooms (p. 186). She argues that teacher education programs often lack critical race centered strategies and curricula that address the specific needs of TOC and that push them to become more conscious in identifying racism internally, interpersonally and structurally in order to disrupt the cycles through their pedagogies.

Building from her 2009 study, Kohli (2014) investigated the process that pre-service TOC underwent to reflect on their own internalized racism as they simultaneously reflected on how to teach for racial justice in their practice. She conducted in-depth interviews and focus groups with four Black, four Latina and four Asian American women enrolled in a social justice-oriented urban teacher education program in California. She found that her participants had experienced and internalized racist beliefs that were projected on them since their childhood. One of the pre-service TOC expressed her concerns of reproducing the White cultural superiority and internalized racism that was instilled in her by her parents in her own classroom:

My dad really feels like we owe [White people] something because we're in their country, so growing up, they instilled that in us. My parent's mentality was—study hard, and then you can have that life . . . . Leave your community, so you can become one of them—and still to this day, that's their message. I have to fight that. But it really makes me wonder how that's going to affect me as a teacher. What am I going to be communicating to my students about the way that I grew up? I hope that I can step back and check myself on a lot of those things. (p. 379)

The TOC in this study expressed how transformative it was for them to have opportunities to unpack their internalized racism before entering into the profession and how vital it was in their development as aspiring anti-racist educators. This

process of unpacking and identifying their own internalized racism led them to think about how to address and teach about these issues in their own classrooms proactively. The levels of trust and community that had been developed to reach these levels of vulnerability and honesty had to occur as a shared process over time.

### **Racial Battle Fatigue**

Kohli (2016) argues that utilizing a CRT analysis of education structures, policies and practices is critical in order to understand how TOC are impacted by race and racism, especially within a predominantly White profession. Racial Battle Fatigue occurs when people of Color experience physical and psychological stress as a result of recurring experiences with racism (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014). For example, educators of Color who are committed to racial justice are often met with oppressive constraints when attempting to challenge racism institutionally and/or interpersonally which can lead to Racial Battle Fatigue (Hayes & Juarez, 2012; Kohli, 2009; Matias, 2013). In *Racial Battle Fatigue: Insights from the Frontlines of Social Justice Advocacy*, there are several stories and examples of how social justice advocates experience socio-emotional and cognitive strains when attempting to dismantle oppression and inequity within and outside of institutions (Martin, 2015).

Kohli's (2016) study explored how the racial climates of urban schools affect the professional experiences and retention of racial justice-oriented TOC. She utilized Critical Race Theory (CRT) to analyze the narratives of 218 racial justice-oriented, urban TOC from across the nation. Her study illuminated the hostile racial climates, institutionally and interpersonally, that TOC had to navigate within public

schools, particularly through the manifestations of two forms of racism: color blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) and racial microaggressions (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012; Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). According to CRT theorists, color blindness occurs when institutions and individuals ignore race/racial differences (e.g., differences in language, culture, and immigration status), which are often intersecting (Bell, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Racial microaggressions have been defined as:

(a) *subtle verbal and non-verbal insults/assaults* directed toward People of Color, often carried out automatically or unconsciously; (b) *layered insults/assaults*, based on one's race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or name; and (c) *cumulative insults/assaults* that take their toll on People of Color. In isolation, racial microaggressions may not have much meaning or impact; however, as repeated slights, the effects can be profound. (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012, as cited in Kohli, 2016, p. 13)

The teachers in this study shared various experiences that illuminated how both “color blindness” and racial microaggressions manifested in their work and how the collective impact resulted in them feeling silenced, undervalued, invisible, stereotyped and disrespected, which Kohli argues systematically pushes critical TOC out of the profession (p. 19). She also contends that while much of the literature lists factors such as low pay, limited resources, and high teacher turnover within urban schools to explain the high rates of attrition for TOC, it does not sufficiently address other root causes of the problem and argues for an entire paradigm shift in the field:

If we do not begin to shift the paradigm of schooling from one of performance and achievement to a humanizing space that acknowledges the histories, strengths, and struggles of those in the building, we are setting up both our students of Color and teachers of Color for failure. Teachers of Color are not a quick fix to improve test scores or prove a school's cultural responsiveness.

Rather, they are people, and the hostile racial climates that we have recruited them into have taken a toll on their well-being, growth, and retention in the field. With a commitment to social and racial justice, we must begin to imagine schools that not only provide critical and rigorous educational opportunities for students of Color but also are school environments that are inclusive and supportive to everyone in the school community. (pp. 21–22)

The sociopolitical and racial dynamics that critical TOC endure inevitably leads to alienation in the field and negatively impacts their ability to engage in meaningful and transformative pedagogies, which slowly diminishes their hope in creating change within the system.

For TOC who come from low income backgrounds and marginalized communities, structural barriers seem insurmountable and make their entry and retention within the teaching profession more challenging than their White counterparts. Even after “successfully” navigating the systemic barriers upon entry such as accessibility to teacher education, difficult and costly prerequisite examinations and tuition, as well as teacher education environments that center Whiteness, they are presented with new barriers within the field. TOC need equitable access to more livable and workable material conditions as well as emotional and intellectual support in order to teach in ways that are spiritually and psychologically sustaining.

### **Critical Approaches to Support Teachers of Color Committed to Social Justice**

While much of the literature in the field reports on Professional Development (PD) initiatives which draw on interactive, dynamic and inquiry orientations to teacher learning (Blank, de las Alas, & Smith, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 1993; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Lieberman, 1995), these initiatives do not

challenge structural, pedagogical and/or internalized manifestations of racism or other forms of oppression (Corcoran, 1995; Giroux, 2004; Burciaga & Kohli, 2018; Zeichner, 1993). Rather, teacher learning initiatives have been primarily concerned with providing tools, strategies and support in navigating the current system. Further teacher PD, which has been increasingly shaped by standardization, pre-packaged solutions, corporate interests and high stakes accountability, relies on hierarchal, colorblind, ahistorical and apolitical approaches (Giroux, 2002; Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015; Picower, 2007; Zeichner, 1993). In light of these issues, research has highlighted how TOC with an explicit commitment to social justice often seek out programs and other sources of critical professional development to support them in enacting their political and pedagogical commitments (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Arce, 2004; Borrero, Flores, & de la Cruz, 2016; Gist, 2016; Hayes, 2014; Kohli, 2012; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). This section will examine those sources of support in more depth.

### **Institutional Support Programs for Future Teachers of Color**

While pre-service teacher education programs are beyond the scope of this study, I reviewed several efforts to support TOC in the field which have included a growing number of pipeline programs designed to recruit and support people of Color from high poverty areas to become teachers in their own communities (Bartow et al., 2014; Burnett, 2014; Curammeng & Tintiangco-Cubales, 2017; Irizarry, 2007; Tandon, Bianco, & Zion, 2014), support mechanisms and strategies that mitigate the difficulties teachers of Color face when pursuing a teaching career in higher

education (Dillard, 1994; Ellis & Epstein, 2015); and culturally responsive and social justice-oriented teacher education practices and assignments that support pre-service teachers in navigating contradictory and often unsettling aspects of bridging theory to practice (Borrero et al., 2016; Rodriguez & Cho, 2011). Much of the research that focuses on alternative forms of teacher development for TOC, center the racial identities of teachers through the integration of autobiographical assignments, critical race reflections and dialogue, participatory action projects, community/trust building and asset-centered racial identity orientations to teacher support.

### **Critical Professional Development Approaches**

Kohli et al. (2015) found that some of the key attributes that make Critical Professional Development (CPD) groups and learning spaces so necessary and effective is the sense of solidarity, love, community and critical dialogue that leads to action and agency in and out of classrooms. The authors found that developing strong relationships, community, and cooperative spaces for diverse education stakeholders who all share a commitment to social justice allowed them to become vulnerable and open to learn and build with a like-minded community, which positioned them to move toward taking collective social action. The three cases in their study examined the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice (ITOC), the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) and the People's Education Movement, demonstrating how teachers cultivated a critical community to learn and organize with around issues that they were committed to (e.g., parent

organizing in their respective communities, centering LGBTQ and intersectionality dialogues), and more.

While critical dialogue is important to experience within K–12 schools and teacher education spaces, there are distinctive benefits to having dialogic spaces situated outside of institutional spaces. Social justice grassroots teacher networks and coalitions like the ones mentioned above, often offer and engage in inquiry groups that rely on critical pedagogy approaches, which can be understood as critical professional development (CPD). These approaches revolve around teachers engaging with one another to build a deeper analysis of structural oppression, colonialism and White supremacy and ultimately taking some form of action towards dismantling it in their work and personal lives.

Gist, Bustos Flores, and Claeys (2014) challenge reform efforts that aim to “fix” teachers by positioning them as objects of reform and instead offer their theory of change: Critical Development Theory. They position teacher professional development as, “a socioconstructivist process in which teachers work as change agents in knowledge-centered communities of practice that assess, implement, and refine rigorous and culturally responsive pedagogy to increase achievement for all students” (p. 19). In their qualitative study, they examined entry interviews, teacher reflections of their PD experiences, mentors’ classroom observations, and field notes and utilized portraiture (Lightfoot, 2005) to analyze and illustrate critical professional development within the Academy of Teacher Excellence (ATE) at the University of Texas at San Antonio. ATE’s culturally responsive Community of Practice (CofP)

included three key themes: visionary leadership, the work of vision building, and the development of agents of change within the CofP. The leadership of ATE developed conceptual frameworks and support structures to guide the development of the teachers within the CofP as change agents within the communities and schools in which they worked. Gist et al. (2014) found that the program leadership drew on the collective knowledge of colleagues and students of Color to design and create a space for teachers of Color to “affirm their commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy and become self-empowered in CofP” (p. 29).

Critical Professional Development, then, does not only utilize critical approaches to think about structural oppression but also supports TOC through building relationships and leadership skills in order to create change within the systems they are trying to transform.

### **Social Justice Teacher Networks**

Multiracial social justice teacher collectives across the country have been organizing their own forms of critical professional development (CPD) situated outside of institutional spaces, designed by a collective political vision of education for liberation and tailored to serve teachers’ context-specific goals and needs (Kohli et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2016; Navarro, 2018; Picower, 2007). CPD approaches aim to be non-hierarchical in relation to who holds/contributes knowledge within the CPD space which is also rooted in critical and political pedagogies. They are often part of larger movements toward equity and justice, and participation is voluntary as members tend to actively seek out grassroots CPD. These approaches are often

teacher-led and centered, context specific and shaped by identifying the collective's needs. Grassroots CPD approaches can take shape in the form of a critical inquiry group, for example, which deeply engages in topics that may be controversial within participants' respective work places. To this end, participation is not incentivized via extrinsic rewards (stipends/professional development units/higher step on salary scale/etc.) but rather intrinsically rewarding by addressing participants' needs and commitments, which inevitably supports their retention within the field and more importantly, within a broader movement toward educational equity.

These approaches and collectives help critical educators grapple with and negotiate antiracist praxis within the context of White supremacy<sup>8</sup> and neoliberalism as well as enacting their agency in and out of the classroom. Ritchie's (2012) qualitative in-depth interview study reported on how eight P-12 teachers across the nation described what influenced them to teach critically and found that grassroots teacher networks played an important role in their development as social justice educators.

Radicalizing networks sustain critical educators' teaching practice by offering support when teachers feel isolated, giving teachers models and resources for innovative teaching strategies, and providing venues for sharing and publishing about one's practice. Whether serving as incubators or sustainers, social justice networks played an influential role in developing these teachers' critical practice. (p. 127)

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<sup>8</sup> White supremacy is the historical, systemic, pedagogical and social privileging of the collective interests, values, ideologies, and accomplishments of White people (Hayes & Juarez, 2012). Leonardo (2005) describes White Supremacy as "a racialized social system that upholds, reifies, and reinforces the superiority of Whites" (p. 127).

Grassroots social justice networks such as The New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE), the People’s Education Movement, the Institute of Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice (ITOC), and Teachers 4 Social Justice (T4SJ) organize “communities of praxis” and critical inquiry groups where teachers reported receiving support emotionally, intellectually and professionally (Kohli et al., 2015; Ritchie, 2012). Critical inquiry topics from NYCoRE have centered around topics such as teacher organizing, interrupting Islamophobia, creating safe spaces for LGBT youth, and supporting undocumented students, to name a few. As mentioned previously, NYCoRE has also created racial affinity spaces such as the Educators of Color (EOC) group and the Antiracist White Educators (AWE-G) group, where “teachers of Color and White teachers, respectively, separately address their needs as teachers committed to racial justice” (Strong et al., 2017, p. 133).

The People’s Education Movement in California organized anti-colonial scholarly and applied inquiry groups to understand how to develop a decolonizing pedagogy in the classroom. These critical teacher inquiry groups ultimately sought to dismantle the colonial nature of schools and academia that alienate educators committed to social justice (Martinez, 2014). Relying on Kirkland’s (2013) displacement ideologies, these inquiry groups challenged teachers to examine how they might be complicit with colonial ideologies of schooling while simultaneously disrupting these logics and reimagining liberatory possibilities in education. The ways in which their inquiry groups were structured relied on intentional dialogical and reading protocols that allowed members to feel vulnerable to express blind spots

they had in relation to their critical consciousness while still feeling valued as knowledgeable members to learn from. Martinez's implications of the study suggest that "developing one's teaching practice in a humanizing, teacher-led space has the potential to support teachers in deepening their critical consciousness" (p. 172). He argued that teachers' critical consciousness is at the core of their ability to develop curriculum and cultivate classroom environments that are transformative and humanizing for their students. Even within grassroots CPD spaces, affinity groups have served to better support the collective needs within organizations and social justice collectives, which I will describe in the following section.

### **Critical Affinity Group Spaces**

An affinity group is essentially a small collective composed of individuals who share a common aspect of identity—race, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, religion, and more—and who are engaged in a common endeavor. For example, schools, organizations and institutions might take up affinity group spaces as an approach to support identity development as well as engage in critical learning regarding issues related to social justice. Blitz and Kohl (2012) describe racial affinity groups as a process where only people of Color or only White people meet regularly to "discuss dynamics of institutional racism, oppression, and privilege within their organization" (p. 481). However, there are few studies that show how racial affinity spaces have been taken up to support teachers committed to social justice within the field of education. The studies reviewed below mainly report on the benefits associated with affinity-based TOC professional development.

Kohli and Pizarro's (2016) study involved 218 TOC that applied to participate in an institute exclusively designed for self-identified people of Color committed to racial justice in education. Each participant was selected and ultimately admitted into the institute using criteria to evaluate essay responses to select participants that demonstrated an advanced level of racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011). More specifically, criteria for advanced racial literacy included a structural analysis of racism, asset-based framing of communities of Color, and critical theoretical approaches to challenging inequality. Using Wilson's (2008) indigenous cultural framework of relationality and relational accountability to analyze their data, the authors found that TOC had "deep relational commitment[s] to teach along with, and as part of, communities of Color" even in the face of contradictions which frequently resulted in, "isolation, marginalization, and barriers to the advancement of justice" (p.73). The authors argue that while there is an imperative to recruit TOC, reasons for recruitment have more to do with benefits associated linked to higher student achievement or the more "efficient" functioning of schools (e.g., recruiting teachers to work in hard-to-staff schools; contributing specific scarce resources such as for example, translators) than with the appreciation of expertise, community cultural wealth and transformative pedagogies that TOC bring with them to schools.

For these reasons, TOC committed to racial justice need community-oriented approaches to support, which can include involvement within teacher activist groups, critical inquiry circles, or any space where they can meet and build with like-minded teachers. As they argue, these spaces can make all the difference in supporting

teacher retention and PD that is geared towards transformative learning for themselves and their students.

In a similar example, multiracial organizations have created racial affinity groups to provide tailored support for people of Color. For example, NYCoRE's Educators of Color (EOC) group was designed for people of Color in the profession to grow as social justice educators without the derailment of White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011).<sup>9</sup> Their mission statement states, "we advocate for a nurturing, transformative, and action-driven space for educators of Color to connect, learn, struggle, and heal together. We do this work to build and connect bridges for our collective liberation" (Strong et al., 2017, p. 134). Influenced by EOC, White educators within the organization created AWE-G a few years later as a space for self-identified antiracist White educators to deepen their understandings of race, racism and Whiteness and disrupt its perpetuation within their personal and professional lives. Their mission statement states that their work is "founded in reflection as action; critical reflection on our own racial identities allows us to build awareness of our role in perpetuating White supremacy" (Strong et al., 2017, p. 136). These racial affinity groups played an important role in their multiracial grassroots organization by decentering Whiteness and moving away from the tokenization and

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<sup>9</sup> DiAngelo (2011) describes White fragility as, "the state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable [for White people], triggering . . . outward displays of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate White racial equilibrium."

commodification of TOC within their learning spaces. Although these affinity groups operate separately, they also collaborate on the facilitation of anti-racist workshops and events within the organization.

The Black Teacher Project (BTP) is a racial affinity collective in California and New York that recruits future Black teachers and aims to sustain them personally and professionally through data-driven research on “Black teacher health and sustainability” (Blackteacherproject.org). BTP works with university, school district and other non-profit partners to understand how Black teachers are experiencing their work in schools and specific challenges they face in order to develop tailored support. To date, while the collective has not yet published any research findings, Dr. Micia Mosley explained how and why affinity group spaces have been integral to supporting Black teachers:

Our work is aimed at encouraging individuals to embrace and embody Black excellence that is authentic to who they are and in ways that serve their students. Affinity-based groups have allowed teachers to address more specific issues in serving their students. Our research indicates that teachers who are able to have open dialogue about how their race impacts their practice have been able to engage in culturally responsive pedagogy from a more grounded and sustainable place. (retrieved at <http://educate78.org/intro-Black-teacher-project/>)

Other collectives have sought to collaborate with the Black Teacher Project to garner intellectual, pedagogical and emotional support. For example, the Equitable Schools organization based in New York describes themselves as a “radical think tank organization on a mission to close the opportunity gap by equipping, mobilizing and empowering our Black teachers matter network to improve racial and cultural equity in schools” (retrieved at <http://www.equitableschools.org>). The Black

Teachers Matter collective is situated within the Equitable Schools organization and has organized teacher racial affinity projects such as #MyBlackTeacher which is a “pop-up conversational series” that centers on people of Color’s experience with Black teachers in K–12 schooling, or the lack thereof, across the United States. This collective is also developing a Black educator mentors’ summit to create opportunities for Black teachers to learn and build with more veteran like-minded colleagues in the field.

TOCs who share a common desire to engage in a process of conscientization, or critical consciousness oriented toward action for a more just world (Freire, 1970) can do so via critical affinity group spaces. However, there are very few studies that report on the nature and impact of these spaces on TOCs over time. Diversifying a predominantly White profession necessitates attention to TOCs material conditions within the profession, as well as their personal and collective healing from racial trauma via school-based structural violence in order to disrupt its perpetuity. When teachers engage in spaces that acknowledge and center their political, professional, and personal identities rooted in visions of liberation from oppression, the very conceptualization of teacher professional development provides radical possibilities for supporting critical TOC. This particular orientation to teacher support can exist within spaces that prioritize cultivating relationships, trust, vulnerability and a sense of community among other social justice TOC in order to heal and thrive (Kohli et al., 2015).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I comprehensively reviewed research about teachers of Color, demonstrating a compelling rationale for their presence in the field. I described systemic barriers that impact a TOC's accessibility to or retention within teacher education programs. I identified teaching and professional learning conditions that also play a role in the overall retention of TOC within the field. I then described research that highlighted critical approaches to support the sustainability of TOC, intellectually and emotionally, via critical and community centered approaches. Lastly, I highlighted how and why critical TOC seek out social justice-oriented support and engage in grassroots teacher activism and organizing. There were very few studies that reported on the composition and day to day experiences within critical teacher of Color racial affinity group spaces with depth to understand how they are developed, what they do or how they support the healing, growth and retention of educators of Color. This gap in the literature is important to address if we are to understand alternative, culturally responsive pedagogies of professional development and teacher learning by and for people of Color in the field.

My dissertation study will contribute valuable insights to the field as it explores how, over the course of three academic years, a grassroots critical racial affinity group cultivated critical and healing centered support on a monthly basis through: (a) critical dialogue, reflection and action directed towards reimagining and transforming oppressive structures and practices (Freire, 1970) via Critical Professional Development approaches (Gist et al., 2014; Kohli et al., 2015); (b) a Community Cultural Wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) for educators of Color to view

themselves, their students and their work through an asset-centered lens; and (c) a Radical Healing framework (Ginwright, 2016) focusing on healing from the impacts of structural, intergenerational and internalized forms of oppression as essential to their development as educators and human beings navigating systemic racism in the field and society. The implications from my study point to the ways in which critical racial affinity groups can serve as a space for marginalized educators to reclaim power in their professional development by engaging in healing centered approaches tailored for and by educators and organizers of Color that understand collective care as a critical form of activism, human development and resistance to White supremacy. Lastly, this study offers important insights and examples of holistic and critical approaches that might inspire other educators of Color around the country to create their own critical racial affinity groups that address their contextual and collective needs.

## Chapter Four: Theoretical Frameworks and Research Methodology

This study explores the nuances and complexity of the lives and experiences of educators of Color as experienced in a critical educator of Color affinity group space. In the first part of this chapter, I describe the theoretical frameworks that underlie my perspectives on teacher learning. In the following section, I describe the theoretical frameworks that shaped the pedagogical approach within H.E.L.L.A. Lastly, I describe the theoretical perspectives that informed my research process including my methodology and rationale for my research design, which were aligned with the frameworks that shaped H.E.L.L.A. pedagogy.

### **Theoretical Frameworks Underlying Teacher Learning Perspectives**

In this section, I describe the theoretical frameworks and concepts that inform my perspectives on teacher learning by: (a) describing the sociocultural and critical perspectives on teacher learning that I draw from to understand professional development through an anti-oppressive and relational lens; (b) taking up sociocultural theoretical perspectives as a frame for examining how learning is situated and how it unfolds through social processes. In so doing, I also draw on the Communities of Practice (CoP) theory to demonstrate the theory's limitations in relation to addressing how race, power and privilege might impact learning dynamics within a CoP. I then draw on Gee's (2005) notion of affinity spaces to illuminate how some aspects of this theory address the gaps within CoP theory but still falls short in capturing the nature of learning within a critical racial affinity group like H.E.L.L.A. The following section will then describe the theoretical frameworks that

shaped H.E.L.L.A.'s pedagogical approach to cultivate a critical racial affinity group space.

### **Sociocultural Perspectives on Learning**

Teacher professional learning within the context of in-service professional development has been critiqued as transmission-oriented pedagogies delivered by outsiders who are deemed as experts but often far removed from the realities of teachers' everyday lives (Corcoran, 1995; Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Giroux, 2002; Kohli et al., 2015; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Lieberman, 1995). In contrast, this study relies on sociocultural learning perspectives, which view learning as situated, co-constructed and rooted in the cultural, political, historical and racialized experiences that teachers embody.

The early work of Lev Vygotsky laid the foundation of sociocultural learning which conceptualized development as a transformative process dependent on socially shared activities and interactions that lead to internalized meaning making (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that because learning is situated and developed through engagement in particular social practices within learning communities, learners move from the peripheral (novice) towards full (expert) participation and as a result, experience a change in identity. However, in the context of teacher development, I view learning as a process that is developed collectively through dialogue, that is shaped by micro- and macro- social interactions and cultural factors, which ultimately impact how learning unfolds in the contexts of teachers' lives. Teacher learning, in this sense, is a complex, dynamic and

transformative endeavor of engagement (Walqui & Pease-Alvarez, 2011). In this way, thinking, learning, and development are shaped both by the broader social system as well as through one's participation within culturally organized activities (Cobb, 1994).

Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) advanced understandings of sociocultural theory and cultural ways of learning by distinguishing between assumed individual learning traits versus one's repertoires of practice. They argue that particular ethnic or categorically attributable group practices are often conflated with static understandings of culture. As an alternative, they propose a cultural-historical approach of understanding groups' experiences as varied histories of engagement with cultural practices. In this sense, cultural-historical theory assumes that one's learning and dispositions are inextricably tied to cultural and historical contexts and, "to understand both individual and community learning it is necessary to examine the nature and forms of cultural artifacts and tools used; the social relations, rules, and division of labor; and the historical development of individuals and communities" (p. 22). This perspective shifts focus to the dynamic experiences situated in activities that groups and individuals participate in which is also shaped by historical factors, rather than focusing on their individual traits, which they argue is problematic, especially toward groups that have been and continue to remain underserved in U.S. schools.

**Communities of practice.** A Community of Practice (CoP) theory considers situated social constructions of meaning, learning, and identity through the co-

construction of knowledge and identity transformations that unfold via legitimate peripheral participation (Lave, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Unlike learning theories that rely on the individual as the unit of analysis, CoP theory suggests that individuals and the community are mutually constituted because as one changes, the other also changes (Rogoff, 1994). Developing an identity as a member within a CoP depends upon the motivating, shaping and meaning making attributed to activities experienced. However, as I describe below, I find this perspective to be inadequate when addressing the professional development of marginalized teachers within the field.

Legitimate peripheral participation is the learning that happens through the process of becoming a member of a sustained CoP and through apprenticeship as opposed to relying on internalized cognitive processes, as described by Piaget (1972). Engaging in these processes overtime leads to a change of identity and sense of belonging and membership within and through the community of practitioners. For example, the co-construction of knowledge, engagement and participation within critical study groups, the co-facilitation of workshops at conferences and community building at various events, are all practices grounded in a CoP that grassroots teacher organizers might engage in. Wenger (1998) explains that members' identities within a CoP are developed and sustained by things that matter to them and that they engage in regularly. Legitimization of a CoP also comes from the various forms of leadership distributed via roles and responsibilities because it is through both learning and leading that one's sense of identity strengthens. However, Lave and Wenger

(1991) emphasize that, “learning is never simply a matter of the ‘transmission’ of knowledge or the ‘acquisition’ of skill; identity in relation with practice, and hence knowledge and skill and their significance to the subject and the community, are never unproblematic” (p. 116). Identity, therefore, plays a key role in CoPs which can become further complicated by the role that race, class, sexuality, gender, and other social constructs relating to power and oppression play in society at large and inevitably within a CoP.

**Affinity spaces.** Gee (2005) problematizes the notion of membership within the community of practice learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger, 1998) and proposes an alternative concept, an affinity space that, “focuses on the idea of a *space* in which people interact, rather than on *membership* in a community” (p. 214). Complicating the idea of “community” within a community of practice (CoP), Gee addresses how the sense of belongingness that is assumed among members may not necessarily be the case from the vantage point of all individuals within a CoP. The very notion of “membership” within a CoP can mean many different things for each individual within a group/organization. While scholars have carefully defined what constitutes a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder 2002), Gee argues that the notion has still been used to speak to a wide array of social forms, which often misses “the trees for the forest” (Gee, 2005, p. 215). He proposes affinity spaces as a particular form of *semiotic social spaces* and focuses on how spaces are constructed in ways where people “get and give meanings to signs within them” (p. 216). An affinity space captures particular

forms of social affiliation that can be compared and contrasted with other forms of affiliation, however, a common endeavor is primary, social affiliation is then secondary.

Gee (2005) posits that while social constructs of identity are not primary, they are intentionally acknowledged through individual and distributed knowledge and participation:

In an affinity space, people relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavours, goals or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability or social class. These latter variables are backgrounded, though they can be used (or not) strategically by people if and when they choose to use them for their own purposes. (p. 225)

Gee argues that one's racial identity alone is not sufficient for sustaining an affinity group so in order to serve the individual and collective needs and goals within an affinity group, there must also be a common endeavor that all members are unified by and engaged in. However, I argue that race and other socially constructed identity affiliations cannot simply exist in the background within a society that is racially and economically stratified. Individuals are impacted based on their social status and identity within the United States and particularly within a teaching profession that is dominated by 82 percent White teachers (Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015).

Sociocultural and affinity space theories must explicitly address how the roles that race and racism shape the leadership, sense of belonging and learning that unfolds within diverse learning environments. Vossoughi and Gutiérrez (2016) argue that sociocultural theory could benefit from aspects of critical pedagogy and vice versa when approaching the study of learning by bridging the "political sensibilities

advanced within the Freirean tradition with the sociocultural emphasis on cultural mediation and everyday activity” (p. 19). They argue that many critical pedagogues have advanced influential analyses of the relationship between schooling and the current social order by focusing heavily on *what* is to be taught rather than *how* it is taught. They further argue that sociocultural theory provides the foundation to consider how learning/teaching unfolds. While sociocultural theory provides insights about how learning is organized and how social relations and forms of mediation engage learners, it does not pay as close attention to critically examining the political nature of teaching and learning. Vossoughi and Gutiérrez’s work examined the shared points of resonance and tensions between Freirean and Vygotskian traditions and highlight how critical pedagogy can essentially push sociocultural learning theories to critically examine the purposes of learning. I approach my design and study of teacher learning by bridging the emphasis on learners’ social/racial identities, political sensibilities in critical theory with the emphasis on cultural mediation and everyday activity in sociocultural theory.

### **Critical Perspectives on Teacher Learning**

Paulo Freire’s (1970) theory of critical pedagogy is rooted in the position that education is a practice of freedom which urges marginalized people to engage in critical and humanizing learning experiences that liberate them from oppression in its myriad forms. Giroux (2002, 2010) argues that many of the interventions in teacher learning either disregard a teacher’s role in preparing critical and socially active learners or position them as objects of reform by ignoring their intelligence and

experience and reducing them to highly skilled technicians. Giroux's reframing of teachers as skilled technicians to teachers as transformative intellectuals offers a strong theoretical critique of the deintellectualization of teachers within conventional approaches to professional learning and development. He, like Freire, urges teachers to think deeply about their larger commitments and visions of what our society should be striving for in relation to justice, empowerment, and freedom within a true democracy for future generations. In an era where standardization heavily shapes public education, teachers are rarely given opportunities to think beyond the confines of standardized testing, mandated curricula and state or nationally adopted standards which directly impact pedagogy and school practices.

**Teaching for social justice within the context of neoliberalism.** The phrase *social justice* has encompassed many meanings as it has been used in school mission statements, curricula, and educational reform proposals across the country (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). In this section, I contextualize and situate teacher professional development within an era of Neoliberalism by defining and providing examples of how Neoliberalism impacts public education and teacher professional development, as well as racial and social justice-oriented approaches and I offer implications for supporting teachers committed to social justice.

*Neoliberalism* and *neoliberal capitalism* are important phenomena to understand in relation to supporting underprivileged communities, especially when education reform rhetoric co-opts equity-related terminology and issues to serve private and corporate interests while masquerading as social justice imperatives

(Picower & Mayorga, 2015). Apple (2009) defines neoliberal capitalism as “a particular set of economic and social relations that privileges the market as the chief structural and ideological governance mechanism” and utilizes public education as a tool to serve the interests and power of the elite by maintaining dominance over disadvantaged groups (p. 163). He analyzed the interrelationships between neoliberal capitalism, globalization, and grassroots social movements targeted at educational reform on behalf of marginalized populations (including case studies he conducted in Japan, Israel/Palestine, rural Mexico, and the United States). Apple argues that massive social movements designed to combat social injustice are much needed.

Similarly, Lipman (2011) provides examples of how neoliberalism materially manifests in public education, such as when:

Urban schools are wound up in privatization, public-private partnerships, demands for union “flexibility,” teacher merit pay schemes, and mayoral takeovers, along with high stakes testing and restricted urban school districts, direct involvement of corporate actors and corporate philanthropies dictating school district policies—these are features of neoliberal governance dominating urban school districts.” (p. 47)

Neoliberalism situates options around school choice, school vouchers, charters, elimination of teachers’ unions, etc. as “common sense” solutions to education failure in urban schools. (Kumashiro, 2009, 2015)

McLaren and Gutierrez (1994) argue that teacher socialization occurs within a neoliberal context that is constrained by inequitable funding, resource allocation and working conditions that leave little, if any, opportunities for reflective, critical and transformative learning and practice. The authors state that this context of teacher socialization and its impact on classroom and school cultures help explain how classroom and school structures mirror the relations of power and hierarchies of

knowledge and distribution in the larger society. The dominant neoliberal frames and discourses around public education, which masquerade as being equity-oriented, do not address community needs and development. Rather, these frames further the agendas of major corporations that profit from standardization and school choice (Picower & Mayorga, 2015).

When teachers are expected to be implementers of policies and deliverers of curricula shaped by private interests, teachers who are committed to social justice are faced with the political dilemma of participating in further disadvantaging historically underserved communities. There are very real structural constraints within the teaching profession and schools that inevitably position teachers as victims of disempowerment along with the students they serve (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Ingersoll, 2003). An example of disempowerment might include factory model schools that demotivate teachers and students because of a centralization of power that is not shared with them or their local communities (Ingersoll, 2003). At a time when teacher and student accountability and test data dominate teacher PD and collaboration, this central focus often goes unchallenged in mainstream school improvement research and school initiatives making it less likely for critical reflection or dialogue to take place in opposition to it (Picower, 2007; Servage, 2008).

Teacher professional development aligned to a neoliberal context therefore does not foster practices of critique and critical dialogue that lead to more nuanced historical, political and transformative analyses of public education (Giroux, 2004; Zeichner, 1993). However, when teachers explicitly and systematically develop a

critical understanding of how schools reproduce inequities, as well as develop critical understandings of their own identities in relation to the populations they serve, they are positioned to engage in personal, pedagogical, and systemic transformative resistance (Katsarou, Picower, & Stovall, 2013; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Sleeter (2008) states that teacher education can also work against neoliberalism by: implementing recruitment and admission policies that bring in more diverse teacher candidates; early fieldwork which supports teachers in inquiry-based learning that disrupts deficit theorizing; professional coursework centered in a socio-cultural framework; supporting teacher candidates in student teaching within diverse and/or low income schools; and on-going professional development through practice-based inquiry and teacher activist networks (p. 1948). Furthermore, centering teacher development around specific issues that impact the communities in which teachers work can serve as an effective way to mitigate some of the negative effects of neoliberal reforms and schooling through strategic political education and organizing (Katsarou et al., 2013; Noel, 2013; Oakes & Rodgers, 2006; Warren & Mapp, 2011).

**Popular education approaches.** Stemming from critical pedagogy, popular education is a pedagogical approach that facilitates a critical and anti-hierarchal learning experience among the “popular classes” which are marginalized sectors of society (Wiggins, 2011). The goal of popular education is to develop individual and collective empowerment through the process of *conscientization*, which occurs when oppressed people come to understand the forces that produce and maintain their oppression and take action against these social and material conditions (Beder, 1996).

This “problem-posing” orientation to learning focuses on addressing societal problems as a means for transformative education rooted in praxis, collective/participatory approaches, and social justice-oriented inquiry leading toward action (Beder, 1996; Freire, 1970). The grassroots organization in which this study is situated utilizes popular education approaches as the method underlying CPD, which disrupts conventional apolitical, ahistorical and hierarchal approaches that districts and schools often mandate as professional development.

A time when neoliberal reforms are essentially dismantling public education, social justice educators must engage in critical dialogue in order to disrupt the normalization of practices that exacerbate educational inequality. Therefore, when teachers unite under a common commitment to justice and equity, as well as strategize and organize around material conditions impacting their students and communities, they are essentially engaging in critical pedagogy. This reconceptualization of teacher learning deliberately engages a critical vernacular and “discourse that unites the language of critique with the language of possibility, so that social justice educators recognize that they can make changes” (Giroux, 2004, p. 4). Popular education approaches to teacher learning, then, offer social justice teachers a pedagogy that positions them as transformative intellectuals centered in the politicized formation of the self and of the broader social order. This study explores the nature of learning, interactions and benefits afforded to educators of Color within a racial affinity group situated within an existing community of practice such as the Teachers 4 Social Justice organization.

## **Theoretical Frameworks Guiding H.E.L.L.A.**

In this section I describe the critical pedagogical frameworks that shaped the learning experiences that were part of H.E.L.L.A. In so doing, I argue that critical professional development supports teachers of Color who have likely experienced isolation, internalized, overt, and/or systemic manifestations of oppression and trauma due to their political and pedagogical commitments and benefit from tailored support that addresses these issues. I briefly describe the general features of critical professional Critical Professional Development (Kohli et al., 2015) and how a racial affinity group approach strengthens these features. I then describe Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) and Radical Healing (Ginwright, 2015) as asset centered theoretical lenses and frameworks that allowed the group to attend to the racial trauma that teachers of Color experience(d).

Critical professional development (CPD) bridges my theoretical frameworks, sociocultural theory and critical theory, with practice as it relates to teacher learning and professional development for educators committed to social justice praxis. As mentioned in the previous chapter, CPD is driven by a socio-constructivist process that conceptualizes teachers as change agents situated within knowledge-centered communities of practice who critically analyze the societal forces impacting public education while building the capacity to struggle for social justice inside and outside of classrooms (Gist et al., 2014). The role of the teacher within this context is committed to transforming society while engaging actively, empathetically, emotionally, intellectually, and professionally in the co-construction of critical

learning which integrates content while reading the world (Kohli et al., 2015).

Teachers in CPD shift from objects of reform to subjects of reform and are positioned as experts in their own social justice oriented professional growth by deciding on what issues and actions to take on collectively and in solidarity with others within a broader movement of education for liberation (Gist et al., 2014; Kohli et al., 2015).

**Grassroots approaches to CPD.** Scholars have documented how educators committed to social justice have either sought out networks and grassroots organizations or created their own spaces to engage in critical teacher learning situated outside of institutional constraints (Kohli et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2016; Picower, 2007; Pour-Khorshid, 2016; Ritchie, 2012; Rogers et al., 2005). I reviewed this work in the previous chapter.

**Racial affinity groups.** A racial affinity group consists of individuals who share a common racial identity and endeavor toward social/racial justice (e.g., a critical teachers of Color group, Black women's feminist group, White allies against racism group). Racial affinity groups within organizations and institutions have been taken up as a way to support people with shared identities by creating a space for them to collectively process, strategize and address institutional racism, oppression, and privilege within their respective context (Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Michael & Conger, 2009; Nieto & Boyer, 2006). Affinity groups have served as institutional interventions to address areas of diverse recruitment and retention, morale and sense of community, the advancement of women and minorities, and to act as a mechanism for community involvement (Greene, 2011). Race-based caucusing is another term

used to describe affinity groups within organizations that value and practice antiracism, ongoing personal and professional development tailored for marginalized groups, and active accountability in addressing institutional racism within organizations (Blitz & Kohl, 2012). Mosely (2018) describes racial affinity professional development as, “spaces of support, learning and healthy career development that are culturally responsive to a specific racialized group who experiences the consequences of institutional racism in particular ways” (p. 270). Social activists and educators create racial affinity spaces for individuals affiliated around a common cause within their collectives in ways that also center members’ racial and social identities (Beck, 1999; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Pour-Khorshid, 2016; Strong et al., 2017).

**Community cultural wealth.** Since its conception, the H.E.L.L.A. educators of Color group was intentionally designed to explore how Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework could be used to empower participants to identify the strengths and assets they bring to the profession as educators of Color. The framework was also used as a unifying roadmap for planning and workshopping ideas on how to teach about and nurture the various forms of cultural capital that communities of Color embody. Yosso’s framework builds on Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural capital wherein cultural capital refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are not only valued by privileged groups in society but also invested in to accrue more capital and success. Yosso uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) to argue that there are various forms of cultural capital that

marginalized groups possess which are not recognized or valued within the dominant capital framework, including aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005, pp. 78–81). This framework created opportunities for participants to deepen their understanding of the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991)<sup>10</sup> within the group, which enriched each participant’s connections to their own and other members’ unique strengths and assets within the collective.

**Radical healing.** Ginwright (2016) proposes a new healing centered justice movement, which he argues is essential to facilitate efforts of repairing the harm caused from structural violence in urban communities. Structural violence, according to Paul Farmer (2004) is, “violence exerted systematically—that is, indirectly—by everyone who belongs to a certain social order [... which reproduces] the social machinery of oppression” (p. 307). The term was originally coined by Galtung (1969) to describe the ways in which the normalization of social structures such as schools, health care, churches and law enforcement, inhibit individuals from reaching their full potential because they often serve as a mechanism of social stratification. Drawing on ethnographic case studies from across the United States, Ginwright (2016) highlights how teacher activists and community organizers utilize healing strategies to support young people and adult allies to become powerful civic actors in

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<sup>10</sup> I use the term, *intersectionality*, coined by legal scholar, Kimberly Crenshaw to describe how race intersects with other social constructed forms of identity and argues that gender, sexuality, ableism, and more cannot be seen as separable from one’s racial identity.

their communities. He argues that one of the challenges in trying to change systems, schools, and other institutions is that often times the strategies and goals aiming to combat inequities are heavily focused on policy or other interventions but do not address the humanity or lack thereof, of the people within social structures such as schools, organizations and government.

In response to this problem, Ginwright (2016) proposes a Radical Healing framework, which can serve as a political reconceptualization of teacher professional development. By focusing on healing from “oppression as a form of social and collective trauma” and rebuilding a “healthy collective identity and sense of belonging that promotes meaning and purpose for teachers and students” teachers can engage in a more holistic approach to their development (p. 8).

One of the case studies in his book describes how a self-selected critical inquiry group centered healing and restorative practices as they intentionally explored the binary between their personal vs. professional identities and demeanors as practitioners (p. 104). This work showed how the binary of what is traditionally deemed as professional vs. unprofessional, in relation to teacher conduct and pedagogy, is often disconnected from the necessary relational dimensions of teacher/student interactions and argues that radical healing practices are critical interventions to shift these binaries. Ginwright’s (2017) work focuses on how the five radical healing principles within the framework center Culture, Agency, Relationships, Meaning and Aspirations (CARMA), which can be viewed as a type of psychic armor to confront systemic and internalized oppression, while at the same

time embracing an identity with personal and communal life-affirming meaning. He argues that any approaches promoting education for liberation must draw upon the power of speaking about painful experiences related to racism, sexism, and poverty because unhealed pain become barriers to resistance. Healing, then, is facilitated through sharing truth(s) about suffering and releasing hidden pain through healing-centered engagement.

The historical and current manifestations of racism, classism, patriarchy and other forms of social and institutional oppression, policies and practices must be connected to the humanity of those most impacted in schools. Since most strategies aimed at improving schools rarely ever focus on restoring and healing individual and collective harm, they do little to provide emotional and material support to those most impacted by structural violence. I argue that CEoC experience compound racial trauma, emotional harm and social toxicity<sup>11</sup> as a consequence of trying to serve as change agents of Color within institutions and a society that perpetuates structural inequity every day. Therefore, teacher professional development makes little difference if the learning is disconnected from the spiritual, cultural and emotional well-being of marginalized educators and students alike. This dynamic has led to critical educators and organizers of Color reclaiming and reframing their pedagogy, professional development, and activism to center radical healing as social justice praxis.

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<sup>11</sup> Social toxicity refers to how “poisonous” social environments threaten the “development of identity, competence, moral reasoning, trust, hope, and other features of personality and ideology that make for success in school, family, work, and the community” (Gabarino, 2012).

## **Theoretical Frameworks Guiding the Research Process**

As an active grassroots teacher organizer of Color within the Teachers 4 Social Justice organization, it was important for me to engage in a research process that was rooted in my political commitments and relationships with the group members in this study, as well as my own identity as a working-class woman of Color in the world. I sought to enact what Guajardo, Guajardo, and Casaperalta (2008) refer to as an activist methodology that emerges from work that has been “rooted in place, built on relationships, and sustained over a period of time . . . where you can witness changes in people, in families, in institution” (pp. 8–9). These aspects shaped the foundation of my identity as a researcher of Color with the understanding that, “I am both colonizer and colonized [and] I understand the imperative of my specific social location (Patel, 2016, p. 6). I intentionally approached this research with a desire to resist traditional power dynamics between the researcher and participants through my commitment to honoring their dignity, wisdom, and strength exuded through each of their complex identities and stories. I also wanted to resist what Tuck (2009) refers to as damage-centered research (Tuck, 2009) conducted through pathologizing approaches that portray marginalized communities as broken and where oppression defines educators of Color, particularly. Tuck (2009) pushed me to think of desire-based research approaches “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (p. 416). In so doing, I sought to capture how educators of Color collectively cultivated a learning space to address their needs and to sustain themselves within the field.

It is important to note that the same theoretical frameworks that shaped the pedagogical approach within H.E.L.L.A. were also used as theoretical lenses with which to view participants and the research site itself. For example, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth theory influenced how I viewed participants within this research study by viewing group members through an asset-centered lens within their own learning as well as teaching. I relied on Kohli et. al. (2015) Critical Professional Development to examine how H.E.L.L.A. resisted technocratic, top-down, antidialogical (Freire, 1970) learning. Instead, I focused particular attention to how H.E.L.L.A. engaged in Dialogical Action (Freire, 1970) by positioning group members as critical education stakeholders to learn for transformation through cooperative dialogue, unity and shared leadership to meet their collective needs. Lastly, I relied on Ginwright's (2015) Radical Healing framework to examine social toxins that impacted members as well as how their focus on culture, agency, relationships, meaning and aspirations (CARMA) influenced and shaped their learning experience and actions.

### **Research Methodology and Rationale for Research Design**

The preceding sections expand upon the literature that informed (a) my approach to investigating the nature of learning, relationships and the personal and professional impact that this grassroots affinity group space had on its members; and (b) the teacher of Color initiative I investigated. In this section, I describe and elaborate on my research approach, however, I will describe the research participants in Chapter Six. In short, I drew on ethnographic methods to investigate the research

questions posed below within the context of a single case, which I define as participants' experiences within a racial affinity group over a three-year period. In so doing, I took on the role of participant observer and drew on multiple data sources (e.g., audio-recorded monthly meetings and interviews, members' written *testimonios*, field notes in and outside of group context, social media posts and other forms of correspondence, and more). After utilizing my research questions as a departure point for my analysis, I drew on a grounded approach to data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Due to the complex nature of human interaction and the dynamic nature of learning, I relied on a qualitative research approach, which was naturalistic, descriptive, concerned with process and meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). More specifically, because my study is focused on the H.E.L.L.A. racial affinity group, I utilized a naturalistic approach with the inherent assumption that "human behavior is significantly influenced by the setting in which [the phenomena] occurs" (p. 5) and in so doing, took up an ethnographic case study approach. I relied on rich data sources such as interviews, field notes, audio-recordings of meetings and interviews, artifacts created within the context of the group, correspondence and meeting agendas. All of the data sources described in subsequent sections held meaning and served to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of learning that unfolded within this case study. In order to deepen my understanding of the nature of learning and benefits associated to the participating members within the H.E.L.L.A. racial affinity group, I sought to explore the questions listed below:

## **Research Questions**

- What is the nature of learning and interactions that develop within a grassroots racial affinity group?
- How does participation impact members' personal and professional lives?

## **An Ethnographic Case Study Research Approach**

This study focused on the experiences, perspectives and practices that unfolded within a grassroots racial affinity group where I served as a co-facilitator and participated as a fellow member. I combined ethnography principles and approaches (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) to this particular case study (Yin, 2003), making this an ethnographic case study with the overarching goal of “creating a cultural portrait” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016, p. 9). I also engaged in sustained participant observation (Jorgensen, 1989; Wilson, 1977), drawing on my first-hand knowledge of the cultural, organizational, social, and political phenomena within the case's natural context (Yin, 2003). I ultimately sought to understand group members' interactions and meaning-making within the group with more depth so I paid particular attention to how members shared their lived experiences, critical perspectives, commitments and perceived benefits.

I drew on the field of ethnography to approach my research methods, which relied primarily on firsthand participation and written records and jottings of my observations and experiences in and with the group (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). The two core criteria of an ethnographic approach are that it is a “field-oriented activity and it has cultural interpretations” (p. 18). It is field-oriented in that as the

researcher, I am participating in “people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artifacts” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 3). The focus I placed on the context of the group across data sources allowed for a holistic view and perspective (Boyle, 1994). Similar to ethnographers who begin getting to know the people within a situated context under study, I began developing relationships with members through my participation in group practices and activities beginning at the first meeting and evolving over the course of three academic years.

Wilson (1977) states that because human behavior is complex and shaped by the context under which phenomena unfold, participant observation is useful for capturing more meaning than what is observable through data sources alone. As a field strategy, participant observation combines “document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection” (Denzin, 1989, pp. 157–158). Considering my role and identity as a fellow public school educator of Color and grassroots teacher-organizer, I explored a context that might be challenging for outsiders to gain access to or understand with the level of depth that an insider can reach (Jorgenson, 1989). Participant observation strengthened my ability to observe interactions and group dynamics over time, and to gain insights that could not be obtained solely through interviews or data sources alone.

Additionally, I attended and participated in all group meetings. I also spent time with members outside of group contexts situated outside of meetings, engaging personally with members. For example, I observed members in contexts such as social justice related institutes, conferences and events, as well as in informal settings such as working together at coffee shops, exercising locally together, and attending parties with one another. I produced field notes in both written and audio-recorded formats, which I later reviewed and relied on to write analytic memos during data analysis.

As a participant observer, I jotted notes, and in some cases, doodles and drawings before, during and after group meetings in a journal as well (Flick, 2006). More specifically, I relied on four forms of field notes for documentation: (a) condensed accounts in single words, sentences, quotations from conversations, and more; (b) an expanded account of the impressions from interviews and field contacts; (c) a fieldwork journal, similar to a diary, which included experiences, emotions, reactions, and more that arose while engaging in participant observation; and (d) ongoing notes regarding analysis and interpretations (Flick, 2006, p. 287). Some of my field notes were also audio-recorded, in which case those were later personally transcribed.

Relying on an ethnographic case study approach to my research allowed me to explore various factors that contributed to transformative shifts in perspectives and praxis within the context of the affinity group (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). As a participant observer, the group dynamics, which evolved over the

course of three academic years, also allowed me to build deeper levels of trust and relationships with members.

### **Data Sources**

I began collecting data for this project upon IRB approval beginning in January of 2015, however, because I have been an active member within this grassroots organization since October of 2012, I also had access to data about the T4SJ organization from a pilot study I conducted in previous years which was also IRB approved. In capturing what transpired during group sessions, I focused on the following sources:

- 1) Discussions shared among the group that I gathered through audio-recordings and field notes from monthly meetings; individual-recorded interviews; and in-person and online interactions including email exchanges and social media messages and comments related to the group.
- 2) Textual productions from our monthly study groups including written narratives, *testimonios*, posters and artifacts produced within our sessions, journal entries, and survey responses.

Ultimately, I created a H.E.L.L.A. archive to store my data sources which served as inventory so that I could know what was in each interview, each group session-recording, and more. Additionally, I changed participants' names to pseudonyms in any stored data within my own personal password-protected Google drive.

Between the months of April, May, and June 2016, I employed semi-structured interviews<sup>12</sup> with group members so that I could gain a better

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B for semi structured interview protocol.

understanding of their experiences and perspectives about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Patton, 2002). Utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol enabled me to inquire about issues and perspectives that could not directly be observed otherwise, such as how participants organize and attach meaning to the world (Patton, 2002). Since I could not entirely predict what topics would be addressed, each interview was co-constructed. Using an open-ended interview protocol, I asked participants focused questions while also being flexible to changes in conversational directions that were relevant to the topic but not necessarily part of the interview protocol. I conducted a total of eleven in-person interviews at the end of the first year of the affinity group experience, which was during the summer of the 2015–2016 academic year.

The following year, I conducted 9 additional interviews<sup>13</sup> at the end of the 2016–2017 academic year and due to time constraints in relation to my dissertation timeline, rather than formally interviewing members, I conducted informal check-ins regarding each member's reflections of their H.E.L.L.A. experience during the 2017–2018 academic year. Each interview was conducted in-person and ranged between 1 and 1 ½ hours. The interviews were audio-recorded on my personal digital voice recorder and transcribed by Rev online transcription services.<sup>14</sup> I personally reviewed each transcript closely to ensure accuracy. I reviewed all transcriptions by listening

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix C for semi structured interview protocol.

<sup>14</sup> Rev Transcription Services can be found at:  
<https://www.rev.com/transcription?gclid=CK2G2-SbuMECFsGv7AodGT8AaQ>

to all original audio-recordings matching all transcriptions to what each participant said in the audio recordings.

### **Audio-recorded Meeting Sessions**

I audio recorded every meeting session after the third month of the 2015–2016 academic year. I waited until the third month to audio-record meetings because I wanted participants to feel comfortable within the context of the group before recording and I also wanted to be sure that those who initially joined the group would remain in the group after their first few months. I checked in with each member individually and all members collectively to ensure that they felt comfortable with me recording sessions for the purposes of the dissertation study. However, all monthly meetings during the 2016–2017 academic year, with the exception of the November meeting, were audio-recorded, and during the 2017–2018 academic year I audio-recorded every meeting, with the exception of the last meeting in May.

### **Documents**

Analysis of documents produced for and by the teachers in this study included, but were not limited to: the mission and principles of the organization in which the study group was situated; the H.E.L.L.A. affinity group description, community agreements, meeting agendas and notes; the texts produced by participants within the group, including *testimonios*, which I will describe in more depth below; and scholarly articles, book chapters, and poetry which were read during meetings.

### ***Testimonios***

The political nature and writing genre of *testimonio* has evolved over a long history of marginalized people writing about their experiences as interlocutors, surviving oppression which has been taken up as a “pedagogical, methodological, and activist approach to social justice that transgresses traditional paradigms in academia” (Delgado-Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012, p. 363). *Testimonio* writing has historically been used as a way to build solidarity among women of Color (Anzaldúa, 1990), and although our group is composed of a mixture of multi-age, cisgender, transgender, and gender nonconforming classroom and community educators, *testimonio* served as a central writing practice over the course of three academic years together.

As a method, *testimonio* engages storytellers and witnesses in critical reflections about their racialized lived experiences as a means to bring about awareness and possible change through consciousness-raising about collective struggles and resistance. I drew on every *testimonio* written and shared within the context of group meetings in order to make sense of each educator’s lived experiences and connections with others. These were shared during debriefings, as notes to other members, and during “appreciations” which took place at the end of every meeting.

### **Correspondence**

I referenced various forms of correspondence within my field notes and analytic memos over time. I saved all emails that were sent to and from group members over the course of three academic years by placing them in a file named

“H.E.L.L.A. Data” within my Google Mail Account. I also kept track of text messages, personal phone calls, social media messages and posts that related to my research questions in regards to the nature of interactions and relationships among the group over time. Some messages were saved via screen shots on my personal iPhone and stored in my personal Google Drive. Some social media posts were bookmarked and saved in my personal Facebook and Instagram accounts as well.

### **Data Analysis**

For data analysis, I relied on Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which involved collecting and analyzing qualitative data through systematic and yet flexible approaches in order to construct theories “grounded” in the data. For theorizing, I relied on memoing, which is the “write-up of ideas about substantive codes and their theoretically coded relationships as they emerge during coding, collecting and analyzing data and during memoing” (Glaser & Strauss, 1978, p. 83). I read and reread field notes, transcriptions of H.E.L.L.A. meetings and interviews, as well as a collection of memos to reflect and continue to build on patterns and themes in my data (Glaser & Strauss, 1978). Additionally, I engaged in reflexivity by continuously taking time to critically reflect on my role throughout the research process, including but not limited to my methods, data collection, and interpretations (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Lastly, I engaged in member checking (Krefting, 1991) to check for accuracy of the understandings, commitments, and practices within the study.

### **Grounded Theory**

I utilized grounded theory analysis and inductive approaches to engage in a systematic process of discovery of important categories and themes as I engaged in the coding of my data. Grounded theory analysis requires skills such as developing an ability to step back and critically analyze situations; recognize the tendency towards bias; think abstractly; be flexible and open to helpful criticism; be sensitive to the words and actions of respondents; and have a sense of devotion to the work process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). More specifically, Charmaz (2006) summarized the defining components of grounded theory practice developed by Glaser and Strauss overtime, which are:

- Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis
- Constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses
- Using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis
- Advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis
- Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationships between categories, and identify gaps
- Sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness
- Conducting the literature review *after* developing the independent analysis (pp. 5–6)

While I conducted a literature review prior to this study, the purpose for the review was to understand why teachers of Color who are committed to social justice praxis seek out tailored support as well as what other researchers have looked at and how they have approached their research. However, an important aspect of my data analysis was an open coding process in which I identified events and actions that might represent new theoretical or analytic codes and determined which belonged

after repeated comparison to other codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Since grounded theory is not a linear and rigid process, I could write whenever ideas occurred to me, which sometimes happened later in the research process and lead to pursuing more than one analytic direction (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). My analytic categories became more theoretical over time because I engaged in ongoing analysis, which led to different levels of abstraction directly from the data, culminating into grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). This approach also contributed to my literature review because I needed to explore topics related to my analysis as well.

### **Memoing**

Writing memos is a critical component of grounded theory because it prompts the researcher to capture their thinking, connections, questions, and new insights in concrete and manageable ways (Charmaz, 2006). I began by writing and audio recording memos early on to explore qualitative codes in order to focus and direct further data collection. I later began writing advanced memos which were more useful in tracing and categorizing data, describing emerging categories and changes, identifying assumptions, describing how the topic is experienced from different vantage points, making comparisons, among other important practices that took place later in the research process (Charmaz, 1995). While all written memos were analytic to some extent, I categorized them according to their primary purpose such as, “coding memo, theoretical memo, research question memo, task memo, etc.” (Saldana, 2009, p. 42).

Analytic memos served the purpose of capturing reflections on my coding processes and choices, as well as emergent concepts and patterns, which were all necessary for possible theory development from the data (Charmaz, 1996; Saldana, 2009). I categorized my written memos according to their purpose and I stored all computer-processed memos and audio recordings securely in a password-protected online folder and all hand-written memos securely in my personal file cabinet at home.

### **Validity and Reliability**

To check for reliability and validity I triangulated multiple data sources, but particularly individual interviews, audio recordings of meetings, as well as document analysis of agendas and writing produced during meetings (Shenton, 2004). Triangulation helped in demonstrating that my findings were the result of multiple sources rather than simply a single source, artifact or my own bias (Patton, 1990). An additional form of triangulation that I relied on was the inclusion of a range of participants in this study. I was able to capture a richer picture of this study by comparing individual experiences and viewpoints to others within the group, which allowed me to illuminate multiple perspectives, attitudes and needs from various vantage points (Shenton, 2004). Including a range of documents also served the same purpose in triangulation as a range of informants, for example, in this study participants wrote multiple *testimonios* and journal reflections and because many of the group members are on social media, I collected posts and messages they had shared as well as email exchanges and coded them just as I did with transcripts.

## **Member Checking**

Another important component of triangulation data analysis is member checks, which is the continual sharing of my interpretations from my findings with the group members themselves in order to check for validity (Shenton, 2004). I gave all group members opportunities to read, modify, and provide feedback on written descriptions, statements, and findings that I developed as I analyzed the data over time. Alasuutari (1996) believes that while participants provide meaningful interpretations, they are often partial ones, which then allows the researcher's interpretations to serve as a dialogue-starter with the group so that they can support in developing a more ample and closer interpretation. This practice was effective because I established strong bonds with group members based on trust and openness over the course of three academic years together (Charmaz, 2006).

## **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is an ethical, rigorous, active and ongoing reflective process that happened at every stage of thinking related to this research study and particularly in relation to the kind of knowledge produced and how that knowledge was generated (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). For example, through my writing of what I witnessed in this study, I actively created meanings and realities to illustrate patterns or stories, which required an awareness of my role and responsibility in re-presenting members' experience and story (Emerson et al., 2011). In this project, I constantly attempted to separate my own experiences and perspectives about and within the group as a participating member from those of the other participants through journaling. In so

doing, my goal was to not interpret group members' experiences, interactions and perspectives through my own as a fellow member and educator of Color.

In turn, reflexivity required understanding that my account of reality in this study was not simply a report or a mirror, rather, it was the work of reality construction which is the product of the representational processes I engaged in to make meaning of the data (Atkinson, 2014; Emerson et al., 2011). For example, the reflective processes I engaged in and consequential reconstructions of social reality that were developed, were contingent upon what data I included or left out, linked to one another, or reworked, which was also inevitably mediated by my identity, life experiences and perceptions based on the relationships I formed with the members in my study (Emerson et al., 2011). I engaged in continuous reflexive practices through written and verbal reflections, which I kept record of via written and recorded voice memos stored securely in personal journals and my password-secured Google folder.

## Chapter Five: Context of the Study

The H.E.L.L.A. affinity group was one of several critical study groups organized and offered through Teachers 4 Social Justice, it was also the very first racial affinity group created explicitly for people of Color in the organization's history. I will first describe the grassroots organization in which H.E.L.L.A. is situated, and then follow with a description of the H.E.L.L.A. racial affinity group for educators of Color, which is the site and focus of this study.

### **Teachers 4 Social Justice**

Over the past 18 years, Teachers 4 Social Justice has organized multiple opportunities to support a range of educators and education stakeholders to engage in social justice-based workshops, conference and events. These events have served as a place for critical educators and organizers locally and nationally to network with other like-minded practitioners in the field. The organization intentionally situates their work outside of institutional programs and funding in order to have full autonomy over their vision, approach and scope of work. Core members include K–12 classroom teachers, community organizers and educators, university instructors or education practitioners such as counselors, school specialists, and administrators in the Bay Area, all of whom voluntarily organize their time and energy after their full-time work hours.

T4SJ's mission is to provide opportunities for self-transformation, leadership, and community building to educators in order to affect meaningful change in the classroom, school, community, and society. The collective organizes projects with

the intention of developing empowering learning environments, organizing around more equitable access to resources and power, and realizing a just and caring culture.

They strive to align their work with the following goals and principles:

### **T4SJ's Goals**

- 1) Maintain a network of progressive educators to develop an environment of support and professional development.
- 2) Sustain a membership that is engaged in a continuing process of critical self-reflection and growth.
- 3) Evolve an education system that is responsive to the needs of the communities it serves and promotes equitable access to resources and power.
- 4) Support membership in creating empowering learning environments.

### **T4SJ's Principles**

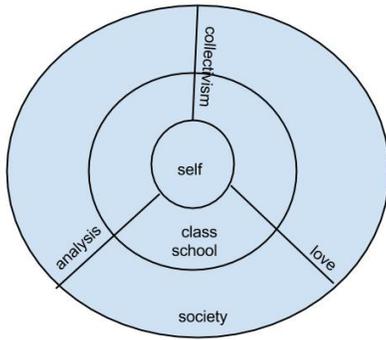
- 1) Involvement of teachers of color in all aspects of the organization is crucial.
- 2) Democratic decision-making processes need to be upheld, ensuring the meaningful participation of every member in systems and structures.
- 3) Shared accountability for our actions as individuals and as an organization.
- 4) Learning and collective action is a partnership between the students, teachers, parents, and community.
- 5) Our actions address root causes of systems of oppression at individual, group, and societal levels (racism, sexism, homophobia, age-ism, able-ism, etc.)
- 6) The development of our organization is based on the evolution of our individual and collective processes.

Some of the events that the collective organizes have included the annual conference which brings together over 1600 educators and organizers, informational “411” community forums, mini-conferences, annual retreats, and annual social justice teacher award celebrations.

### **Current Organizational Learning Model**

The graphic below in figure 1 illustrates the three areas of social justice development the T4SJ collective created to show how they aim to engage in transformative teacher learning: the personal [self], the pedagogical

[classroom/school], and the political [larger society]. T4SJ’s pedagogy aligns with critical analysis, collectivism and love, which are the elements that intersect with each area of development. Volunteer work that is invested in the organization is considered a “labor of love” because the work produced/offered is done with and for love not for extrinsic benefits (e.g., pay, professional development units for salary increase). As time has passed, many of the members’ children have grown up together, helping with events/conferences or attending organizational retreats and building bonds with one another by virtue of their parents’ participation.



*Figure 1.* T4SJ transformative education target.

### **T4SJ Study Groups**

T4SJ study groups provide teachers with ongoing focused, peer-based professional development opportunities as a way to disrupt the one-shot approach to “training” that they felt often happens within schools and districts. PD curriculum is built around the investigation of a specific topic through research and personal experience. Most study groups meet for seven evening sessions or more, starting in October after the annual conference. Dinner is usually provided for members and is paid for from the donations given to the organization or collectively from members

within the study groups. Some examples of study groups in the past include the Social Justice Book Club, Social Justice Writing Group, Beginning Teacher Support Group, and many others. The model in Figure 2 illustrates how every study group structures their meetings, which intentionally dedicates more time and energy building community for a significant portion of the first few sessions together and as time progresses, the focus on content and action increases over time.

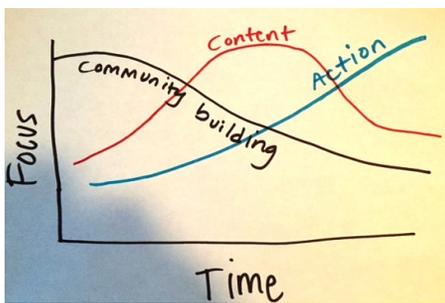


Figure 2. T4SJ study group learning model.

### **Context of the Case Study**

#### **The H.E.L.L.A. Educators of Color Racial Affinity Group**

H.E.L.L.A. is the first racial affinity group that the organization has had within the twenty years of its conception. H.E.L.L.A. is an acronym of the group's guiding ideological and pedagogical commitments and learning tenets: Healing, Empowerment, Love, Liberation and Action. As all other study groups that are part of the organization, H.E.L.L.A. was intended to be a one-year study group experience for the 2015–2016 academic year but extended to its third year during the 2017–2018 academic year.

One of the many roles I play within the organization, and more specific to this study, is that I serve as a co-facilitator and co-founder of this racial affinity study

group. I originally shared my idea of creating a racial affinity group after attending the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice in Los Angeles ([www.instituteforteachersofcolor.org](http://www.instituteforteachersofcolor.org)). This institute is a three-day critical professional development experience tailored for teachers of Color who are committed to racial justice and who already have developed a level of racial literacy to engage with critical race theory. The experience at the institute always ends with participants spending the last day strategizing and developing an action plan toward racially transformative praxis in our work. While I knew that I wanted to create a racial affinity group within T4SJ, I had not yet fully developed a concept of what it might look like, especially considering that all study groups in our collective must be co-developed and co-facilitated in collaboration with another experienced member.

During the 2015 T4SJ annual retreat, two other women of Color comrades wanted to join me in this endeavor, they are also both participants in this study as H.E.L.L.A. co-facilitators. We discussed various possibilities for the theoretical content and structure of the group sessions that could ground us and we each took turns taking notes regarding our discussion on a Google doc that we all have access to. We decided on focusing our year engaging with Tara Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework as our pedagogical anchor. With that goal in mind, we collectively drafted the following description:

H.E.L.L.A. Description and Call for Participants  
(H)ope<sup>15</sup> (E)mpowerment (L)ove (L)iberation (A)ction

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<sup>15</sup> The *hope* tenet was first conceptualized during the initial development of the study group at the T4SJ summer retreat. However, the group changed this tenet toward the

Community cultural wealth is a theoretical lens that students and educators can use to explicitly combat deficit frames of communities of Color. In the theory, critical race theorist Tara Yosso (2005) explores six forms of cultural capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance and argues that all forms of capital can be used to empower individuals. In this T4SJ study group, participants will explore the theory of community cultural wealth in depth by learning from and building with other school and community practitioners of Color who are committed to putting this framework into praxis.

The study group is centered and driven by educators of Color and is intended to build on the leadership strengths, critical analyses, racially diverse experiences/*testimonios*, and pedagogical creativity of classroom and community-based educators who are committed to working in solidarity with students and communities in under resourced, culturally and linguistically diverse schools in the Bay Area.

In the Fall, the group will focus on deepening their understanding of Critical Race Theory in Education and Community Cultural Wealth as a framework to understand our work as educators of Color more deeply as they relate to our lived experiences, professional development and pedagogy. In the Spring, participants will workshop lesson plans based on the idea of community cultural wealth, and engage in critical reflexive sessions around strengths and areas of development for their lesson plans or units. Our goal is for this study group to incubate a Summer Institute on Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth that educators committed to social and racial justice can benefit from through developing their analyses more deeply and building networks of support for educators and by educators.

Who we're looking for: Educators with 3+ years of experience, educators of Color committed to racial justice, who work directly with students and have capacity to implement lesson plans (this includes but is not limited to para-educators, administrators, professors, counselors, after school educators, teaching artists, librarians, etc.). Requirements: Participants must commit to meeting on the first Wednesdays of the month from 6–8pm in Oakland, beginning in November 2015. Space is very limited, the maximum number of participants in this study group is 12 people.

### **H.E.L.L.A. Members**

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latter half of the first-year experience after one of the members, Jedaiah, expressed that our collective should consider changing the first word from *Hope* to *Healing* since he felt it was our collective experience through our work together. The group agreed with his suggestion.

We advertised the H.E.L.L.A. study group description on the organization’s website and social media pages with a link to the application. The participants were chosen based on their responses to the open application questionnaire that was part of the initial call for participants shown in in Table 2. Each applicant’s level of thoughtfulness, desire to join and self-identified assets described in their responses was what ultimately swayed the co-facilitators’ decisions to invite applicants to participate in the group.

Table 1

*H.E.L.L.A. Application*

<b>H.E.L.L.A. Open Application Questionnaire</b>
What is your name and contact information? How do you identify? (race/gender/sexuality/etc.) What is your gender pronoun? What city do you work in? If you are a classroom teacher, what grade/subjects do you teach? Why are you interested in joining this study group? In what ways do you believe that you bring unique perspectives/assets to this group? What expectations/hopes would you like to see manifested from your participation in this group?

We wanted the study group to be open to educators of Color (broadly defined) who had at least three years of experience working in the field of education because we felt that a few years in the field might contribute to the depth of experience in each session. We hoped to attract a range of education workers including but not limited to afterschool educators, community organizers, administrators, teacher educators, school counselors, school specialists, and other individuals connected to

education somehow in under-resourced communities. By opening up the study group in this way, we believed that we could collectively explore how the various types of work that we all do intersect professionally. We also decided to cap the group at a maximum of twelve participants in order to as an attempt to cultivate an emotionally intimate environment where all members would be comfortable and where relationships would develop. We viewed all of the participants selected as experts from the field that come with unique racial and intersectional identities, experiences, and perspectives that offer a powerful collective body of knowledge.

In Table 2, all H.E.L.L.A. participants are described and categorized by their years of experience working in the field of education, their positions in education, as well as their self-identified gender, racial identity and sexual orientation. Among the co-facilitators are three members have also served in T4SJ for several years and built relationships with one another over time prior to organizing the group. However, while a few other participants knew of each other through other education networks, none of the other members had established relationships with one another prior to joining the H.E.L.L.A. study group.

We anticipated that not all participants would attend all sessions and that some participants would drop out of the group. Since the conception of the group three years ago, a total of four members had to step back from participating in the group. One member, Catalina, had to leave at the beginning of our second year together because she started graduate school in Los Angeles. Another member, Irma, needed to step back from the group during Year Three, because she was facing family

difficulties which she needed to attend to and later communicated that she would like to return for Year Four. Mark and Monique both needed to step back from participating during Year Three as well due to either graduate classes or obligations they were committed to which conflicted with the meeting times that most group members could attend. However, they stayed connected with the organization and planned to return for H.E.L.L.A. Year Four. All other participants continued in the group for the third year together. At the end of Year Three, Charmaine, Karina, Jedaiah, and I met in the summer to discuss Year Four of H.E.L.L.A. and decided that each remaining member could invite one CEOC they knew who expressed interest in joining and whose values aligned with the group's. Members that moved away would have the option of creating their own H.E.L.L.A. critical racial affinity group if they so desired, in which case they would already have access to the H.E.L.L.A. archive, including all meeting agendas and materials used in the past.

Table 2

*H.E.L.L.A. Participating Members*

Co-Facilitators	Farima: Primary Teacher, Organizer Nicaraguan/Iranian, Cis-het <sup>16</sup> Woman Experience: 10 years	Charmaine: Secondary Teacher, PhD, Organizer Black/White Cis-queer Woman Experience: 12 years	Kay: Secondary Teacher, Organizer Latinx/White, Cis-het Woman Experience: 21 years
3-6 Years Experience	Jedaiah: Secondary CBE <sup>17</sup> Filipin@ Agender Trans-Masculine Experience: 4 years	Mark: Secondary Teacher Chinese/White Cis-het Male Experience: 5 years	Amirah: Secondary Teacher Muslim, Pakistani-American, Cis-het Woman Experience: 6 years
7-10 Years Experience	Nita: Secondary Teacher, Organizer Vietnamese Immigrant, Cis-het Woman Experience: 6 years	Kyrie: Secondary Teacher Black/White Cis-het Male Experience: 7 years	Nate: Middle School Teacher Black Cis-het Male Experience: 9 years
11-15 Years Experience	Irma: ELL <sup>18</sup> Specialist Mexican immigrant Cis-het Woman Experience: 11 years	Monique: Bilingual Primary Teacher Chicanx Cis-het Woman Experience: 12 years	Catalia: CBE, Organizer Latinx, Cis-het Woman Experience: 13 years

**H.E.L.L.A. Meetings**

While the duration of T4SJ study groups in general have historically spanned one academic year, at the end of the 2015–2016 year together,

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<sup>16</sup> Cis-het refers to cisgender and heterosexual.

<sup>17</sup> CBE refers to Community Based Educator.

<sup>18</sup> ELL refers to English Language Learner.

H.E.L.L.A. members asked to extend the study group for a second year and toward the end of the second year together, they asked to extend the group again for a third year. For Year One of this study, our group met monthly beginning in October of 2015 until May of 2016. Year Two of the study began in September of 2016 and lasted until May of 2017. Year Three began in September of 2017 and ended in May of 2018.

Each H.E.L.L.A. meeting took place afterschool in a participating teacher's classroom located in East Oakland and lasted between 2 and 2 ½ hours. During meetings the group engaged in a variety of activities, including open-ended discussions and check-ins, discussions focused on critical theoretical frameworks, discussions focused on the development of action plans connected to the theories learned within the group, as well as several reflective writing and art-based activities.

Aligning with the T4SJ learning model, we decided that the first four sessions would focus on various identity-centered community building activities and writing reflection prompts. During the first two years of H.E.L.L.A., Karina, Charmaine, and I met before each monthly meeting to co-plan a flexible and negotiable agenda. During meetings and informal check-ins, other group members typically shared ideas and content to contribute to our meeting activities, which also helped shape each agenda. For example, one group member, Mark, suggested that we allocate more time for writing together during the meetings because he felt it was too difficult to carve out time during the week to write outside of H.E.L.L.A. Other group members

agreed that it would be valuable to do so as well, which ultimately shifted the nature of agendas to include more writing time.

H.E.L.L.A. members engaged in critical dialogue and reflection about one another's intersectional<sup>19</sup> identities as educators of Color. They workshopped community cultural wealth centered action plans to integrate in their personal and professional lives. Below I describe practices, activities and rituals that the group engaged in which contributed to the essence of their learning space.

### **H.E.L.L.A. Learning Activities**

In this section, I briefly describe learning activities that H.E.L.L.A. members engaged in over the course of three academic years to provide context. All activities were co-developed by either the three group co-facilitators, which were myself, Karina and Charmaine, or they were co-developed with a co-facilitator and another member, Jedaiah, Nita, or Kyrie. While group members expressed that they appreciated being able to attend meetings without having to plan or facilitate during the first two years, a few members signed up to co-plan and co-facilitate one meeting during the third year, with another co-facilitator.

### **Community Agreements Activity**

Group agreements were co-developed at the first meeting together and revisited for the following two meetings to check in with members in case there were additional agreements to be added. However, they were not revisited after the first

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<sup>19</sup> I use the term, *intersectionality*, coined by legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race intersects with other social constructed forms of identity and argues that gender, sexuality, ableism, etc. cannot be seen as separable from one's racial identity.

few meetings thereafter as the group did not feel the need. The process began by posing the question at the very first meeting, “What do we all need to be mindful of in order for H.E.L.L.A. to be a fruitful learning space for you?” The group members had time to reflect and write their thoughts down individually and then each member shared their thoughts with the group. Community agreements were described as “a living document” which could essentially be revisited and changed if and when needed. These agreements were not revisited again during our time together, however, they were all honored consistently over time. The final list of community agreements co-created among members were:

- Active listening, be present; Everything shared in our space must remain in our space
- Don’t hesitate to ask questions
- Share your truth, regardless of how different our walks may be
- Speak from your own experience
- Step up, step back: be aware of dominating conversations;
- Be aware of power in specificity of identities-think about intersectionality within this space (colorism, class, gender, etc.)
- Honor ALL voices (you can’t honor what you’re blocking)
- Create a space of solidarity
- Be intentional and accountable for impact
- Trust that folks are taking care of themselves when they need to step out, yawn, cry, etc.
- Create a feminist space where sharing feelings is the norm
- De-hierarchize our learning space as much as possible
- Be open to sharing what your needs are or if something is not working for you in this space
- Respect everyone’s time (be on time)

### **Consistent Group Rituals**

Below I describe group rituals and routines that were part of all meeting agendas, which helped to make the planning of each meeting sustainable and open-ended.

**Community dinner.** Every meeting had thirty minutes of unstructured time to share dinner with one another before officially beginning. Each member donated thirty to forty dollars toward dinner for the year. I usually picked up dinner from a local restaurant and Nita, the member who extended her classroom for our meetings, usually provided eating utensils. Members often enjoyed this time as they typically developed closer relationships with one another by conversing about topics ranging from dating, family dynamics, goals, school challenges and victories, political issues, organizing, and trauma.

**Connections.** At the beginning of every monthly meeting the group started with an activity that Karina introduced called *Connections*, which is a dialogical practice that allowed for members to build a bridge from where they were or have been to where they would be going and what they would be doing in the future. It was a time for members to reflect upon what they were carrying with them into the meeting, and connecting it to the work to come. In this sense, it was a way to ground group members and also inform one another of their emotional and mental state at the meeting. For the connections activity to go well, Karina explained that it was important to emphasize that silence is okay, as is using the time to write, or to just listen. If an issue came up during connections that members wanted to spend more time unpacking or responding to, the group could decide to make time for a

discussion about the issue after Connections was over. The “rules” for Connections are:

- Speak if you want to.
- Don’t speak if you don’t want to.
- Speak only once until everyone who wants to has had a chance to speak.
- Listen and note what people say, but do not respond.

The connections portion of meetings was not a time to engage discussion per se, but more so a time to listen actively. Facilitating the process was straightforward, a facilitator would begin by saying “Connections is open,” and would then let participants know how long it would last, which was usually for about 20 to 25 minutes. A few minutes before the time was up, the facilitator would let the group know how many minutes remained, so that anyone who had not yet spoken could speak. While this activity seems simple in nature, it opened the meeting up with depth and a lot of context. Issues that came up during connections ranged from experiences with trauma, problems faced in the workplace, pedagogical challenges, exciting news, changes and shifts in members’ personal lives, and stories of how our work in the group manifested in members’ classrooms and/or personal lives. Across interviews, members mentioned how a sense of trust was developed over the course of several months, which contributed to a vulnerable and emotionally centered experience.

### **Theoretically Grounded Activities**

Every meeting revolved around a particular overarching critical theoretical framework. For example, when Karina, Charmaine and I began conceptualizing the group, we jointly decided to center year around the Community Cultural Wealth

framework (Yosso, 2005) because we thought it would be important to focus on an asset-based framework designed for people of Color and by a person of Color. The majority of year two revolved around concepts from the Radical Healing Framework (Ginwright, 2016) since Jedaiah, another group member shared that he felt that the study group represented a healing space for him which resonated with the rest of the group and led to changing the group's H)ope tenet in the acronym to H)ealing. Since Nate and I had participated in the Radical Healing Educators Retreat the summer prior to the group reconvening for year two, I invited Shawn Ginwright to come and talk with us about the framework, which we then focused on during year two. By year three, the group centered their learning in their lived experiences as theory, writing their *testimonios* to describe how each tenet of H.E.L.L.A. (healing, empowerment, love, liberation and action) manifested within their personal and professional lives. Any meetings that did not specifically rely on the frameworks mentioned, still had other overarching critical theoretical lenses that informed group activities and dialogue. Some of the other overarching critical theories included intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), patriarchy (hooks, 2004), and White supremacy (Coates, 2015), which are all located in the appendix section. I describe a range of theoretically grounded activities that the group engaged in.

### **Racial Life Map Activity**

The objective for this activity was for each member to share their backgrounds and to develop understandings of where each person was coming from at the first meeting. Each member created illustrations and provided verbal descriptions of

formative moments throughout their racial identity formation. After each member shared their racial life maps, the group then engaged in dialogue about their experiences.

### **Community Cultural Wealth Partner Posters**

This activity was a way to develop an understanding of Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework. Group members first reviewed the community cultural wealth article by Yosso and then in pairs, created posters describing each form of capital: navigational, linguistic, familial, aspirational, social, resistant capital. Posters needed to include:

- Title
- Imagery
- Definition of form of capital in own words
- One manifestation of form of capital in members' life working with students
- One manifestation of form of capital in members' personal/home life

This activity was followed by partner share-outs and whole group reflections and dialogue. The three co-facilitators planned for the group's homework to be an idea about how each member wanted to connect the community cultural wealth framework to their work in education. For example, the idea could be a unit to teach, a lesson plan, or a vague idea around an event.

### **Community Cultural Wealth Vision Boards/Action Plans**

The objective of this activity was for members to envision how they already were or how they could begin to bring their community cultural wealth (CCW) to the spaces in which they worked. Members created posters with images and descriptions illustrating how CCW could be deepened within their content and curriculum,

interactions with adults and young people, advocacy work, self-perception/love of self, etc. This activity led to the creation of action plans. Members shared their action plans/vision boards while the rest of the group offered each presenter positive and constructive feedback and one question on an individual post-it at the very end of all presentations to use as they organized their CCW plans. On the last meeting of year one, members shared how their action plans were executed through PowerPoint presentations and/or other artifacts such as photos, student work, etc.

### ***Testimonio***

After taking a class at my university, I was introduced to *Testimonio*, a methodological, pedagogical, and political form of storytelling that exposes injustices and disrupts silence that radical Latinx women of Color such as Moraga & Anzaldúa (1983) and others (Cruz, 2012; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Fuentes & Perez, 2016; Pour-Khorshid, 2016; Sanchez, 2009) have utilized to testify and theorize lived experiences navigating various forms of oppression. I shared the idea of integrating *testimonio* to the group and members were interested and open to engaging with it. After their first experience, all members were impacted by the experience and they wanted to continue engaging in that form of writing with the group. *Testimonio* became an important practice that contributed to the essence of the H.E.L.L.A. learning experience. As an affinity group made of individuals who all identified as people of Color, there were important similarities and differences between members' experiences navigating varying forms of oppression because of their multi-layered identities and positionalities within society.

For example, Irma emigrated to the United States at the late age of 27 and Nita emigrated at the age of 10 as a Vietnamese refugee, while these members shared similarities related to being English learners and undocumented immigrants in this country, their experiences and identities as teachers of Color in the United States unfolded very differently. Listening to one another's struggles and resiliency allowed each member to connect with and affirm one another while also understanding differences among the group related to class, sexuality, gender, marital status, parental status, etc.

*Testimonio* writing sessions were always framed by prompts such as the ones listed below. Members would write for 20 to 25 minutes and sharing/storytelling followed immediately after. Some of the writing prompts for each meeting were:

- What has your community cultural wealth looked like throughout your educational experiences as a student and/or educator of Color?
- How do/have the H.E.L.L.A. tenets (healing, empowerment, love, liberation and action) manifested in your life?
- Write your *testimonio* to your younger self. What is important for that young child of Color to know?
- What is your meaning of love? What has/does love look or feel like in your life (i.e., your classroom, home, in the street, within)?
- Write your *testimonio* using two or more of the following theoretical lenses that we've read about below. Reflect on the following systems listed below have impacted you institutionally, interpersonally and/or internally.
  - White supremacy and racial justice
  - Patriarchy and feminism
  - Ableism and disability justice
  - Sizism and body acceptance
  - Homophobia/heterosexism and queer liberation
  - Classism and economic justice
  - Colonialism/imperialism and indigenous sovereignty
  - Nativism and immigrant justice
  - Colorism and color-consciousness
  - Christian hegemony and spiritual/Religious Freedom

After every *testimonio* writing session, members each shared their writing within the group and members responded with verbal or written affirmations, resonations and/or questions. Some feedback processes were informal and some were structured. For example, Karina developed a *testimonio*-sharing feedback protocol for her high school classroom once she began incorporating this practice with her students, which she then shared with the group to use. This protocol simply consisted of each member writing on a slip of paper and addressing (a) what members resonated with in the *testimonio* shared and (b) something about the writing style or about the underlying spirit from the person's *testimonio* that was appreciated. Each member who shared would then have several slips of paper with reflections and affirmations related to their *testimonio* to take with them after the meeting. In some cases, members verbally reflected on common themes that they noticed across all *testimonios* after storytelling, which led to deeper discussions about why or how those commonalities manifested across members' lived experiences (Pour-Khorshid, 2016).

Across interviews and audio-recorded meetings, members expressed how the sharing of *testimonios* contributed greatly to the level of depth, sacredness and connections cultivated every month. This particular approach to critical storytelling was a practice that members felt was missing in their lives and they appreciated not only having the space to deeply reflect on their lived experiences and homemade theories (Sanchez, 2009) but to also exchange their experiences with others through the reciprocity of vulnerability.

### **Zine-making and Writing Workshops**

Jedaiah, a community-based educator that worked in a non-profit LGBTQ organization had begun working on zines and wanted to share this practice with the group. Zines are commonly known as self-published or small-group published work that consists of texts and images. The objective for this activity was to engage in personal and collective critical reflection and creativity. Jedaiah asked members to bring in any poems, photographs, drawings, writings, visuals, etc. to use for their zine creation, which was connected to the following reflection questions that he developed:

- How do the H.E.L.L.A. tenets (healing, empowerment, love, liberation and action) show up in various areas of your life?
- How are we building a teaching community around H.E.L.L.A. tenets?
- What does H.E.L.L.A. look like from the day to day? (e.g., in your classroom, at home, in the street, within, etc.)
- How would you conceptualize H.E.L.L.A. as a journey for critical consciousness?

Another zine activity that Jedaiah facilitated within the group involved each member contributing text and/or imagery to one section of a zine that would eventually end up being several zines including every members' contributions. This particular zine activity was grounded in critical reflection questions, quotes and songs related to self/collective care that each member emailed to Jedaiah prior to this particular meeting. Jedaiah then created a Spotify<sup>20</sup> playlist with all of the songs that members sent him. The playlist was used as a way to time each prompt by song, each song spanned between two and three minutes. After each song, each member would

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<sup>20</sup> Spotify is a digital music service that gives access to millions of songs (<https://www.spotify.com/us/>).

then pass their zine to the person next to them and the process would repeat again until every member contributed to every zine. The zine that members started with eventually returned back to them, completed with several doodles, art illustrations, poems and free-writes. The prompts that were used for each segment were based on some of the questions, quotes and songs related to self/collective care that each member had already emailed to Jedaiah prior to the meeting:

- Draw how you see your comrade next to you? As you're drawing, share what you are thinking about regarding your comrade's strengths and community cultural wealth.
- How can "rest" play a role in your resistance and liberation?
- What are your favorite ways to practice self-care that doesn't cost money?
- What are your favorite ways to practice self-care with other people?
- "And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see-or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read." –Alice Walker
- "we who gather, gather around corners & tables & ourselves, gather around smoke & drank & broken bread, gather around fire & fire & questions, who know this world is not the world we deserve, who harvest the fruit of an alternate now, the adjacent possible, the should be here, the why the fuck not, the what we owed, the duh, the need, the gift of better we know is ours" – danez smith, "Our Movable Mecca"
- "We are here now, together, so let us learn how to care for ourselves and each other while we do this work. and let us have faith that the work will slowly, but surely bring more and more joy to our lives, more abundance, and that strange contentedness that comes when we trust in the universe, our ancestors, our people, our most divine selves, and mother earth to provide all that we need and then some." –naimonu james

At the end of this activity, Jedaiah shared the Spotify playlist with all of the members' self-care "go-to" songs that they emailed to him so that members could access it when/if they needed to in the future.

### **Intersectional Life Paths**

Every member had access to a Google folder that contained a collection of critical theoretical lenses, which Charmaine created to teach about intersectionality to her high school students. Each member had time to read through a collection of the theoretical lenses listed below which included definitions and chapters/articles about each. We then chose two different theoretical lenses that we related to and then shared two significant quotes aloud. The lenses included the following [see Appendix for resources that were used for the Intersectional Life Paths Activity and *Testimonios*]:

- White supremacy
- Racial justice
- Patriarchy
- Feminism
- Ableism
- Disability justice
- Sizism
- Body Acceptance
- Homophobia
- Heterosexism
- Queer Liberation
- Classism
- Economic Justice
- Colonialism/Imperialism
- Indigenous Sovereignty
- Nativism
- Immigrant Justice
- Colorism
- Color-Consciousness
- Christian Hegemony
- Spiritual/Religious Freedom

After each member shared their theoretical lenses, quotes and their significance in their lives, they then illustrated ten milestones from their teaching lives over their life paths as metaphors to share each person's life experiences on a

blank piece of paper. Members later focused on one to two events from their illustrations to reflect on and write about using the theoretical lenses read, as well as the following prompts, which Charmaine also provided the group:

- Which theoretical lens will you use to analyze this milestone/life event? Why is this lens relevant?
- Describe this event using this theoretical lens (1–2 paragraphs)
  - Explain how the choices that were made/actions that occurred were influenced by systems outside of the immediate people involved.
  - A way of thinking about these systems is that they all happen on multiple levels: institutional, interpersonal, and internalized. Did this system influence you on one of these levels?
  - How did the system strengthen or weaken your options in this situation? (if applicable)
  - How did it affect your sense of self?
  - How did it affect your community or family?
  - Were you aware at the time of the system or social forces that were acting on you at the time? If you were, what gave you that awareness? If you were not aware, what prevented you from seeing those forces?

This activity was followed up with time for members to write their *testimonio*, which was detailed in the *testimonio* section described previously in this chapter.

### **Who Are You Activity**

This activity was facilitated by Nate, he and I both attended the Radical Healing Educators Retreat with Dr. Shawn Ginwright the summer prior to this meeting. Nate explained the purpose of the activity, as described by Ginwright, which was to begin to explore aspects of ourselves through deep self-reflection in order to build a deeper awareness of who we are in the world. The premise of the questions posed was to help members to understand that we are more than our jobs and roles in society, which would help us to accept ourselves—the good, the bad, and the ugly—as well as engage in more authentic and meaningful relationships with

ourselves and others. Since this activity impacted him deeply in his retreat experience, he facilitated the activity in the same way he experienced it as a participant during the summer prior the meeting.

Part I: Members joined with a partner throughout the room & determined who would be partner A or B. Partner A would need to continue to ask the question repeatedly for 2 minutes: “Who are you?” Partner B would repeat this process for Partner A. The same process would happen two additional rounds for the questions: “Who or What do you pretend to be?” and “Who do you want to become?”

Part II: Writing/Reflection Time

Use any writing style to reflect on the questions you just engaged with. If you were to speak back to yourself now, what would you say?  
What are some intentions you want to manifest for this new year?

Group members then shared their writing reflections with the group and engaged in open dialogue.

### **Spotlight Reflection Activity**

This Activity was done in triads where each member had an opportunity to be in the “spotlight” to share and the other two partners would listen/ask questions/suggest a possible action plan.

Prompts for Being in the Spotlight:

What/who empowered you to go into teaching/working with youth?  
What do you need to keep the fire going?

Triad Process:

1. (2 min) share out
2. (5 min) Questions from two other partners
3. (1 min) Action
4. Will you accept/reject the challenge

The triad process repeated until all three members had the opportunity to be in the spotlight. After all three members shared, the activity was followed with a whole group share-out.

### **Empowerment Art Activity**

In this activity, members engaged in much laughter as they envisioned, illustrated and interpreted ideas of empowerment among the group. This activity was facilitated by another group member, Nita, who felt ready to take on a co-facilitator role for that meeting. By this time in the group experience, members signed up to co-facilitate with one of the founding group co-facilitators for one month of the year. She began by asking members to draw a line across the very top section of a blank piece of paper. She then asked, “When you think of empowerment, what does that look like for you? Draw your image (with no words) within the top section of your paper. Do not let anyone see your illustration and when you are done, fold the paper over to cover it and pass it to the person to your left.” She then provided the instructions below, which repeated until each paper was passed around to every member:

1. (1 min) Open up your paper, look at the image that the person next to you drew, guess what it means and write a description for that image right below it. Fold it backwards and pass it to the person to your left.
2. (1 min) Look at the description that the person wrote and draw an image that corresponds to the written description. Fold it backwards and pass it to the left.

Once every member had a chance to contribute to every paper passed, the original paper each person started with ended up with that member. Each member then opened up their paper and facilitated a “show-and-tell” with the rest of the

group. Because the illustrations were sometimes challenging to interpret, there was much laughter amidst deep reflections shared related to empowerment. We then closed this activity with a debrief of our experience.

### **Critical Reflection Writing Prompts**

The objective of critical reflection writing prompts was to give members time and space to deeply reflect on questions related to each of the five H.E.L.L.A. tenets or critical frameworks such as Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) and Radical Healing (Ginwright, 2016) at different meetings. These writing activities could range between 5 and 15 minutes, which was always followed up with partner, triad or whole group sharing. Some examples of reflection writing prompts that were developed collectively between Charmaine, Karina, and myself (co-facilitators) included but were not limited to:

- What are you leaving behind in 2015, what are you taking with you into 2016?
- What have you/your students/your community/etc. needed healing from?
- What does/has healing looked like for you?
- What are some healing spaces/practices you have found helpful?
- Reflect on how you took action last year using the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework and where you are now in your thinking. How did CCW manifest in your classroom/community space/leadership role/personal life?
- Reflect on your reality post this 2016 presidential election. How are you navigating these times with students/friends/family? What have you been able to face and process, and what has been too big/too challenging to engage with?
- 2015/2016 Reflection: What are you leaving behind and what are you bringing with you into this new year?

### **Liberation as Absence and Presence**

This activity was developed and facilitated by another group member, Kyrie. Every member had a blank piece of paper that they folded into three parts and had five minutes to write or draw in each box by responding to the following prompts listed below and then passing their paper to the person next to them.

- On the first third of the paper: What does liberation require destroying?
- On the second third of the paper: What does liberation require preserving?
- On the final third of the paper: What does liberation require creating?

This activity was then followed by a reading and writing activity where group members read Ariana Brown's "At the end of the sword" and then created a personal list based on the following prompt: What are the things about yourself that are worthy of honor and protection? Members then turned their lists into a poem and/or *testimonio* where members were encouraged to either go deeply into one or two items listed, or arrange, repeat and revise their list. Lastly, members shared their writing with the group.

### **Monthly Announcements**

Members typically spent about five to ten minutes sharing important announcements ranging from protests to take part in, critical teacher conferences and events, discounted rates for teacher-related programs, activities and curricula, etc. These announcements also connected members to other networks and also allowed for opportunities to build with one another outside of the group context.

### **Appreciation Circle**

Every meeting ended with the group sharing appreciations within the context of the group. Appreciations that were shared ranged from expressing gratitude for

logistically related things such as thanking members for picking up food, co-planning impactful meeting agendas and sharing space to hold meetings to more intimate dynamics such as the shared vulnerability and emotions reciprocally shared through *testimonios* and group dialogue.

### **2017 End-of-the-Year Reflection and Brainstorm**

At the end of year one, the co-facilitators sent a Google survey to the group with the following questions to answer:

- Please provide plus/deltas on how H.E.L.L.A. has been for you thus far.
- What are some needs that you would like to have met through our group?
- What is something that you would like to learn about/work on/develop/engage in dialogue about/etc. for next year?
- What have you appreciated most about your experience in H.E.L.L.A.?
- Is there something that you would like to incorporate/take leadership in facilitating in our H.E.L.L.A. meetings next year?

The three co-facilitators discussed the members' responses over the summer break and decided it would be important to start the second-year meeting engaging in an intentional activity to collectively brainstorm how year two could somehow meet everyone's needs. At the first meeting in year two, the group engaged in a "Chalk Talk" activity where members walked around the room writing on different poster papers posted around the room with one of the following questions listed on each:

- What did you appreciate in H.E.L.L.A. from last year?
- What was a memorable moment for you?
- What/How would you like to help lead H.E.L.L.A. this year?
- What thoughts/resources/questions come to mind in relation to the H.E.L.L.A. tenets?
- What are you in need of from H.E.L.L.A. this year? What would you like to get out of our study group experience this year?

The group then engaged in a gallery walk to observe the responses on each poster, which then led to group dialogue about what they noticed. It was clear that members wanted to continue writing *testimonios* together and engaging in storytelling at meetings. Members discussed the importance of writing their stories within the context of the group because they had no other space or time in their lives to do so and they appreciated having that time within group meetings. Just like the year prior, members also wanted to continue the practice of allowing each meeting to inform the next, building thematic umbrellas based off discussion and appreciations, which were part of the monthly meeting rituals.

The group also appreciated exploring the H.E.L.L.A. tenets so I, along with the other two co-facilitators drafted possible structures for future meetings in order to make planning sustainable and aligned with the collectives' feedback. H.E.L.L.A. rituals and routines from the year prior were important to maintain and members suggested have a rotating H.E.L.L.A. tenet to focus on each month. For example, if empowerment was the focus tenet, there would be a timeframe allocated in the meeting to engage in that particular tenet via an interactive activity, dialogue prompt and/or writing reflection on that tenet and how it connects to their personal and professional experiences. After a few iterations, the following was the outline developed jointly by the group to use for monthly meetings:

5:30–6:00: Dinner and Community Building  
6:00–6:30: Connections  
6:30–7:45: H.E.L.L.A. tenet activity/writing and group sharing  
7:45–7:50: Announcements  
7:50–8:00: Appreciations Circle

The intention behind this group brainstorm activity was to engage in grassroots popular education approaches to meet members' particular needs and also encourage each member to take on co-facilitation if they felt ready and interested in doing so. Some members appreciated simply taking part in conceptualizing how the group would run but were not necessarily interested in co-facilitating because some felt that H.E.L.L.A. was the one space that they could go to for their own wellness and did not want to engage in the additional labor of planning and facilitating group meetings. However, some members did feel ready and excited to take on particular activities to facilitate for one or two meetings because they already had ideas in mind that they want to share with the group. For example, Jedaiah had artistic and interactive activities that he wanted to share during year two and by year three, more members were willing to sign up to co-facilitate for one month in the academic year alongside another founding member/co-facilitator.

### **2018 End-of-the-Year Reflection and Next Steps**

On the last meeting of the 2018 academic year members engaged in a reflection activity where they created a visual of how each H.E.L.L.A. tenet (healing, empowerment, love, liberation, and action) was nourished and shaped within the context of the affinity group learning. Using a legal sized White paper, members folded their paper so that we had six boxes in which to either illustrate or write out our ideas. After about 20 minutes, members shared their responses with one another and then engaged in a conversation around continuing to facilitate H.E.L.L.A. for a fourth year and inviting new people in since three members moved out of the Bay

Area and two other members were beginning administrative programs which would be in addition to teaching full-time. The group decided that they wanted to stay together and allow each member to invite a close friend/colleague/comrade that either already expressed interest in joining the group or that the group member felt would benefit from and contribute to the H.E.L.L.A. group. Members who relocated want to commit to creating their own H.E.L.L.A. group within their new contexts.

### **H.E.L.L.A. People's On The Run**

During the 2017/2018 school year, I started an event called H.E.L.L.A. People's On the Run which was a grassroots organization collaboration between the Teachers 4 Social Justice and the People's Education Movement Bay Area chapter to create opportunities for educators/organizers of Color to engage in wellness, collectively, while building community. My hope was to build on both of the organizations' efforts of centering the needs, healing, strengths and individual/collective power of POC in organizing spaces. Every second Saturday beginning in September 2017 and ending in May 2018, a range of people of Color working in the realm of education met at Lake Merritt at 10 am. Participants began with ten minutes of stretching and introductions and each person would then choose one of the following groups to join:

- a) Mindful Meditation/Yoga Squad
- b) Walking Squad
- c) Jogging Squad
- d) Running Squad

The group would then meet at the starting point after about 50 to 55 minutes and would close with an appreciations circle and Assata Shakur's (1987) words as a

chant, “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains” (p. 52). For participants that were interested in working with others afterwards would then relocate to a café beside the lake to lesson plan, study, write, etc. While not all H.E.L.L.A. members were able to participate due to their schedules and commitments, those members who would come felt rejuvenated and appreciative for the space and time to engage in wellness within and among a community of like-minded people of Color.

In the subsequent findings chapters, I draw from an array of data and my participation within H.E.L.L.A. to describe my findings. In addition to relying on my role as participant observer to examine the nature of learning that resulted from the activities described throughout this chapter, I also relied on individual interviews with group members to capture how members described and experienced learning within H.E.L.L.A. Chapters Six and Seven illuminate how participants described their experiences, their perceived benefits and impacts from participation, as well as how they engaged in learning via audio-recorded meetings and field notes.

## Chapter Six: Creating a Space for/by us—Learning as an Act of Political and Pedagogical Resistance to White Supremacy

This chapter examines the nature of learning and interactions within a grassroots racial affinity group for educators of Color, as well as the personal and professional impact that the group experience had on participants over the course of three academic years. The findings that emerged from the data revealed group members' need to have access to a space exclusively for critical people of Color in the field to engage in ongoing critical reflection, support and inspiration, which was ultimately described as the antithesis of their professional development at their respective worksites. In the first section of this chapter, I describe how group members collectively engaged in what I term a "POC Learn-In," an approach to learning from and for their selves due to constantly navigating Whiteness and social toxicity<sup>21</sup> at their schools which led to unsustainable teaching conditions. I then describe how the group fostered critical camaraderie through fugitive learning that rejected Whiteness and other forms oppression. In so doing, group members were able to move beyond the cognitive, technical and apolitical approaches to learning they faced in the profession which replenished their energy and empowered them to take risks and action in the field.

### **A POC Learn-in**

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<sup>21</sup> Social toxicity refers to how "poisonous" social environments threaten the "development of identity, competence, moral reasoning, trust, hope, and other features of personality and ideology that make for success in school, family, work, and the community" (Gabarino, 2012).

In this section, I discuss why and how an educator of Color racial affinity group approach to learning, met with a commitment to critical praxis, played important roles in the nature of learning and interactions that unfolded in the group. I weave details throughout my findings that illuminate how the nature of learning in H.E.L.L.A. was inherently social, situated, humanizing and shaped by each of the group member's particular experiences, contexts, needs, identities and participation. I describe how members consistently reflected on: (a) how Whiteness<sup>22</sup> impacted their lived experiences in and out of the classroom; (b) their racial and social identity development and formation through a critical race lens; (c) intergenerational trauma, internalized oppression and everyday experiences navigating White supremacy from their childhood to their adulthood; and (d) the collective wisdom and community cultural wealth they embodied which inspired them to take action within the field.

The term “teach-in” is commonly understood as a form of social protest when activists teach about complex political issues that are not taught within institutional spaces or in the dominant public sphere. H.E.L.L.A., in this sense, cultivated a monthly “learn-in” for people of Color to learn about critical frameworks and lenses that were never part of their professional learning provided in the institutions that they worked in. Group members deeply valued having access to a critical learning space explicitly led by and created for critical educators of Color (CEoC). Their

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<sup>22</sup> Whiteness is a social construct that upholds White identities, histories and ways of being as the norm while ignoring the social, economic and political inequities that White people benefit from at the expense of marginalized people (Matias, 2016; Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2001).

access to this space on an ongoing basis impacted their sense of sustainability in committing to their day-to-day and long-term goals within the field.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, while some members appreciated simply taking part in conceptualizing how the group would run, but were not necessarily interested in the additional labor of planning or co-facilitating, other members felt ready to co-plan and co-facilitate one or two meetings by the second and third year. During the first two years of the group experience, each agenda was co-planned by the group facilitators (Karina, Charmaine and myself). As facilitators, we committed to allowing each meeting to inform the next, building thematic umbrellas based on a combination of articulated needs and wants discussed during meetings, interviews and annual surveys. In the following excerpt, Catalia, a mixed raced Latinx community-based educator, shared her appreciation for this dynamic during her interview:

I feel like [you all as co-facilitators] have done a great job of taking care of the tediousness of coming together, like just the logical stuff of making an agenda, some goals, and some materials, which is so critical. It's funny though because I also don't feel like you guys make it just your space when you do that, does that make sense? Like, I always feel like WE'RE coming together. WE'RE gonna be able to share things and WE'RE gonna be able to have say on what or how WE want the space to be like. I think you guys are always so great about opening up like "Do we wanna go here or do we wanna go there?" "Do we want to write or do we want to do something else? Do we wanna reserve that for next time, or do we wanna do it in groups now? Like, what do WE wanna do?" I go to so many trainings and meetings where other folks have this tendency to facilitate and expect me to just sort of follow the model and I'm like being molded or taken along for the ride and like if I speak out of turn or something, it would sort of be inappropriate. I don't ever feel like that in our group, there's nothing that's inappropriate, we can go with the flow you know because everybody is sort of a leader in our group.

The flexibility of H.E.L.L.A.'s meeting agendas was important for members because they had agency in how or what they wanted to engage with. That is to say, while agendas were created, they built upon previous discussions from meetings and it was a common practice to check in with one another about process. Group members valued the thoughtfulness that went into the agendas that were co-created and co-facilitated as well as the flexibility and opportunity to stray from it if they wanted to. Similar to Catalia, Amirah, a Muslim Pakistani-American Ethnic Studies high school teacher shared how much she valued the group's approach to learning,

It feels like you all put so much work into planning and facilitating that it becomes invisible and seamless but I also appreciate how flexible we are, like how we can ask for what we need and move in those directions. That's what makes it ours. I've never experienced that happening in school settings because they're always like, "this is the agenda and this is the structure and this is how we're going to do this and for this long" and it feels like it's being drilled sometimes. [School PD] never feels like an organic process where everyone has a say in how we want to participate or learn like we do in H.E.L.L.A.

Much of the members' appreciation for H.E.L.L.A.'s approach revolved around their ability to learn from one another in a manner that was not restrictive or laborious like other education learning spaces they navigated. Rather, members felt intellectually and emotionally challenged as they experienced the flexibility to collectively shape a learning experience where they could engage in emotional and pedagogical support with and from other CEoC. This dynamic, within itself, was a form of resistance to the "professional" learning and training they had to comply with in other contexts. The shared leadership and knowledge within H.E.L.L.A. provided members with opportunities to collectively engage in critical learning that challenged

each member according to their own needs and desires as critical learners and educators of color.

### **Fugitive Learning**

There were parallels between the ways in which members described learning in H.E.L.L.A. to the ways that Stefano Harney and Fred Moten (2013) describe *fugitivity* in the book, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*. By pushing back against capitalist logics and control mechanisms deemed normal in society, fugitivity is conceptualized as being separate from settling and instead, creating spaces and modalities that exist outside of the logical or logistical ways of being which are deemed “normal” in society. Harney and Moten raise the question of how and if subversive intellectuals can exist “in” but not necessarily be “of” the institution that they must work within. In the book, Jack Halberstam describes fugitivity as resisting the rights and respectability that were first refused to oppressed people and “in this refusal reshape desire, reorient hope, reimagine possibility and do so separate from the fantasies nestled into rights and respectability” (p. 12). In this sense, H.E.L.L.A. members were *in* schools because of their commitment to the young people they served, to the communities they felt connected to and because of their aspirations toward enacting their commitments to social justice in education. However, they were not *of* the schools they worked in, in that they refused to identify with the practices, goals and systems that they understood perpetuated White supremacy. The following subthemes comprise the overarching theme of fugitive

learning: the freedom to learn from and for themselves, away from Whiteness; the development of critical camaraderie; validation; and inspiration.

**Freedom to learn from and for ourselves, away from Whiteness.** Amirah was pregnant during the first year of H.E.L.L.A. and I wondered if her pregnancy might eventually lead to her leaving the group because of the challenges that might arise for her as a new mother and full-time teacher. On most meetings during the first year, she often struggled with her breathing, which impacted her ability to talk on some evenings. She would rub her stomach as she breathed deeply to ease her physical discomfort, even as she completely immersed herself in the pages of her notebook during our *testimonio* writing sessions of the meeting.

On one evening, as we were eating dinner before our meeting started, the group was talking about the group email that we had gotten earlier that month from Amirah with a picture of her beautiful newborn. We all expressed how happy we were for her as a new mother. As the group transitioned to start the meeting, to our surprise, Amirah unexpectedly walked through the door. All of the group members yelled in excitement about how glad they were to see her as they hugged and congratulated her. We were collectively surprised that she, still healing from just giving birth to her first child a few weeks prior, came to the meeting to write and hear *testimonios* that night. Later that year when I interviewed her, I learned that Amirah intentionally sought out H.E.L.L.A. through T4SJ because she was searching for a community of teachers of Color, which for her, was necessary for her overall well-being as well as her sustainability in the profession.

After moving back from out of state where she had a strong community of teachers of Color, the Bay Area—a place where she had spent most of her life—no longer felt like home. Everything had become completely different because of gentrification:

It wasn't very long before I felt like I was working in a vacuum and burning out. I was ready to quit my job last Spring because I was navigating White spaces at work in a way that I hadn't had to when I was working at my last school, which was predominantly kids of color. I knew that if I was gonna keep teaching, I needed a community of teachers of color for my own sanity and survival. I hadn't been back here since high school and in some ways it still felt like home because my family is here and I grew up here but in other ways everything I had built in terms of community is not here anymore...so the biggest thing for me is that H.E.L.L.A. is the only space I have regularly that is not a White space, in a lot of ways even my Mosque is now a White space. Whiteness can be hard to navigate, in ways that are not about you growing and learning yourself, but more about you educating other people which can feel so exhausting. So it's nice to be somewhere where I don't feel like it's my role to educate anyone, I can just be there and learn and grow and reflect.

The displacement of working-class and poor people of Color due to gentrification in the Bay Area impacted Amirah's sense of belonging, safety and community within and outside of the school she taught at when she returned back home. Amirah told me how exhausting it felt to navigate Whiteness, particularly because of the labor of educating or comforting White people. In H.E.L.L.A., however, learning and educating was a reciprocal process where other members' learning was not at the expense of her own, especially since all of the members already came to the group with a commitment to racial justice and varying levels of racial literacy. Amirah's participation in H.E.L.L.A. was inextricably connected to resisting Whiteness and her commitment to building with other CEoC as a practice of self and collective care.

The level of trust that was developed within H.E.L.L.A. was influenced by how members perceived one another in relation to each of their experiences, commitments and positionalities within the realm of education. It was important for members to be in a space that rejected all forms of White supremacy. Nita, a Vietnamese Ethnic Studies high school teacher and community organizer in her late 20s, came to the United States with her family at the age of ten and struggled navigating the U.S. education system. She grew up in East Oakland and felt proud of the community that she was raised in, prompting her commitment to continue living, teaching and organizing there. Her high school classroom is located in the same plaza as Oakland's Fruitvale BART station where in 2009, Oscar Grant, a 22-year-old Black young man, was fatally shot by police officer Johannes Mehserle while facing the ground and handcuffed.

Every month over the course of three years, our group met in her classroom and sat in a circle right next to a large mural of Oscar Grant's face. Right beside the mural are several posters of young people of Color who've lost their lives to police terror, as well as Nita's students' essays analyzing Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. During the appreciation circle at the end of a meeting, she expressed gratitude for H.E.L.L.A. because she did not have to police her tone or way of being since she felt that there was a shared experience among other members as CEoC:

I've been thinking about how thankful I feel for you all and this space because when I'm here, I feel so grounded. To work with teachers of color who know what we go through is hella valuable because we understand the struggle and the success in personal ways, and also why we do the work that we do so there's already trust built from the beginning. We're here because we're down for the work and we just need our own space where we can build and

where we can connect about how hard it is, but also how inspiring it is and not having to constantly teach White people. A lot of teacher spaces be taken over by all these self-identified “down” White teachers and I still say what I need to say in those spaces too but folks be like “oh my god, please be nice to our White allies and make them feel comfortable” [deep exhale and rolls her eyes]. That’s why I like having a teacher of color space because we’re able to move and do the work for *us* and not have to constantly watch what we say to make [our space] “inclusive” [using her fingers, she gestures quotation marks in the air] which really just means, “let’s not make White people feel uncomfortable.”

Nita described a sense of freedom that she experienced in the group compared to the ways that she was expected to behave around and with White teachers, which set her learning back by privileging Whiteness. For her, H.E.L.L.A. was a space where her learning was not stunted by Whiteness, rather, it was driven and shaped by people of Color who actively rejected it, which sustained her as a CEoC.

Similarly, Nate also felt that having access to H.E.L.L.A. as a support space explicitly for CEoC was important for his well-being within the profession. As a Black man and middle school teacher in and from Oakland, it was often difficult for him to engage with his colleagues because they simply did not want to address issues of race in meaningful or critical ways. For him, H.E.L.L.A. felt therapeutic because he could “finally let [his] guard down” when engaging in critical race conversations:

I feel like in H.E.L.L.A. you get to be you because we’re way more raw and real and there’s no fear, we’re willing to go deep together. When we’re together I don’t ever feel the pressure of needing to say things to defend or like represent all of my people. I can come into our space and I can speak however it comes out and feel safe about that. When I’m at my school, my spirit feels more on the defense and sometimes even combative, you know? It’s not safe or loving like our space is because we’re all in this together so it’s totally different vibes. Honestly, at school sometimes it can feel like a tug of war, people be tuning out or being defensive just for the simple fact that you mention race. It can be disheartening like, do I even want to be here and talk about this? It’s awkward, everybody is just looking at me in weird ways and

so talking about race there or in other teacher spaces just doesn't feel authentic.

That's why I think our space is important because we can get swallowed up or blinded by our reality and not know how we can change it to something else. If I didn't have our group, especially after this year, I honestly don't know how optimistic I would be right now, I can remember all of those times when I came to H.E.L.L.A. and I was like "Oh God, I really needed this tonight." Yeah so like spiritually, I think it's super important for us to have our own space because our challenges are different, our passion for what we do can be different, too.

Nate's interactions with racist colleagues often triggered the racial trauma that he endured from his own schooling throughout his childhood, adolescence and college experiences in the Bay Area.

Throughout Nate's first two years in H.E.L.L.A., he was navigating a lot of stress that directly related to his struggles securing stable and affordable housing in Oakland, a livable working wage as a teacher in order to support his three children and partner, the racial tension within and among colleagues who were defensive anytime issues of race surfaced at staff meetings or professional development, as well as his frustrations with how Black students were still disproportionately targeted and suspended at his school. For him, navigating professional learning spaces generally felt like added stress and alienation, which became increasingly more toxic overtime. For example, after attempting to take on leadership at his school by planning and facilitating critical race conversations with his colleagues, he shared:

I overheard my White colleagues say like, "I really hate talking about all this race stuff at 8am," "Why are these circles mandatory?" and sarcastically saying things like, "I guess it's time to learn about my White privilege and fragility." One of these teachers just stopped attending. By the end of the year, we ended up having to basically shift plans from focusing on race to generally focusing on trauma because of the negative feedback from staff,

despite the fact that our suspension percentage increased for Black students by 12% that year.

He was puzzled by how the school felt that they could and should focus on learning about trauma without addressing race because he saw both subjects as interconnected. For Nate, having a racial affinity group of CEoC not only affirmed him and his experiences, it also provided him with intellectual, emotional and professional support as he continued to grapple with how to address the racial dynamics and barriers he faced at his workplace, especially when his attempts failed. These learning experiences and peer support inspired him to continue to take action at his school despite the pushback he experienced. Through his connections within the group, he also gained confidence in facilitating workshops and speaking on panels at social justice conferences. For example, after the 2017 T4SJ conference he wrote the following post on his Facebook profile:

Shout out to my H.E.L.L.A. comrades for the love work that we're doing with our students and our communities and shout out to T4SJ for allowing me to help facilitate a workshop at the conference. As educators of color within systems that are not for us, our stories, our experiences, our fears, and our aspirations are important to be shared on the platforms that we have so that maybe we can make visible the struggles of our people but with the aim of creating something new. For the people . . . By the people.

Although he experienced negative feedback around his work on race at his school, he experienced positive feedback from his work around race in the workshops and panels he participated in within T4SJ and the People's Education Movement. The continued affirmations and support he received overtime led him to eventually apply to an equity-oriented administrative leadership program during the third year of H.E.L.L.A. because he felt that he could have a bigger impact in terms of creating

change within schools. Additionally, while he felt that working with young people of Color in his community was his calling, he also needed to make sure that he could mentally, spiritually and financially afford to continue working with them.

In H.E.L.L.A., members collectively processed their racialized experiences navigating schools as former students and as educators of Color through a myriad of critical learning reflections and activities. Through their processing, group members had regular opportunities to reclaim and re-center their core values, commitments and goals as CEoC, which made them feel “grounded” after meetings. During monthly appreciation circles, members consistently shared gratitude for being able to fully embrace their identities and experiences as people of Color, which was expressed as a tool for survival for some members.

When I met Jedaiah to interview him at his home, he shared his struggles working in a White-led nonprofit organization that already pushed out radical brown and Black educators and organizers that he respected. He then talked about how teaching in several public schools in the context of rampant gentrification throughout San Francisco and Oakland added another layer of daily stress as a trans man of Color. He struggled with what it meant to work in and through racially hostile environments on a daily basis:

Just being in community with other educators of color and being able to talk shit and also go deep with each other, those are the tools we need to survive and honestly, to not be able to access that can be really emotionally, mentally and psychologically draining because when you're dealing with the day-to-day White washed structures, not being able to access your full humanity and having to assimilate to these codes, rules and regulations, it feels like it's almost suicidal at times.

Jedaiah, like other members, felt emotionally and mentally depleted when having to operate within professional spaces. He described how his assimilation within White spaces felt like a form of spiritual and identity suicide, which speaks to the level of harm and social toxicity that he experienced through his work. He intentionally pursued an alternative route to teaching by working for a nonprofit organization because he felt that he might have more autonomy. However, even within a social justice-oriented LGBTQ youth centered nonprofit organization, he could not escape Whiteness or ignore the toll that it took on his mental and spiritual well-being.

**Critical camaraderie.** A group member, Kyrie, described the essence of interactions within H.E.L.L.A with the word, “camaraderie,” which is commonly understood as a mutual feeling of trust and relationship among a group of people through a shared experience (Dictionary, 1995). There was a common theme of deep gratitude expressed by members for having developed relationships with other people of Color who they could converse with on a regular basis. Their shared endeavor of reimagining their work and their lives beyond the confines of White supremacy was a critical aspect that deepened their learning and interactions within the group, for example, Kyrie shared:

There’s definitely a sense of camaraderie that I cling to in H.E.L.L.A. . . . being able to build with folks who you see eye to eye with, where you can start on page 2 and not have to constantly explain yourself or define or defend shit. When I’m with my colleagues [at work] I feel like I’m a sliver of myself [because] they’re fragile, liberal White folks who I have to come off a certain way with so that they don’t feel attacked, which makes my identity in relation to them carefully constructed.

In H.E.L.L.A. I’m not at work, I’m in an environment where I can engage with other [educators of color] invested in the same vision and I can show up

fully as myself. I wouldn't describe it as a "safe space" because, is it safety we're seeking? I don't think so. It has been a challenging space. A revolutionary space. A dangerous space. What I get from H.E.L.L.A. is a space where we don't have to get stuck on the usual rules of White supremacy and we can actually get down to it.

Kyrie described H.E.L.L.A. as a space where he could move beyond the apolitical "usual rules" of learning and professional development maintaining White supremacy<sup>23</sup> and "get down" to engaging in learning through a liberatory lens. There was a collective sense of exhaustion among the group from constantly fighting against systems, practices and people that normalized White supremacy, in its myriad forms, at their worksites and in their daily lives. Members came with the intention to engage in critical and humanizing ways. Humanization (Freire, 1970), in this sense, related to members' desire to learn as whole human beings struggling for freedom and justice, and through their learning, engage in a "struggle to recover their lost humanity" (p. 44). This orientation to learning is geared to what Freire described as a practice of freedom geared toward the transformation of their world. The group's shared endeavor in critical praxis allowed members to feel more connected to one another, which developed a sense of critical camaraderie.

Mark shared his frustrations with racist school and district-wide systems and practices that his professional development (PD) sessions never addressed, which was

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<sup>23</sup> White supremacy is the historical, systemic, pedagogical and social privileging of the collective interests, values, ideologies, and accomplishments of White people (Hayes & Juarez, 2012). Leonardo (2005) describes White Supremacy as "a racialized social system that upholds, reifies, and reinforces the superiority of Whites" (p. 127).

one of many reasons that he valued the learning and relationships he had within

H.E.L.L.A.:

H.E.L.L.A. is different, critical theory is a central part of our learning, which I hella appreciate. I love that we use Yosso's framework and Critical Race Theory to talk about race, it's much more critical than any of my school PDs. Actually, I haven't been to *one* PD that explicitly focused on talking about race like we do. They've talked about district-identified struggling students like African-American males or foster youth but it's always at this level of "Oh, let's provide tutoring or let's provide one-on-one support." It's never at a structural level like why do we operate from a deficit frame of our students of color but we never really turn the mirror towards us and talk about the ways our school is perpetuating racism? Or in what ways is our curriculum and pedagogy racist? Or, how are the ways we think and talk about certain students, racist? That never happens in PD because they're not actually talking about race or racism, they're talking about students that land in certain boxes on a spreadsheet for state or district accountability. Plus, school PD is never personal, they're never asking you about your positionality and how it informs your practice. In H.E.L.L.A. we talk about the internalized stuff that we carry but also about what we bring to the table . . . so we're talking about race and racism in much more deeply personal ways.

The ways in which Mark described H.E.L.L.A. was in direct contrast to his school's approach to professional development, which implied his need for an alternative space to talk about issues that were never discussed at his school site. Talking about race and racism at a deeper, more personal level was possible because of the critical camaraderie that was developed among group members. He, along with other members, spoke of their frustrations with the ways that colleagues and administrators were complicit with practices and systems that perpetuated oppression. As a consequence, members feel implicated in those actions. Another example of this dynamic was after the 2016 election when group members discussed how their worksites either responded with "business as usual" or did acknowledge the negative impact of the election but still encouraged teachers not to participate in student led

walkouts/demonstrations for liability reasons. As CEoC, they felt that these responses signified just how disconnected their colleagues, administrators and school policies were to the lived realities of students and educators of Color navigating a racially hostile sociopolitical climate and society.

Catalia worked with and in institutions that she felt were harmful places for people of Color to work and learn in. For example, she had years of experience teaching in juvenile hall settings, continuation schools, K–12 schools, non-profit organizations and even in the fields teaching farm workers, all of which expected efficient outcomes that often felt dehumanizing. In her interview, Catalia explained:

I know that on a day-to-day basis so many educators are just re-traumatizing, re-traumatizing, re-traumatizing or at the very least, missing critical opportunities to kiss “owies” that have not been kissed for generations. So that’s really what I love about us, we all are working really hard and pushing ourselves in our process, in our specific role as educators, to constantly check our own indoctrination. It made me think about the institutionalization of even things like worrying about being on or sticking to a schedule, you know what I mean? Because I want to remain open in that indigenous and organic way of what comes up in a moment and honor that and not be so rigid to agendas and time. I feel like that’s really important because that’s not *our* way, that’s capitalism’s way.

Catalia appreciated how H.E.L.L.A. offered the group opportunities to critically reflect on their goals, approaches and stances as CEoC and in so doing, deepen their awareness and ideological clarity.

**Grappling with the toxicity of Whiteness in our lives.** During meetings, Whiteness was never discussed as a singular experience but rather as a residual, never ending experience with Whiteness. Members often affirmed one another as they shared their experiences by either snapping their fingers as a way to communicate, “I

feel you,” eye rolls or verbal resonations. These moments led to identifying connections between past experiences with Whiteness and current ones, each drawing attention to unaddressed racial trauma.

*Grappling with Whiteness perpetuated by loved ones.* When Whiteness was discussed in H.E.L.L.A., it was not always spoken of solely in relation to the White people in their lives but also in relation to the ways that Whiteness was embodied and perpetuated by people of Color in their lives, including close family members. For example, one night each member created a racial life map to illustrate the evolution of their racial identity formation using a variety of markers and colored pencils that Nita would let us borrow from her class materials. While members worked on their maps, music by Sade was playing in the background. As they drew their images, some members simultaneously joked around, talked about their personal lives or listened to others. When it came time to share maps with the group, Whiteness came up several times throughout the presentations. For some members, Whiteness was described in the context of family members of Color that ascribed to Whiteness, or family norms and ways of being that perpetuated Whiteness. For example, Karina’s father was a dark-skinned immigrant Latino who thought assimilating to U.S. culture and the larger society was the key to success in the United States. As a young man he joined the Navy and later married her mother, a White woman with a very different experience with race and racism. When describing her experience, Karina told me:

I grew up very confused about who I was and really tortured in a lot of ways when I was younger. By the time I went to college I felt a lot of shame about who I was. They would read my name and I would be trying to front like I didn’t speak the language.

She went on to describe how her father's internalized racism shaped her own sense of identity in ways that made her feel ashamed of who she was. When Karina became a bilingual teacher as a way to reclaim her identity and language, he could not understand why she would teach kids in Spanish when they were in American schools and felt that English should only be taught. Karina's experience growing up biracial was complicated and she struggled to understand how to identify herself.

Mark talked about the ways in which his conflicting identity as a mixed raced Asian/White male, was heavily shaped by his White father. He was still learning about how Whiteness and toxic masculinity was embedded in his identity development throughout his childhood. Mark explained:

My parents weren't interested in me going to a Chinese school. My dad thought it would be nerdy and he wanted his boys to buy into sports. I definitely internalized stereotypes around Asian weakness or like emasculated male asianness from him, like that we are weak and don't fit the norm of what it means to be a man because we're not these domineering athletic all-American guys. I love my dad through and through but he also says some messed up stuff like, "Man, if it wasn't for me, you'd be playing violin," or doing something else that he would think is not masculine. So I think I internalized a lot of those stereotypes about what it means to be an Asian male from my dad and I'm definitely still thinking about that. It's funny how when we're in H.E.L.L.A. I'll remember things about race that I wasn't necessarily fully aware was happening the way it was back then.

Mark's father attempted to shape his racial and gender identity from a dominant, White, cisgender, heterosexual lens, which was at odds with how he understood an Asian male identity. H.E.L.L.A. supported Mark in reflecting about and unpacking formative moments from his childhood where he was negatively

impacted by Whiteness within his own family in order to begin the process of reclaiming his identity outside of Whiteness.

As represented in Karina and Mark's experiences, all of the members experienced tension with the ways that some of the people they loved dearly essentially perpetuated Whiteness, which made their experiences with them complicated and often painful. While members grew to understand how Whiteness was harmful to their wellbeing, that harm dated back to their early childhood and was suppressed for much of their lives thereafter. H.E.L.L.A. provided members opportunities to revisit those memories, critically and emotionally reflect on them and begin to explore how to heal from the impacts of Whiteness perpetuated by people they loved.

*Grappling with Whiteness in the classroom.* Some members struggled with how to navigate Whiteness in their own classrooms. For example, after teaching in several ethnically diverse schools throughout her twenty-one years of experience within K–12 public education, Karina moved to another city and began teaching at a school known to be racially segregated and tracked. She was assigned to teach in a program that served predominantly White affluent students and a few students of Color. At one meeting, I noticed Karina's energy as she sat in circle. Her hair shifted out of place after she ran her fingers through it while exhaling deeply before sharing her Community Cultural Wealth action plan. She barely touched her food and slid her plate under her chair. She took her turquoise eyeglasses off and placed them on

the table behind her and said, “Ok, where do I even start?” She sat up straight at the edge of her chair and began sharing the following with the group:

You know that I work in the most segregated, problematic part of [Bay Area High School] so it’s really difficult every day on the job because, well, I’m biracial so I grew up around White people but *these* White students are the ones going to Stanford, Yale, Dartmouth, you know? I really struggle with them. I go into class every day and I work so hard to challenge their deficit mentalities but honestly, it’s complicated where I work and I’m just trying to keep my spirit alive and stay sane teaching in this program. I try to create an emotional space in the classroom for students of color because they need it so bad, *especially* in this program. The whole system is set up on this dehumanization that these White kids thrive off of, they love to critique and get into these mental arguments as ego masturbation and I challenge that all the time . I’m trying to center an emotional intelligence that my students of color have because of their families, because of who they are, because of living within a targeted community so you *have* to build that ability to connect with others. I hear them constantly express how much they’ve been waiting for this space. Just today at our retreat, one of my Black male students got up and said, “This is exactly what I’ve been waiting for.” Whereas these White kids are just like [mocking tone], “I’m all about school and I’m here to excel.”

I’m always having to remind myself who I’m there for and who I’m trying to serve. I know that I have a really strong internal narrative that I’m not smart enough, I mean some of these kids are just so difficult to stand up in front of sometimes and it has a lot to do with my own fucked up experiences in school, much like yours, Farima. Sometimes I don’t feel like I have anything academically to offer on some level. You know, my experience within my family, where I came from and all of the generational trauma I had to grow up with... so I think I’m just working a lot on trying to figure out my place as an intellectual and as a teacher of color and as a biracial woman and mother and all of my identities within this program and it’s just really complicated.

The group disregarded the agenda’s allotted time for the action plan share-outs and created space to unpack the experiences and emotions that surfaced after Karina shared. Several group members resonated with Karina’s experience and also struggled teaching privileged and defensive White students. While group members

resisted Whiteness and centered their students of Color in their classrooms, doing so was complicated.

Some of the same references regarding Whiteness were also described in the context of teacher education. Karina taught a course at a predominantly White university, and a couple of her White students had given her negative teaching evaluations. They complained that her pedagogy “was not academic enough.” Charmaine, a high school teacher who also taught at a local university, rolled her eyes in response to the teaching evaluation example that Karina shared and said, “yup, that happened to me too but for other reasons.” Nita, frustrated, blurted out, “I can’t, wow! Y’all, that is some bullshit, I’m so tired of that shit, honestly! Y’all are so dope, that don’t even make sense!” As I looked around the room, it was clear that all of us, at some point throughout our professional careers, faced unfair judgments regarding our practice when seen and assessed from a lens of Whiteness. It was important for the group to acknowledge and affirm not only how prevalent Whiteness was in their classrooms, workshops or courses, but also how much it impacted their everyday experiences as well as the experiences of their students of Color.

During that same meeting, some group members were also concerned about how theories that were/are created for people of Color, such as the community cultural wealth theory, might be co-opted and misappropriated by White people. Since all of the members in the group worked in the Bay Area and experienced Whiteness through the daily realities of gentrification, everyone was familiar with how the work, spaces and cultures of people of Color have been stolen by White

people. For example, resonating with Karina's experience and tensions with teaching White students the community cultural wealth framework and *testimonios*, Jedaiah shared:

Yeah it's hella challenging for me too, I'm specifically thinking of a class of 30 students who are mostly White and privileged because their parents are techies that moved into the Mission in San Francisco. I don't know if I want to teach this [Community Cultural Wealth] theory within that context for it to just be reappropriated and consumed in a way that renders the theory meaningless, you know what I mean? Especially as a trans man of color, I don't want to teach these particular students in the room about racism and feel tokenized either. It just feels fucked up.

Kyrie resonated with Karina and Jedaiah and added:

Yeah, I also think it's really challenging because I was thinking about how Tara Yosso wrote this in an academic journal, right? So, it's basically consumed mostly by folks from a particular place in society who happen to *not* be a majority of people of color. Also, since it's a framework that's meant to be applied that feels pretty tricky to me sometimes because there's so much that White folks and privileged folks get to hide behind, by always getting to apply the theory or perform the metrics for "the other" but never having to be measured by them. It would seem to be a real loss to have this framework to be another way they try to measure and validate the worth of people of color so I feel some tension on how to use it but I think a lot of that is also just about how and why it was created, too.

As represented in the tensions that Karina, Jedaiah, and Kyrie expressed above, some group members struggled with teaching theories and engaging in rituals created for and by people of Color because of the ways in which Whiteness harms, tokenizes, disrespects, steals from or measures marginalized people. Members regularly grappled with what it meant to enact critical and socio-emotional pedagogies within the context of Whiteness within their classrooms.

***Grappling with Whiteness among colleagues.*** Navigating Whiteness among colleagues was a daily struggle. Amirah was teaching at the same school as Karina

and while she taught in a different program that served predominantly students of Color, she still constantly dealt with Whiteness among her colleagues and administrators. She felt frustrated by White guilt and White tears in her professional development and staff meetings especially when she was aware of how students of Color were being treated by these same teachers and administrators. During an interview, as Amirah was rocking her baby girl, she began sharing about how she needed to constantly remind herself that most of her White colleagues were “probably coming from a good place” to keep her from “just checking out, shutting my door and trying to do this on my own but then also feeling like if it’s not happening on a bigger level and *only* in my classroom, then it won’t end up accomplishing very much for *all* kids.” As a CEOC she felt the pressure of:

Constantly having to be visible and be vocal in ways that aren’t necessarily comfortable and simultaneously trying to make space for kids of color without speaking for them but when you’re expected to be their voice and remind people what’s not appropriate and that they have their own, it’s a lot to navigate.

The constant pressure of advocating for students of Color in predominantly White spaces was stressful, especially after having a child of her own.

Amirah found herself wanting to just disconnect because of how emotionally and mentally draining it felt to constantly navigate Whiteness but she felt responsible to take on the additional labor for the sake of all students that she knew would be subjected to it by her colleagues in one way or another. The toxic stress that she experienced, especially in the face of blatant racist acts and the disregard from school administration impacted her well-being and sustainability. For example, someone at

her school tampered with a computer and made a lynching threat against Black students, using the “n word” and even provided a specific date for when the lynching was expected to occur. Some of her students of Color told her that their complaints were brushed aside by school administration because they claimed to not understand what the references actually meant. Frustrated, Amirah shared, “If you need a 14-year-old to explain what a noose on campus means and how that impacts your community, you should *at least* listen” to them.

The Black Student Union organized a walkout in response to the threat, which Amirah described as “the best organized protest that I’ve been part of, I was just taken away by them, they got press out there, they got people from the districts, they collaborated with people at UC Berkeley and so much more to take action.” She then began talking about how the Monday morning after the walkout, one of her White colleagues burst into tears, saying, “I just don’t know how we’re expected to go on with business as usual,” during their staff meeting. She took up a lot of space centering her feelings about what happened, upon reflecting on that moment, Amirah elaborated:

I got really pissed off. I was like, well, this is what we’re asking our students of color to do every day. They’re dealing with this level of institutional trauma daily and they’re expected to go on with business as usual and you’re dealing with *one* second-hand experience and you can’t function? But yet when your students come into your classroom trying to express this, your response has been, “Sit down and why don’t you have a pencil?”

It’s exhausting trying to figure out how to say that in a way that will be heard rather than alienate. It’s hard because when the dialogue is actually taking place, most of the time it’s not taking place because the White tears and White guilt and Whiteness is always centered, rather than the actual students who are impacted daily.

It was difficult for Amirah and other members to collaborate with White colleagues who constantly derailed or trivialized important conversations addressing issues that were impacting students and teachers of Color.

The additional emotional and intellectual labor that was expected of them to “educate” or “comfort” White colleagues, students and their families, felt burdensome, especially with no additional institutional or emotional support. Navigating Whiteness was also particularly challenging for members as they shared how their interactions with privileged White students and/or colleagues triggered racial wounds caused by Whiteness from their past. Openly sharing perspectives, experiences and emotions in response to Whiteness was possible within the affinity group because members were among other people of Color with similar ideological clarity, commitments and experiences. The group understood Whiteness as a form of toxicity and therefore, expressed the ways in which they felt harmed by it.

Processing members’ racial identity development in relationship to Whiteness was at times very funny and triggered much laughter, other times it felt heavy as members described the grief endured from losing access to their heritage language, history, or culture. The connections members made about their racial trauma ultimately allowed them to understand Whiteness as the problem, rather than internalizing toxic dominant narratives regarding their worth as people of Color.

**Validation.** Another common theme was a sense of validation that was experienced through their group experience and relationships. Since members regularly unpacked the social toxicity they struggled with and collectively engaged in

reframing the ways they viewed themselves using Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework, they felt validated as educators of Color and more broadly, as people of Color. Some members described how they felt more validation within the context of the H.E.L.L.A. group compared to other teacher support spaces. For example, Nita, a young Vietnamese immigrant woman who grew up in and still resides in East Oakland, developed intersectional Ethnic Studies English lessons for her high school students relying on texts such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970), *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Díaz, 2007), and *Parable of the Talents* (Butler, 1998) and her students had close bonds with her. While she invested endless amounts of unpaid labor organizing and facilitating transformative experiences for students and even participated in several other teacher spaces, she rarely experienced the sense of validation within them like she did within H.E.L.L.A.:

I just want to appreciate y'all. When I'm here I be feelin' hella validated. As someone who's young, who is an immigrant and part of this community *and* who learned English as a second language honestly, sometimes I have to be reminded that these are assets because I don't feel like I'm valued in that kind of way in other teacher spaces like the ones I told y'all about. I just feel like this is such an intentional space, here I feel like who we are, the work we do with our students and what we be goin' through is hella important and helps me to show up for my students, for myself and, really for everyone, so I'm just grateful for this space.

Considering her identity as an immigrant and Oakland resident, her expertise, as well as the amount of energy and time that she invested in her practice, she was undervalued in the professional teacher programs and spaces that she was part of. H.E.L.L.A., however, was a space where she felt validated, understood and supported

by other CEoC who connected with her experiences of marginalization, as well as her commitments within the profession, which she expressed during appreciations circle.

Similarly, Nate spoke to the ways he felt validated and understood by H.E.L.L.A. members which made him feel a sense of empowerment and inspiration to take risks at his school site that he would not have taken otherwise:

I have trouble decompressing and processing what I experience when I'm teaching so being able to have a space to process with y'all has helped me because I know you guys understand so I don't have to feel like I need to justify myself or even explain in a way that's easy for others to digest it, you know what I'm saying? That's been empowering and healing, it's helped me to be more reflective because I found that I tend to just move on to the next thing and I just put my junk aside to get back to lesson planning or whatever I have to do for my family. So H.E.L.L.A. has allowed me to kind of slow down and think about things that I wouldn't have thought about doing. Like I never would have had that meeting with the principal about my CCW idea, which is still going to happen! That just wasn't on my radar before, like my power to actually try to bring something to the entire school but being around like-minded friends brought that idea out by learning about Community Cultural Wealth the way we did together. Honestly, I really look forward to coming every month because y'all help me fight those feelings of not being capable or good enough, you know? I'm still battling it but being with y'all, the community we have, it just feels really good and helps me through those feelings so I feel really blessed.

Nate described how the sense of validation he experienced within H.E.L.L.A. helped him to move beyond imposter syndrome and his fears of inadequacy by taking action in ways he would not have thought about outside of the group context. Some of his actions were geared toward his own healing and processing and some were geared toward taking on leadership at his school.

The ways in which members described the validation that they experienced in H.E.L.L.A. was connected to affirmations, not to seeking one another's approval.

This is an important distinction to make because, as people of Color in the world,

group members did not need another context in which they had to abide by particular guidelines to measure their worth or capability. Rather, appreciated having access to a space that centered, valued and built upon their community cultural wealth.

**Inspiration.** All members spoke to the ways in which they found inspiration from other comrades in the group, especially as members shared what they were doing to bridge their learning in the group to their professional context. Hearing the various Community Cultural Wealth action plans, as well as related ideas and projects that members were taking on, motivated each individual to do more in and out their classrooms. For example, Karina spoke about how inspired she felt when hearing about how Jedaiah and Mark were connecting what they were doing in the group and applying it at their respective school sites via student affinity groups:

I always feel inspired and I want to do more so that when we reconvene, we can talk about some of the community cultural wealth stuff we're doing. Listening to people's stories and being inspired by what they're doing has really had an effect on me. It's made me want to do more. I actually started meeting with Chicana/Latina girls in my class and that all came about from all of us talking about the work we're sharing. I realized that I need to use my identity more explicitly in my work and that was totally inspired by H.E.L.L.A. and listening to Jedaiah who has been doing all of his gender-based stuff with youth and Mark also, he's been doing those identity-based student groups now, too. And so there's almost like this sense of camaraderie, I'm going to show up and bring stuff and maybe I'll inspire some people but either way, I know I'm going to get some inspiration, too.

While Karina had almost twenty-one years of teaching experience and was already deeply involved in teacher organizing throughout the Bay Area, there was something about having an intimate space to reflect with other critical educators of Color around identity and pedagogy that reinvigorated her. She became inspired to bridge her commitments in ways that she hadn't thought about doing before.

Similarly, this professional inspiration was especially important for members when they were navigating toxic dynamics at their school sites. For example, Monique struggled with the deficit ways in which her colleagues spoke about the students and families at the school she was teaching at. She came to several meetings feeling frustrated and exhausted from navigating the social toxicity among her colleagues but she found inspiration in the work she was doing within H.E.L.L.A., which encouraged her to not only stay at her school site but also motivated her to create and implement her action plan, which made her hopeful:

I feel like just working on this Community Cultural Wealth action plan has helped me remember all the wealth that we *do* have despite all the turmoil that we're in and all of the negative issues and interactions and feelings that it's bringing out. There are a lot of teachers that aren't coming back [to my school site] because of their deficit narratives of our school being bad because of the kids and their families and all kinds of other deficit narratives, but you know what, I don't care because I'm feeling super excited just preparing for [my CCW action plan], it's been keeping me feeling really hopeful and motivated despite all the BS.

Similarly, Jedaiah was often frustrated with the ways in which the organization that he worked for would not allocate time for him to “hold space” for his students because of the curriculum he was expected to teach from. However, their experience in H.E.L.L.A. inspired Jedaiah to challenge that dynamic in his own curriculum. During the appreciations circle portion of the H.E.L.L.A. meeting, he shared the following:

Jedaiah: I think it's just really dope to be in an intentional space like this. I feel like I can't talk about these things at the school sites that I work in because there's no time, which is something that I'm working to challenge and honestly that is totally inspired by this group.

Irma: Yes I also want to appreciate this group, being able to come here and get all of these ideas, all I keep thinking about is how I'm going to be working with parents and coming here and hearing all of your stories it's like yes, I have to go back, I have to figure out how I am going to contribute. It's something new for me, this theory that we're learning, so I am excited to share this with my parents that I work with.

Irma, a Mexican English Language Learner (ELL) specialist working in a high school in Hayward, immediately followed Jedaiah and shared her appreciation for the inspiration that she found within the group to share her work around the community cultural wealth theory with the parents she was working with. Since she was working with the parents of her students who were designated as English Learners, she spoke about how they were often invisible at her school site, often because of the language barriers and the ways in which ELLs were marginalized at her school. These parents, however, often shared that they felt safe with her because she not only spoke Spanish but also because she built relationships with them and helped them to navigate the U.S. school system. She was inspired to teach both her students and their families about the Community Cultural Wealth framework because she felt that it would inspire them to see the assets that they possess/rely on.

Members also told me that learning from one another's lived experiences was another source of inspiration. Through activities such as connections, *testimonios* and storytelling, members often shared their personal struggles and processes navigating their lives but also how they thrived despite them. For example, it was common for members to share personal challenges such as mental and physical health struggles, family struggles, housing difficulties, relationship separations/divorces, death and various forms of social trauma that members faced throughout the three years

together. While these topics seem dismal, the ways in which members displayed resiliency through their hardships inspired other members, for example, Nita shared in an interview during year two:

I think what's so powerful about our H.E.L.L.A. framework is that we didn't learn each tenet through hella different readings but more through our lived experiences. The way we dug into the framework was through a personal narrative-based approach and focus, so that was deep. I think that's what I love so much about our group, we learn so much through sharing our stories and experiences together so I really appreciate something as simple as our connections every meeting because we're connecting with what happens in our lives and that automatically connects to the theories that we've learned and talked about so having the space to write and reflect on the (H.E.L.L.A.) tenets and share out together, what better way to learn than through making connections in that kinda way, you know? Everyone in our group is so dope and so strong so it's just always powerful to learn from everyone's experiences and knowledge and work that they're doing on themselves and in their classroom, that's always inspirational for me.

The personal connections and inspiration that members experienced also had direct implications on their personal growth, interpersonal relationships, pedagogy and over all sustainability in the profession.

The inspiration that members experienced through their learning and interactions within the group eventually led to their empowerment to pursue various projects and positions of power at their school or within the field. For example, Mark and Karina created student affinity groups inspired by H.E.L.L.A. at their respective school sites. Jamil Moises helped to build a Trans Educator Support Network within the Bay Area. Nita co-created a Radical Homies Reading Book Club, which involved practitioners of Color from around the Bay Area who met over potlucks to discuss a new book each month at someone's home. Nate worked with his school design team and the restorative justice coordinator to facilitate radical healing workshops and

professional development so that his colleagues could begin to address race and racism at his school. Monique advocated for parents to teach students various cultural dances and practices from their countries of origin during the school day rather than as an after-school activity. She also organized a performance and cultural celebration for students, teachers, families and community members to witness the community cultural wealth within and among their community.

Similarly, Irma worked with the parents of high school students who were designated as English Language Learners (ELL) to learn about the community cultural wealth framework as she supported them in understanding how to navigate the U.S. school system. She also advocated for ELL high school graduates to receive a special medal of recognition because she felt that they were often ignored and stigmatized at the school. Karina and Charmaine took on leadership roles at their school sites to facilitate critical professional learning with colleagues. They also taught education courses at local universities using a social justice lens and approach in their work. I established an organizational partnership between the Teachers 4 Social Justice, H.E.L.L.A. and the People's Education Movement to bring educators and organizers of Color together monthly for H.E.L.L.A. People's on the Run which centered self and collective care at Lake Merritt in Oakland (see chapter five for more details).

Some group members applied to graduate programs during our time together because they wanted to have the agency and power to engage in work they felt was needed in the field but not necessarily possible within their current roles. For

example, Catalia pursued a PhD program in Community Psychology, Liberation Psychology and Ecopsychology; Jedaiah pursued a M.A. in Expressive Arts Therapy; Kyrie pursued a PhD program in Social Research Methodology; and Nate and Monica pursued administrator credential programs with focuses on equity and social justice.

In short, all group members described H.E.L.L.A. as a space to replenish intellectually and spiritually from the exhaustion, harm and labor of navigating white supremacy, in its myriad forms, that served as obstacles for them within the profession. Shifting from solely focusing on cognitive based approaches to learning, group members engaged more holistically by bridging their learning to their humanity, focusing more on how their personal and professional experiences with oppression impacted their emotional and spiritual well-being. This approach naturally developed a sense of critical camaraderie among the group and led to members finding validation and inspiration from one another which led to them finding agency to take action within their schools and personal lives.

## Chapter Seven: Cultivating a Sacred Space for Collective Healing and “Soul Care”

In this chapter, I describe the findings that emerged from the data revealing how collectively, members described H.E.L.L.A. as a critical form of “group therapy.” Group members expressed gratitude for the ways in which everyone “shared space” and “held space” for one another, which implied a sacred and therapeutic association to the nature of learning and sharing that took place within the context of the group. In H.E.L.L.A., members’ lived experiences were regularly centered, enriched through critical theoretical lenses and affirmed by the group which was described as healing and replenishing their spirits. I describe how members discussed the writing and sharing of *testimonios* as a transformative personal and professional benefit afforded to them through their participation. I will illuminate how ongoing critical and healing praxes unfolded among this diverse group of educators of Color, which led to members engaging in what I term *intersectional healing praxis*.

### **A Sacred Space for Educators of Color to Heal**

The critical dialogues, *testimonio* writing and storytelling that members regularly engaged in required the reciprocity of vulnerability among members. The ways in which members described their experience in H.E.L.L.A. using words like “sacred,” “therapeutic,” and “healing” were related to it being a humanizing sanctuary space that centers healing. Members appreciated learning in ways that surpassed cognitive approaches that solely engaged their intellect by challenging them to tap into their emotions, creativity and “soul.” However, this notion of

“space” was not described as a location but more as an energy, vulnerability and as time fostered and exchanged within the group. For example, Catalia expressed, “I love when we write together in the same space and time because it creates a sacred container for us to release our burdens in a safe and supportive way and that shared energy heals me.” At another meeting, Jedaiah shared, “I really appreciate this space, not just for the physical space but for how you all hold space and share space with everyone here.”

Nita’s classroom was where the group met regularly for over three years. During the meeting’s appreciation circle, she shared gratitude for H.E.L.L.A. as a space, not in reference to the location because the group met monthly in her classroom, but the following excerpt highlights how she describes “space” as the group:

I know I’ve said this before but thank y’all so much for creating a space where I can come feeling all over the place and leave feeling hella grounded, it’s just such a dope feeling and the one word that always pops up in my head when we’re together is ‘therapy’. I feel like when you’re hella caught up in service and organizing, when do you really have time to process all the shit you’re going through? So having a supportive space to do that with other dope teachers of color is beautiful.

This notion of “therapy” had more to do with Nita having the space and support to make sense of her experiences within the relationships and learning she engaged in within the group. Nita often shared gratitude for having the space to reflect within H.E.L.L.A. because as an educator and organizer, she rarely was able to process her emotions and experiences. The irony was that Nita was finally able to experience this emotional “space” among HELLA colleagues.

While group members were also part of other equity-oriented educator collectives and organizations, their learning experiences in H.E.L.L.A. differed because of the explicit focus on CEoC and healing. Additionally, because members regularly processed their experiences with oppression from childhood through adulthood, some of which had been repressed for years, their learning within H.E.L.L.A. felt healing.

Karina had been with T4SJ since the organization's conception and expressed how there had never been a racial affinity group created before and recognized that there had also never been a group that focused on collective healing either. From her vantage point after being part of H.E.L.L.A., she felt that organizationally, it was important to continue creating space for healing, especially during such tumultuous times. For example, during appreciation circle one night, after Catalia cried from expressing how toxic her work context was and how it was taking a toll on her, she shared gratitude for the healing that she experienced within the group. Karina passed Catalia tissue as she resonated with her comment,

You know, I was thinking about how half of our meeting agendas have been so deep in community building and this sense of connection and how it makes so much sense why this is a safe space for us. This is such an emotionally intelligent group of people and so I want to appreciate the balance of us being kind of half support group and half study group because that's what we need in the kind of world we live in, a safe space like this is what we *all* need.

Karina's use of the term "support group," spoke to the need of bridging intellectualization with emotionalization,<sup>24</sup> which is something that *all* people need, not just educators. This implied a level of humanistic development centered in a person's full humanity, as opposed to the ways that learning "in the kind of world we live in"—e.g., capitalism, neoliberalism, colonialism, etc.—predominantly only tends to center the "technical" development that is needed for productivity within an oppressive system that values power over human life.

The reciprocity of vulnerability and the shared effort to heal within the group led to members experiencing and understanding the practice of healing from various forms of oppression *as* action toward social justice. This approach shaped the nature of interactions, learning and healing work that became possible over time, which had implications on their sustainability, practice, curricula and relationships in and out of their classrooms. For example, Mark shared:

I feel like each time that we meet we dig a little bit deeper and get more connected, I learn more about myself and make deeper connections so I want to continue that with you all. There's no other space like this in my life where I can talk about teaching in a critical, reflective, healing kind of way. You know, my school is so toxic and our PD's are so toxic and I dread it [...] I'd rather do something else with my time that's going to be more healing, more productive and beneficial for me and my students. I'm really overcommitted this year and I just started asking myself "is this good for me? Like through and through, is this a good thing for me to do?" I made a conscious decision that if it's not, I'm going to cut it but if it is, I'm going to keep it. I'm keeping all the stuff that's directly serving me and my students in my life and I feel like H.E.L.L.A. directly serves me and my students because the more whole

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<sup>24</sup> The term emotionalization refers to the act or process of emotionalizing; the action of imbuing with emotion (English Oxford *Living* Dictionary, retrieved from: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/emotionalization>)

and complete I am in the classroom, the more whole and complete my teaching is, which is necessary for my students to feel whole. At the very least when they're with me, I don't want to perpetually harm them through my pedagogy.

Mark was aware that the social toxicity he was navigating at his school on a daily basis could potentially impact his person and pedagogy, and influenced him to begin making changes that would serve him and his students. The deep reflection that he experienced within the group setting supported his ability to heal in ways that would help him to not perpetuate the same forms of toxicity that could negatively impact his students' sense of self and wellbeing in his classroom.

The sense of therapy that members experienced was through a shared emotional intelligence and reciprocal vulnerability, which was different from any of the other teacher learning spaces they were part of making H.E.L.L.A. a “safe space” to express their emotions, experiences and stories. Since racial and social trauma and healing was reflected upon and discussed regularly in H.E.L.L.A., members had the opportunity to feel, especially while navigating teaching through sociopolitical turmoil in the form of state sanctioned violence and attacks on marginalized communities shared via social media and news outlets and regularly witnessed on school campuses regularly.

Furthermore, as a sacred space, members prioritized their participation in H.E.L.L.A. It was the space where they went to replenish their energy, to realign themselves and to feel grounded during such uncertain and emotionally taxing times. As much as possible, they showed up at H.E.L.L.A. meetings, both literally and figuratively. Some, despite feeling exhausted or being in predicaments where they

could and should not come (like Amirah after giving birth), would prioritize meetings for their own self and collective care. Other group members who could not attend particular meetings because of schedule conflicts or illness, would come back the following month expressing how much they missed the group and space. Two members in the group who needed to step away from H.E.L.L.A. during the third year due to schedule conflicts because of enrolling in graduate school, for example, communicated that they wanted to return for the fourth year. Group members told me that they looked forward to coming every month because of the nature of care they experienced. This space served as an important form of sanctuary for group members to honor themselves, to process and to center their own healing through writing and sharing their stories navigating oppression in its myriad forms and thriving despite of it all.

### **Soul Care**

Group members collectively created space to process the complexity of emotions they struggled with as they navigated teaching through oppressive and uncertain times, but also as they unpacked their own experiences as people of Color navigating White supremacy more broadly. While the topics and experiences shared were often heavy, members also shared laughter, affirmations and hugs regularly, which they said replenished their souls. The term, soul, implied members' need to nourish their emotional and intellectual energy, which alluded to their appreciation for the ways members "held space" and "shared space" with one another. This holding and sharing of space was rooted in the trust and collective vulnerability

exchanged, which felt healing and restorative. For example, Jedaiah expressed that learning within H.E.L.L.A. felt healing, transformative, and liberatory:

The healing and soul care we engage in, for me, is a form of collective liberation and survival for educators of color, and so many other aspects of our identities that we embody. Just rooting myself back into my experience and my body and seeing my power and rethinking what I've been taught in schools and society and realizing that I can be visible and that I can exist and that I matter as an educator of color, as a trans and queer person, and as a human being, you know? I think we do that through our radical vulnerability, through our *testimonios* and our storytelling.

Across all group members' interviews, the "sacredness" of the group, which Catalia expressed in the preceding section, "creates a sacred container," related to the space being humanizing and special. This sacredness, highly contrasted their surface level learning, relationships and experiences that they were socialized to engage with in professional contexts. Several members alluded to how they felt safe to share their truths, personal stories and "release their burdens" within the group context because of the authentic reciprocity that was honored and shared. The reciprocal vulnerability within the group was necessary in order for members to feel like they could let their guards down as they critically reflected and processed heavy topics with one another regularly. Humanization and reciprocal vulnerability cultivated a nurturing environment, which felt rejuvenating for members. For example, during appreciations circle at a H.E.L.L.A. meeting, Monique, a Chicana elementary school teacher, expressed gratitude:

I'm just thankful for you all nurturing this space, it always feels so loving and healing and safe and I just feel very blessed and calm whenever I'm here. You all share your heart and soul and words of wisdom and knowledge here and I just feel really blessed and honored to be a part of such a deep intellectual space of analysis and emotion. I feel like I can bring whatever I'm

carrying and I don't ever need to hold back or feel apologetic about it because I'm not the only one, so thank you everyone, for contributing all that you are to make this such an authentic space.

Monique described H.E.L.L.A. as a space that was nurtured by group members, the words she used to describe her experience had to do with how members shared their hearts, souls and wisdom which made her feel blessed by something so sacred. She illuminated how the group contributed to bridging their intellectual learning to their emotional learning which allowed her to experience calm, healing and safety knowing that she could always show up as herself because others would also.

H.E.L.L.A. became a space that deliberately centered self and collective care as opposed to "just another meeting." For example, members "checked in" with one another and engaged in storytelling regularly at meetings, sharing what they were navigating in their lives. While some moments felt deeply emotional, sometimes involving tears, they also regularly engaged in laughter and joy when they met, which was just as important for their emotional experience. A focus on healing in the group also pushed members to reflect on how they were healing and what they needed to heal from. These practices made meetings feel like their work was about them and what they were doing to care for themselves as opposed to feeling laborious and adding more work to their lives. For example, one night as members were sitting in a large circle in Nita's classroom, after sharing testimonios the group transitioned to sharing announcements of upcoming social justice events and then began sharing appreciations:

Charmaine: Right now I'm just feeling like wow, I already thought all y'all were amazing but you all are *hella* amazing [laughs]. It really has been such an important practice for us to share our stories and I know there's so much more that all of us are thinking and feeling and processing, anyway, thank you for sharing yourselves. Y'all know the grind, we got hella meetings and political commitments and lots of other things we're doing beyond our teaching and it's so nice to have a meeting that's not a meeting, if that makes sense, it's just such a pleasure to come here because its more relief than it is work.

Mark: Yeah, I appreciate everybody for sharing and like I said earlier tonight, I've just been feeling really burnt out and so seeing you all and listening to you all reinvigorates me and I don't get that anywhere else, at least not in this way, so I really felt it when I couldn't come last month, honestly. Anyway, I'm really thankful to be here tonight, I really needed this.

Kyrie: Yeah, I also appreciate this space, I feel like my months revolve around it, like afterwards things are so good [group laughs] you know how it gets, we'll leave feeling all energized and shit and after a few weeks you start running close to empty and you're like ok, I need to get to this H.E.L.L.A. meeting [group laughs]. I don't know, it's like a rhythm that I'm like now kinda starting to identify like, "oh that's why last week felt so fucked up!" [group laughs and snaps in agreement] It's just good to know that this is where I get to feel real charged up.

Monica: Yeah I want to echo what everyone has said about appreciating this place especially when we're not always at our best. I've also in the past couple of weeks felt like I'm not 100% but I always feel like I gotta be here because I *need* this and I feel very grateful for it. It's nice, to be able to share things that we can't share in other spaces or with other people and to realize like wow, "I really needed to talk about that." But also, everyone bringing their creative juices and insightful words and experiences and stories always helps me connect and understand on a deeper level [exhale] so thank you, you all.

All of the educators in the group at some point felt the heaviness and emotional toll of supporting their students and loved ones through the fear, anger and a range of intense emotions associated with the toxic sociopolitical climate that they were navigating. They also carried the stress of the work they were doing in their classrooms, at their schools and in the community. Creatively processing their

experiences and beliefs, particularly through the H.E.L.L.A. tenets (healing, empowerment, love, liberation and action) was important to members' learning experience in the group. Whether it was engaging in art, writing or dialogue, group members appreciated feeling affirmed, intellectually challenged, emotionally held and inspired by one another. Despite members feeling emotionally, spiritually and physically exhausted during the week, they looked forward to coming to meetings and when they couldn't, for whatever reasons, they often expressed how it impacted them, implying that meetings contributed to caring for themselves.

The group also represented a humanizing space where members could reflect on their higher purpose, both in education and in life. For example, when members engaged with the love tenet in H.E.L.L.A., they wrote their *testimonios* about love and described the beauty, complexity and struggle associated with love in their lives. Group members felt inspired and hopeful by one another's commitment to love, which felt nourishing to their souls. Nate expressed his appreciation after every group member shared their *testimonio* about love in the following excerpt:

Man, I just appreciate everybody here saying yes to love and really making that a central purpose in our lives. It's clear through the work that each of you do, you wouldn't do it if it wasn't for that love, and the extent to which you all love is hella inspiring to me. It makes me more hopeful, you know? Honestly, I always feel hope and inspiration when I come here. The way you guys look at me and the way we look at each other, it's just powerful. Like, the way we understand that love is labor and the way each of you embraces that labor really pushes me to center love in all that I do unapologetically because that's what life is about, it's about love, so thank you for that, y'all.

H.E.L.L.A. became the space where members could go to replenish their energy, to realign themselves to their commitments, values and purpose, and to feel

grounded during emotionally taxing times. Group members looked forward to coming every month because of the nature of care they experienced at every meeting. This space served as a form of sanctuary for group members to honor themselves, to process and to center their own healing through writing and sharing their stories navigating oppression in its myriad forms and thriving despite of it all.

### ***Testimonio* as Transformative Personal, Collective, and Pedagogical Action**

The act of writing and sharing *testimonios* allowed for deeper levels of connection to self and to others, which also influenced group members' pedagogy in their respective teaching contexts. *Testimonios* allowed members to freely engage in a form of learning rooted in emotionality, which was not the emotionality rooted in Whiteness that often centered White experiences at the expense of marginalized people's experience. Through *testimonio*, H.E.L.L.A. members centered their stories, experiences and racialized emotions connected to navigating systemic oppression and various forms of social trauma. Their peers emotionally reciprocated because the group collectively explored how ancestral, intergeneration, interpersonal, internalized and systemic forms of trauma shaped their racial identity formation. However, the act of writing and witnessing *testimonios* within the group regularly also allowed members to reclaim their story and find power in their pain, individually and collectively. This process helped members to connect back to their bodies and spirits as they embarked on the intellectual and emotional process of writing their *testimonios* through the H.E.L.L.A. tenets (healing, empowerment, love, liberation, and action). In this section, I will describe how *testimonio* led to members reflecting

on the harm that they experienced directly or indirectly from patriarchy, White supremacy, colonialism, sexism, transphobia and various other forms of oppression, which led to their self-awareness of the need to heal from racial/social trauma and to understand healing as a social justice act.

It was common for members to share via *testimonio* about the dehumanization they either witnessed or personally experienced in schools. For example, after the group spent half an hour of the February 2016 meeting writing their *testimonios* to the prompt:

Write a *testimonio* highlighting your own community cultural wealth as an educator/person of Color. Feel free to focus on one or more forms of cultural capital.

Each member shared their *testimonio* while others would either shed tears, burst out in laughter or snap their fingers in affirmation at particular moments to express their resonations and connection to one another. After sharing, just like at all other meetings, the group transitioned to the last element of the meeting, appreciations circle, where Catalia, with tears streaming down her face, shared:

I want to appreciate everyone's heart, everyone here just has so much heart for getting through what you've gone through and particularly for your commitment to young people, and just all the heart that you bring to your day-to-day work. I feel hella grateful for this space, today wasn't quite as bad as yesterday but I really, really, really hate my job and I feel invisible every day. I sit in a concrete room and I'm belittled by White men and none of my community cultural wealth is in play or valued and none of it is asked about. I'm also in a very financially stressful place right now and I know this [meeting] is not gonna help me pay my rent this month but I feel rich just hearing you, I feel so much more abundant and blessed. *They* are sad and soulless in their shallow worlds and I'm blessed to have this space because this is where my work starts, you know?

Catalia struggled to survive gentrification in the Bay Area, especially because she was a community-based educator and had to work several side jobs in order to continue teaching in juvenile halls, farms and youth centers. H.E.L.L.A. was a space where she felt inspired by the focus on *testimonios* and storytelling because the practice was humanizing compared to other spaces she struggled working in. Karina also appreciated *testimonio* and storytelling because they were sacred practices that were often not valued within institutional spaces where standardized tools to measure academic growth were centered as more important. For example, during the appreciations circle, she shared:

I just appreciate our stories so much, hearing them is so important to me. I'm so glad that we focus on our stories because those are pieces of our souls, they are our traditions, our heritages and they're ignored constantly, especially in education. Sure, we have all these graphs and pie charts and shit but none of those tools tell our stories.

Telling, writing and sharing *testimonios* allowed members to feel humanized as learners by having opportunities to address the everyday ways in which structural oppression and social toxicity impacted their lives, their students' lives and the world. Members had several opportunities to name the racialized and gendered experiences that shaped their racial identity development, which also allowed them to reclaim their power (Pour-Khorshid, 2016). For example, during the appreciations circle after sharing *testimonios*, Nate explained:

I appreciate you all because a lot that was shared tonight really impacted me. Our stories are so powerful, man. It's funny because we all talked about coming from broken places and trying to repair what's been broken and what's so beautiful is that I don't ever see broken people when I'm here. Well, unless we're just some pretty good lookin' broken folks up in here.

[group breaks out in laughter]

I mean, for real, not to negate our experiences in any way, I just think each of you are so empowered in my eyes and y'all have helped me so much to feel empowered too. All that y'all do in the community, in schools, in your families, in the world, despite all of that pain is pretty incredible, you know?

The level of intimacy that was experienced through storytelling allowed members to show up fully as themselves, with all of their struggles and their power. Similarly, at a different meeting, after sharing *testimonios* during the debrief and post reflections, Nita added:

I noticed struggle and resistance in all of our *testimonios*. I thought about how at our breaking point comes liberation even though some of our stories are unfinished because we're still writing our stories. It just feels so good to be in a space where we share a similar purpose and have similar experiences and even though our stories are different, I feel so connected to you all because of our resistance so thank y'all for sharing your *testimonios* with me.

While members commonly addressed painful memories within their *testimonios*, the through lines of resistance, resilience and empowerment despite their struggles, shaped the ways in which members saw one another and themselves. Seeing connections across members' *testimonios* was also powerful because members were able to

Several members also relied on *testimonio* as a transformative pedagogical tool in their classrooms. For example, Nita shared in an interview during year two:

I was hella excited to come back to our meeting and share with y'all about how I used *testimonios* as a performance task for my students, it was just so powerful for them personally, for each other and for me as their teacher. Some of the themes that they read about in texts we were reading from like, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by Junot Díaz, they wrote about in their own *testimonios*. So *testimonios* by far, has been my favorite project in my teaching so far because it allowed students to be so vulnerable with themselves but also for them to actually want to be vulnerable with one

another. I told them that after they wrote theirs, they could just share one line with the class if they didn't feel safe sharing their whole *testimonio* but even in the biggest class that I have, every single student wanted to share their entire *testimonio*. For me, every day of sharing I just felt like crying and the funny thing is I don't even cry, but they were all just so powerful. I felt like it was hella healing for them to share their story with their classmates whether it was about their own identity, how they view school, or love, or even migration. There were just so many ways that they took it there that I didn't even expect. So yeah, the *testimonios* really impacted my teaching and my own life and I learned about *testimonio* by writing my own in H.E.L.L.A.

Similarly, during an appreciation circle, Karina shared how powerful it was to introduce her high school students to *testimonio* by sharing the H.E.L.L.A. published piece I wrote which include three of the group members' *testimonios* (Pour-Khorshid, 2016):

I've been working on a version of what we did tonight with *testimonios* with my students. I want to really appreciate Nate and Farima, every kid in my class read your *testimonios* and they loved them so much, you all are like famous in our class. The published version of the article about H.E.L.L.A. with your stories have been so incredibly powerful for my kids, they are just totally mesmerized. I wish I would've brought some of their comments, I didn't have a chance to but I will, I promise. I really want to thank you for getting our work and our stories published, I'm able to say to my kids, this is research, this is from academic spaces, you know? That's so powerful. I just appreciate all of us for creating space for our stories because it's inspired me to bring that practice in with my kids daily and honoring their stories as well.

For Karina, the fact that some of the group members' *testimonios* were published in an academic article not only allowed her to validate the practice as an important act legitimized by academia, but it also allowed for students to connect with the stories within the publication. This was important for Karina because she had a starting point from which to begin teaching *testimonio*, as well as a way to inspire students using the real narratives of educators of Color that she knew.

### **Aspiring toward Community Cultural Love**

Through the act of *testimonio* writing, group members moved beyond Yosso's (2005) theory of community cultural wealth by centering love as their political, pedagogical and existential purpose. For example, when members wrote about love, they reflected and wrote about what it meant for them and how it showed up in their actions as educators and as human beings. Mark started his *testimonio* writing about individual interactions and relationships with his students and ended with how his interactions with them were deeply rooted in an ethic of love. In his last paragraph, he grappled with the complexity of love that was at the root of his teaching praxis and purpose:

*In order to educate for critical consciousness, I believe there has to be a hope for the future and a belief in ourselves and within our students that it's possible to transform our current world. We're surrounded by hate and oppression. Often times, this journey toward critical consciousness is painful, learning about our past and the present day mechanisms of oppression is stressful and if we're not careful, it'll hold us back. Our resistant and transformational capital must embody love: love for ourselves, for our community and others, otherwise it's all bullshit. What's the point of learning about these things if we're not also learning about love? Love is the central element of our aspirational capital and what will help to keep us on this journey.*

Mark was committed to learning more about and embodying love as a form of transformative resistance and sustainability in the field and he built on Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework in his *testimonio* to make sense of his purpose as an educator of Color committed to racial justice. Other members wrote about the complexity and pain associated with fully embracing such an emotion. For example, Nate wrote about his commitment to love as he grappled with being a Black educator who was constantly bombarded by anti-Blackness (Dumas, 2016; Sexton, 2008) and

structural violence (Farmer, 1996) that Black people, *his people*, die from daily. In part of his *testimonio* he shared his epiphany regarding the pain of fully embracing love as a Black man in America:

*Love is to feel, which is often why many of us at one time or another try to avoid it. Love is the reason I hurt for my people. Love is the reason I cry when I see a Black teen thrown in jail for five years in solitary confinement for allegedly stealing a backpack. Love forces me to truly see him and feel his tragedy. There's nothing like seeing a Black man broken down to the point of suicide. A lens of love intensifies this. Rest in peace Kalief Browder and to the many other Black men and women who've suffered the same fate. I love so hard that sometimes it's hard to get up and yet it's that same love that forces me to my feet. Love is also my family, my wife and my rock. I love her so much that I often limit the ways in which she can love me by pretending I'm ok when we both know that I'm not. Her love makes her try anyway but I imagine now that it also makes her hurt. I realize that I should stop doing that because I am operating out of order in regards to what love is. Truth be told, sometimes I just want to lay and cry in her lap, so why don't I? I imagine love works better when you allow it to love you back with no filter. Maybe I'm putting a fifth of love aside so that I don't have to fully embrace all of the hurt and pain.*

Like all H.E.L.L.A. members, Nate struggled with how to heal from the racial trauma. There was a sense of numbness that each member experienced to cope with firsthand and second hand racial/social trauma and stress in their daily lives as people of Color in the world and as educators of Color within a field riddled with social toxicity.

The racialized tensions that members experienced when aspiring toward fully embracing love in their daily lives was a common theme within their *testimonios*. For example, in Charmaine's *testimonio* she wrote:

*Cornel West said that justice is what love looks like in public so what would it mean to really hold this? When I'm talking to two of my best friends from high school at MUA and we're reminiscing about Oakland and growing up here and the [Oakland Police Department] sex scandal comes up and one of*

*them says, “yeah but that girl wasn’t innocent in the whole thing” then I can say, “why are we so set on punishing this young woman?” That’s the opposite of love. People say it’s about holding people accountable and a republican this week said that poor people should reframe from buying iPhones so they can have health care, why are we so set on punishing poor people? Again and again it comes up, my students say, “yeah but there’s people who game the system” and I say that might be true and you know the majority of welfare recipients are children and most of the adults are single and or disabled, right? So again, why the need to punish poor people who are being set up to fail because love would mean everyone gets what they need. Love would look like taking care of people first, and then we can disagree with them, once they’re taken care of.*

*Testimonio* writing about love allowed members to move beyond Yosso’s (2005) theory of community cultural wealth by aspiring toward community cultural love, which meant that love, as a verb and a noun, was their central purpose, despite the ways in which oppression made love difficult to see, feel and practice. Group members were able to re-center love in a way that allowed them to resist capitalist logics of production through dehumanization so that they could repurpose their ways of being in the classroom and in the world.

Group members described the essence of *testimonio* writing and storytelling in the group in ways that paralleled Dillard’s (2008) notion of *re-membering* as “the process of bringing to mind a particular event, feeling, or action from one’s past experiences and the process of actually putting those memories back together in the present (‘re-membering’)” (p. 91). She explains that this process relies upon Freire’s (1970) notion of *conscientizacao*, i.e., critical consciousness-raising, in order to gain new power from racial/cultural memories that marginalized people “learned to forget” (Dillard, 2008, p. 92). For example, Irma shared:

I want to appreciate the stories you all shared tonight, it's very inspiring to hear you. Sometimes I feel like I don't want to think about whatever happened to me in the past, I don't want to go there, it can be very painful and you know, people will say, "oh come on, leave that in the past." So I just learned to suppress it but you know when I hear your stories I feel like, "no, it's ok to go there" especially because you all do, so you inspire me to also.

This form of re-memembering allowed group members to center their humanity in their learning and to deeply reflect on how they might have suppressed historical and their present-day trauma from oppression, which needs to be addressed in order to heal. Just as Jedaiah shared in the excerpt earlier in this section, from "just rooting myself back into my experience and my body and seeing my power and rethinking what I've been taught in schools and society and realizing that I can be visible and that I can exist and that I matter" allowed him to feel whole again.

### **Self-awareness Regarding the Need to Heal**

The letter H in the H.E.L.L.A. study group acronym originally stood for (H)ope when the group began but toward the end of the first year together, Jedaiah shared, "I think the H in H.E.L.L.A., for me, has been more of an experience of healing as a person of Color because we address the embodied trauma of racism that we've experienced as teachers and as humans in the U.S." The group mutually agreed and collectively decided to change the acronym's first tenet from hope to healing. This change in the acronym was what led the group to integrate a Radical Healing (Ginwright, 2016) lens during year two of their experience together. Since I had an established relationship with Shawn Ginwright, I asked the group if they would like to hear from him and members were all excited about the opportunity. After he joined our meeting and spoke with us about the radical healing model and

lens, members experienced transformative shifts regarding their understandings of the importance of healing in and out of the classroom. While some members experienced toxic stress, they had not prioritized personal self-care or healing in their lives.

However, when they were together, they began to develop a deeper awareness about barriers that were impacting their own healing process. Some group members shared that the idea of healing prior to their experience within the group was not something that they would have necessarily felt drawn to or comfortable engaging in within professional or for some, grassroots organizing contexts. Others wondered if they deserved to heal, considering their social privilege compared to so many other people of Color in the world who were experiencing much more “intense” forms of trauma.

Charmaine had complex associations with her Blackness while growing up in Oakland. Since her father is Jamaican and her mother is White, she felt that her Black identity and cultural practices, which she learned and experienced from her father, differed from the ways in which her African American childhood and adolescent peers associated with Blackness. As a biracial, light-skinned young woman, she also spent a lot of her life navigating Whiteness and trying to reconcile what it meant to be half White and half Black, as well as what it meant for her as someone who had social and class-based privilege, which shaped her sense of identity. The complexity of her racial identity development also impacted her understandings and associations to healing. Charmaine elaborated:

I'm light-skinned and because I was raised with class privilege, I feel very committed to acknowledging that as a mixed-race woman. I've never felt comfortable in spaces where the focus was healing from trauma because I've always felt like, what makes *me* deserving of healing? Honestly, I wouldn't

have joined H.E.L.L.A. if I knew that would be a focus but since that shift happened naturally, it became a way to give myself permission to finally think about my own healing. As someone who hasn't experienced the kinds of intense trauma that other folks have experienced, I realized that as people of color in the world, *that* comes with it's own kind of trauma. I think we've created a space where the trauma that's shared doesn't necessarily need to be comparative so that's been an important shift in my life. Now I'm working on building up my socio-emotional skills and doing that kind of work has been challenging because it's never been the kind of thing I do. I've always been the one that's like, "what's all this touchy-feely stuff about? Where's the action plan?" So I think it's been really good for me to have a space that's not hella focused only on action plans but more so about our stories and about what we're giving ourselves and I didn't realize how necessary that piece was for me as much as I do now.

As an active teacher-organizer in the community, she was no stranger to participating in teacher groups committed to social justice. However, her experiences in those spaces had more to do with taking "action" in very particular ways, healing, however, was not part of her schema around "taking action."

Later in Charmaine's life, as a queer educator of color she also had to deal with rampant homophobic slurs almost on a daily basis while working in schools. There were several instances where she shared her frustration with how patriarchy, homophobia and antiBlackness seemed normalized among students at her school, which also mirrored her experience in the world more broadly. The social toxicity connected to patriarchy, heteronormativity and racism she experienced led to her disconnecting from particular students who constantly expressed and displayed anti-gay and anti-Black sentiments and behaviors. For example, at one meeting she shared how one of her male students deliberately wore a "*meninist*" shirt in her class "just to fuck with [her]." During her time in H.E.L.L.A., her own child who was in kindergarten transitioned gender identities and she struggled with how to protect her

child from the heteronormative harm deeply embedded in society. H.E.L.L.A. became a space where she could process firsthand and secondhand forms of social trauma and social toxicity, which impacted her own socio-emotional development and engagement in and out of the classroom.

The group collectively fostered an emotional intelligence and sense of vulnerability that allowed members to deepen their understandings regarding the ways in which oppression and the sociopolitical climate they were navigating negatively impacted their well-being. For example, Nate shared his thoughts in response to reflection questions at a H.E.L.L.A. meeting and spoke to the emotional and spiritual weight he was carrying as an educator of Color,

I wrote about how I saw one of my students the morning after Trump was elected and how everything about his spirit was just crushed. I knew I would get that but when I actually encountered it, it hurt my soul. I held circle like I do every day and it was heavy, I didn't know how to feel, there were just so many emotions. I reflected a lot so I spent more time writing about the question: what does/has healing looked like for you?

It's weird because healing hasn't been prioritized as it should be in my own life, yet it's on my mind constantly every day. I'm always talking to my students about it and I try to hold space for folks to heal around me but for myself, I don't know what happens but it feels like some sort of a stronghold. Something always stops me, even from doing something as simple as writing like we did tonight. I'm always trying to be present for others and support them so I've always felt like I need to have it together to take care of them. So, when I was writing, I started to wonder if that feeling is really about them or if it's more about protecting me from my own stuff and the fact that I'm hurting too. Sometimes it feels like my mind and my body is confused because how could I feel so much and at the same time feel like I've forgotten how to cry? I know I need to be proactive because I'm feeling down more frequently than I'm accustomed to and I'm trying to process what that all means for me right now but I did have some revelations about some things I need to do so thank y'all for tonight.

Nate, among other members, described the disembodiment associated with being a person of Color in the world and particularly as an educator of Color working within inherently socially toxic institutions. He was aware that he was hurting and yet he had “forgotten how to cry” which was indicative of how his body responded in ways that helped him to still be productive and supportive to others. This disembodiment sometimes served as a survival mechanism for members and at the same time, as a psycho-spiritual obstacle (Ginwright, 2016) preventing them from engaging fully with their own humanity. Nate, through continued reflection and dialogue about healing, came to the realization that he was “feeling more down” than he was accustomed to. The increased levels of social toxicity he was experiencing firsthand as a Black man in America and second-hand as an educator of Color navigating the impact that the 2016 presidential election had on him, his family, students and community. The “stronghold” that prevented Nate from engaging in his own healing practices was a spiritual obstacle that he did not fully understand but later gained more clarity about within the group meeting.

Similarly, Jedaiah also came to the realization that while he was facilitating healing practices and conversations with students and loved ones, he was lacking in his own self-care. After group members shared testimonios one evening, he stated the following during our appreciations circle,

I really appreciate having the opportunity to be part of this group and I also really appreciate being able to hear everybody’s stories because you all teach me so much. I never wrote something like that before and y’all have given me the tools to access that part of myself because I think as a teacher I’m always taking care of my students, I’m always taking care of my family but then I

often put my own self-care to the side. Our group has really motivated me to write for self-care a lot more ever since I started coming here.

Like Jedaiah, all members developed deeper awareness around self-care and healing. Whether it was through writing *testimonios*, journaling, art, going to therapy or simply being part of H.E.L.L.A., members were able to think more intentionally about how they could take better care of themselves. This was particularly important for them as CEoC who often spread themselves thin professionally and who would put their students and others' needs before their own.

### **Intersectional Healing Praxis**

While all members anticipated engaging in learning about issues related to social justice, none anticipated a focus on healing when they initially joined the group. The concept of intersectionality was an overarching theoretical lens that shaped group learning through critical reflection about the multidimensional impact that racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of subordination (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) simultaneously have on them as people of Color. This lens was explicitly named from the very first meeting when group members reflected and shared their responses to the prompt, “*What do we all need to be mindful of in order for H.E.L.L.A. to be a fruitful learning space for you?*” Charmaine asked to include, “Be aware of power in specificity of identities-think about intersectionality within this space (colorism, class, gender, etc.),” and Kyrie asked to include, “Create a feminist space where sharing feelings is the norm.” The need that was essentially communicated by members was to bridge intersectionality to their critical and socio-emotional development. Once Radical Healing (Ginwright, 2015) was centered in

year two, the group began to engage in an intersectional healing centered approach to begin to address the psycho-spiritual and socio-emotional harm caused by systemic violence. The writing and sharing of *testimonios*, as well as connections at the beginning of monthly meetings, helped members to learn how harm impacted each person differently as they examined one another's multilayered identities, lived experiences, and social positionalities impacted by oppression within the world.

While everyone identified as people of Color within the group, there were important differences between members' lived experiences and identities that were compounded by other social identities and positionalities that they embodied. In other words, members' identities were complex, multidimensional but often forcefully fragmented, particularly within institutional settings. For these reasons, group members valued being able to center their layered identities and experiences through their shared commitment to healing from the impacts of oppression. For example, during the second year of H.E.L.L.A., Jedaiah changed his name and he was still learning to navigate his gender identity transition, in addition to the other identities he embodied within a heteronormative, transphobic and racist world. He explained:

I'm still trying to heal from a lot of post-colonial trauma, inherited trauma and trauma from the systems that I've had to navigate in this body. I'm trying to heal from my experiences of feeling invisibilized and stereotyped as a Filipino person and the gendered trauma of having to assimilate to a Whitewashed gender binary. I'm still learning how to decolonize my body and my mind so that I can learn how to love myself because I want to embody self-love when I'm with youth because I hope that it resonates with them and makes it possible for them to do the same, unapologetically. To know that there are other folks like me who feel the same way helps me to begin to rebuild myself and rethink who I could be. The more I do that, the more I and my students

can heal the trauma from these oppressive systems, and we do that through our *testimonios*.

Jedaiah's reflection regarding the need to heal was not only about healing his first-hand racial trauma as a working-class, first-generation Filipino-American trans male, he also needed to heal from the ancestral and intergenerational trauma that he inherited before and after his birth. He was inspired to heal because he wanted to offer that same gift to his own students since he understood the damaging consequences of not doing so.

Across all members' reflections, the concept of and relationship to healing was sharpened within the context of the group because members could let their "guards" down with one another. The explicit conversations about how members experienced the world helped to push their learning in transformative ways. For example, Mark shared:

I've learned a lot just from the diversity of lived experiences and viewpoints that get shared in H.E.L.L.A. You know, just hearing other people's experiences who hold different positions and come from different backgrounds and occupy different spaces in our society is super helpful and it pushes me to be more of a reflective, more empathetic, more aware and more conscious teacher, learner and person. We get to go deeper and further and more in-depth so much quicker and get to places that we wouldn't be able to get to in school PD because that filter gets removed when there aren't people present that are perpetuating systems of oppression. At work it's challenging because we're really not on the same page so that's why it's so nice to be able to just jump right in at H.E.L.L.A. meetings. I also think it's cool because we were all strangers at the beginning but we were able to reach such a high level of emotional intimacy and intellectual intensity because we did not have to constantly explain ourselves all the time. We were able to understand each other even when we didn't necessarily share the same exact kind of experience with oppression.

Mark described how he was pushed intellectually and socio-emotionally to understand oppression as he learned about other members' experiences through an intersectional lens. The group was able to reach high levels of "emotional intimacy and intellectual intensity" because all of the group members came with a desire to engage in ongoing critical praxis and that shared commitment created a sense of safety for members to be vulnerable with one another.

Charmaine described how the group's approach to learning created a foundation to think about intersectionality because space was created for members to move past their identities as teachers and toward their identities as "whole humans":

I feel like we've been building a foundation to engage in our practice more holistically by being able to show up as whole humans, not *just* as teachers, but as people of color who carry trauma as queer people, as non-binary folks, as whoever we are in the world because we've intentionally made space for all of those identities. What's really beautiful about that is that because we're explicitly a [people of color] group, the ways in which we are all very different shows up when we're together and we reflect much deeper about our identities and about how the varying experiences in our space shapes what it means to teach our student population as who we are.

Since some group members came to the group already having commitments to centering intersectionality in their analyses, the deep focus on identity within the group naturally cultivated a space for them to learn from the complexities and differences between one another's experiences navigating the world. This approach to learning allowed for members to not only feel intellectually stimulated, challenged and emotionally connected but also more aware of their own and one another's positionalities in relation to the student populations they were teaching.

Amirah described how all of the intersections of her personal, professional, social and political identities felt reconciled and legible within the group context in ways that allowed her to feel understood:

I've been thinking a lot about how H.E.L.L.A. has become one of the few places in my life where I can be fully myself. We're constantly bombarded with talk about intersectionality, but it's incredibly rare to be able to actually feel what it's like to be in a community that so deeply embraces my complexity, so that I don't have to constantly be explaining away one aspect of my experience (like the struggle of being a teacher of color) with another (like all the privilege I know that I have). And in trying to share and understand my own experiences, and listen to others, I don't have to isolate one part of myself like being a parent, being Muslim, being a woman of color and being the hundred other things that I am, and only focus on one aspect of my life. In a short time, I've been able to feel whole in this space in a way that up until now, has only been possible within long-term relationships in my life which have required a ton of ongoing work and investment.

Similar to Mark and Charmaine, Amirah described how she felt seen holistically within H.E.L.L.A. because she didn't have to "explain away" or isolate certain parts of her identity within the group, which felt healing. The feeling of wholeness that she described was compared to long-term relationships from her life, despite her only knowing group members for less than three years.

The healing nature of learning within H.E.L.L.A. had to do with personal and collective soul care for group members, which cultivated a sacred space and practice every month. Healing became possible because group members engaged in reciprocal vulnerability as they shared their raw truths and emotions through *testimonio*, as well as rituals such as the opening *connections* activity, appreciations circle, critical writing prompts and art creation. For group members, their varying lived experiences with oppression became text to read and understand themselves,

one another and the world in more humanizing ways and through an anti-oppressive lens. They often engaged in conversations that allowed them to aspire beyond the ways in which capitalism shapes human conditions and relationships, which was important for their spiritual wellness. Group members depended on this form of support in H.E.L.L.A. because it was nonexistent for them within the profession but necessary for their spiritual and emotional sustainability in the field.

## Chapter Eight: A Critical Racial Affinity Group Approach to Support Marginalized Educators Committed to Social Justice

In this last chapter, I summarize some of the main issues in the literature that this study speaks to; I reiterate my research questions, research approach and theoretical lenses guiding this study; I explain how my data, in relationship to the literature I reviewed, addresses my research questions; and, lastly, I conclude with implications for the field.

Since the passage of *Brown v. Board Education* that resulted in the firing of almost eighty thousand Black and Brown teachers (Ladson-Billings, 2004), the racial demographics of the U.S. teaching profession has since remained disproportionately White (Boser, 2014). Despite research reporting on the myriad benefits and need for teachers of Color (TOC) in the field, they remain grossly underrepresented in the profession due to systemic racism, leading to higher rates of their attrition in the field, at least in part because of structural barriers (Achinstein et al., 2010), the racial battle fatigue and toxicity of Whiteness (Pizarro, 2017), the lack of access to ongoing critical forms of support (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016) and the emotional toll all of this takes on them over time. In this light, the attrition of TOC can be understood as push-out, particularly for those who commit to serving as change agents in schools but who eventually feel like “changed agents” because of their inability to fulfill their humanistic commitments (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). The pervasiveness of White supremacy impacts the agency of critical TOCs in schools, which negatively shapes their everyday experiences in their classrooms, schools and within the profession more broadly. While scholars have documented structural challenges that TOC face

in the profession (Achinstein et al., 2010), few capture how they navigate and heal from the impacts of structural violence perpetuated within and outside of schools.

The centering of Whiteness in teacher learning spaces has led to more intentional critical approaches to support TOC committed to social justice in the field (Kohli et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2016; Mosley, 2018; Navarro, 2018; Pour-Khorshid, 2016). Focusing particularly on grassroots efforts, much of the research reported on critical approaches to professional development for TOC tend to share common features of critical professional development (Kohli, et.al.) such as being rooted in dialogical action (Freire, 1970) which require cooperative dialogue, unity, shared leadership and meeting the critical needs of education stakeholders committed to learning for transformation. Although some of these approaches also include racial affinity group approaches, there is little research about the utility of such spaces and how they support the retention, growth and well-being of the teachers of Color who participate in them.

While research highlights CEoC likely do not experience humanizing or culturally sustaining pedagogies within their professional development in schools, my research explores how a grassroots social justice teacher collective organized to address this gap in the field. This three-year ethnographic case study (Yin, 2003) examines a California racial affinity group made up of twelve CEoC. The overarching questions guiding this research were:

- What is the nature of learning and interactions that develop within a grassroots racial affinity group?

- How does participation impact members' personal and professional lives?

As an active grassroots teacher organizer of Color within the Teachers 4 Social Justice (T4SJ) organization, it was important for me to engage in a research process that aligned with my political commitments to and relationships with the group members in this study. I sought to enact what Guajardo, Guajardo, and Casaperalta (2008) refer to as an activist methodology that emerges from work that has been “rooted in place, built on relationships, and sustained over a period of time . . . where you can witness changes in people, in families, in institution” (pp. 8–9). I relied primarily on participant observation (Patton, 2002) as a fellow member and co-facilitator within the group. My data sources included periodic interviews with each member, audio recorded meetings and field notes, an array of correspondence (e.g., emails, text messages and social media posts) and their *testimonios*. In terms of process, it was also important for me to focus on asset centered research that would highlight the features of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), critical professional development (Kohli et al., 2015) and radical healing approaches (Ginwright, 2015) that group members individually and collectively embodied, engaged with and deepened over time within the context of this study.

### **A Space for/by Critical Educators of Color**

A major theme that emerged from this study was participants' need for support and community explicitly from other CEoC in the field as they struggled navigating the toxicity of White supremacy. The way in which K–12 schooling, teacher education and professional development is structured to normalize and

maintain the status quo not only limits CEoC as change agents but also blames both teachers and students of Color for “not performing” adequately within the very metrics used to measure achievement and perpetuate inequity. What a CEoC affinity group situated outside of schools does is provide support (ongoing critical reflection, relationships, inspiration and healing) in order to do the work that they sought to do within the profession in the first place and that they are fully capable of doing if they do not have to battle to survive every day.

A critical racial affinity group (CRAG) approach to learning provided a foundation of freedom from Whiteness because CEoC were at the center of their learning since the very conception of the group as opposed to constantly having to teach White colleagues. Additionally, since the group centered critical race theories and asset-based learning tenets (e.g., healing, empowerment, love, liberation and action) to shape their experience, these elements not only rejected White supremacy but also reclaimed and reimagined alternative ways to engage in their practice and lives. Their fugitive learning rejected logics of White supremacy, capitalism, or any mechanisms that served to facilitate and normalize oppression and instead, created conditions for them to aspire toward liberatory possibilities (Harney & Moten, 2013; Patel, 2016). For CEoC, fugitive learning spaces are critical in developing political and pedagogical clarity regarding their positionalities being “in” schools but not “of” schools. This approach to learning is inherently political, social, situated and flexible according to the group’s needs and contexts.

### **Collective Healing and “Soul Care”**

While I didn't set out to study social toxicity per se, my findings unearth how members described social and emotional toxins symptomatic of White supremacy that negatively impacted them. The trauma people of color experience through various forms of oppression (ideological, internalized, interpersonal and institutional) spanning from childhood through adulthood impacts the formation of their racial identities (colonial indoctrination, intergenerational racial trauma, internalized oppression); their interpersonal relationships (e.g., family, students, and colleagues enacting Whiteness in ways that contributed to toxic relationships and interactions); the nature of their work (e.g., toxic stress related to White supremacy embedded in professional development, standards, school practices and policies); and their daily experiences navigating a world riddled with White supremacy (structural violence in the form of police brutality, gentrification, inequitable pay). If teacher learning does not acknowledge how these forms of oppression play out within and outside of schools, CEoC are set up to learn under ideologically violent conditions.

The multiple marginalized identities that CEoC embody (e.g., racial, gender, sexuality, religious) as well as social privileges (light skinned privilege, socio-economic status, gender, citizenship status) in the world also highlights their need to grapple with the complexities of their lived experiences and positionalities in the world, making their healing process complex. The act of writing and sharing *testimonios* serves as a tool to unpack these complexities, begin to heal and also experience empowerment through the act of putting racial/cultural memories that marginalized people were told to forget, "back together in the present," to *re-member*

and feel whole (Dillard, 2008, pp. 91–92). To understand one’s healing process from an intersectional lens requires engaging in critical reflection regarding how particular social identities are impacted differently by institutional oppression, which also has an effect on one’s everyday experiences navigating the world. This level of reflection also begins to play a role in mitigating and beginning to heal from internalized oppression. The nature of learning that results from CRAGs can feel therapeutic, sacred and like “soul care,” which is a form of “collective liberation and survival for educators of Color,” as described by Jedaiah in this study. When learning also centers the psycho-spiritual and socio-emotional wellbeing and development of CEOC it acknowledges their humanity and not just their identities as educators. Learning then, becomes just as emotionally rigorous as it is intellectually rigorous, which is a necessary combination especially within a field like education.

### **Implications for Educational Theory and Practice**

This study sheds light on the limitations of Communities of Practice (CoP) theory by complicating the notion of “community,” as well as challenging the assumed sense of belonging of its members. Race, gender, citizenship status, and other forms of social identities that are stratified in society and marginalized by the system of White supremacy, impact a community members’ experience and learning within a CoP. However, this study also has implications for the ways in which Gee (2005) describes affinity spaces as an alternative to CoP, in which a common endeavor is primary and social affiliation (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) is secondary in terms of their roles contributing to a sense of shared identity and belongingness

within them. I argue that race and other social constructed identity affiliations cannot simply exist in the background within a society that is still racially and economically stratified. Individuals are impacted based on their social status and identity within the U.S. and particularly within a teaching profession that is dominated by White teachers (Hrabowski & Sanders, 2015).

Race, and other social constructions of identity create hierarchies of power to benefit those who have historically been and continue to maintain domination over the systems, resources and foundation of this country. The identities and experiences of marginalized people must be critically considered within learning communities and particularly, within White-dominated spaces. However, even among people of color, Whiteness and other forms of oppression can be internalized by group members and perpetuated consciously and unconsciously. Consequently, engaging in intersectional healing praxis is an important critical approach to learning that can be transformative within critical racial affinity group (CRAG) spaces.

Since this study particularly examined a learning space explicitly created for and by people of color who were already affiliated with a grassroots social justice teacher organization, there was an implied commitment to social justice in education. All members, with the exception of the founding co-facilitators, sought out to participate and engage in ongoing critical praxis. This is important to consider because many teacher education programs might require a social justice or equity focus, however, not all teacher educators or learners necessarily want to engage in those approaches to learning which can contribute to racially hostile learning

conditions. The racial literacy that individuals have developed or not, determines the level of learning that will unfold. How might teacher education programs and schools begin to differentiate their teacher learning in similar ways that they ask teachers to differentiate instruction within their own classrooms as it concerns differing literacy levels? How might institutions similarly begin to think about “interventions” to racial literacy development for educators who are in need of varying levels of support?

The H.E.L.L.A. racial affinity group, for example, cannot simply be understood as a “racial affinity group” because it would only capture the relationship between members’ racial identities and their learning. In so doing, it fails to capture the relationship between their ideological, pedagogical and personal commitments to social justice, as well as their racial literacy levels implied in their commitments. It was in fact their racial literacy that formed their commitment to engaging in ongoing critical praxis which also included a desire to center intersectionality in their learning since the conception of the group. However, this commitment was not only to a cognitive act of learning through critical theories, it was also an emotional and spiritual commitment to healing one’s self, healing collectively and societally. This commitment is seldom acknowledged in conventional teacher education and inservice programming.

The merging of (a) critical praxis: critical reflection and action directed at structures to be transformed (Darder, 2014; Friere, 1970; Giroux, 2010); (b) healing praxis: critical reflection and action directed at healing from oppression and social toxicity (Cariaga, 2018; Ginwright, 2015); and (c) intersectionality (i.e., a lens to see

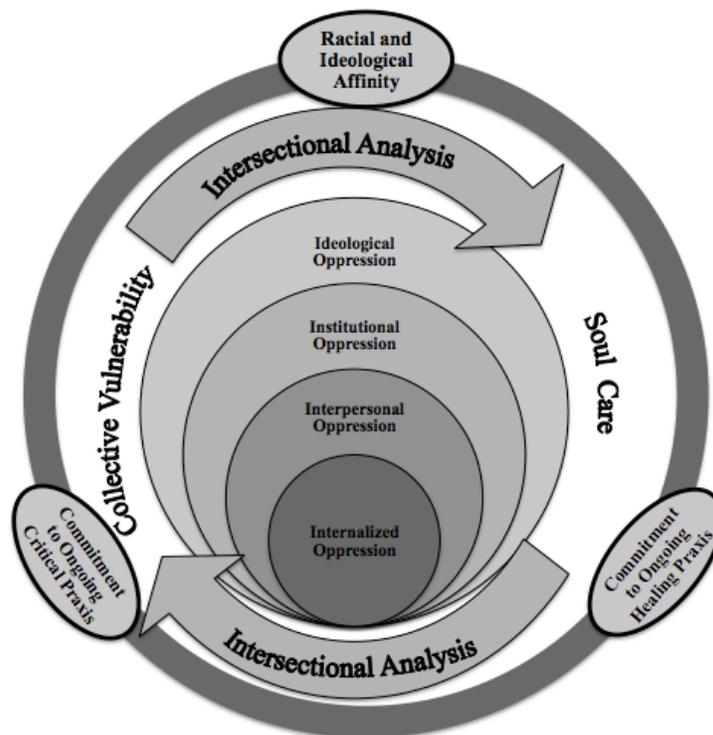
how race intersects with other socially constructed marginalized identities like gender, sexuality, citizenship status, and more, which contribute to compounded forms of systemic oppression) fostered the conditions to engage in what I term, *intersectional healing praxis*. Centering an intersectional analysis as members engaged in critical and healing centered learning and activities, led to members' reflection and action toward healing from the collateral harm that they and others in the group experienced across the intersections of oppression. And, because group members developed relationships overtime, the collective vulnerability experienced allowed for them to be honest with themselves and one another regarding their lived experiences navigating White supremacy from their distinctive vantage points and positionalities in the world. The impact they experienced through learning that combined critical and healing praxes led to growth in their professional *and* personal lives, which reframes the ways in which professional development and teacher education is conceptualized within the field.

The figures in Table 2 provide a conceptual model to illustrate the conditions that fostered ongoing intersectional healing praxis: (a) a Critical Racial Affinity Group (CRAG) approach to engage in ongoing critical and healing praxes within and among a marginalized people that share racial and ideological affinity (e.g., educators of Color committed to social justice/critical praxis); and (b) the overarching theoretical lens of intersectionality to understand the layered ways in which marginalized people are impacted by social toxicity via oppression (e.g., inherited/ancestral, internalized, interpersonal and institutional); and (c) collective

vulnerability and soul care (centering deep emotional engagement, reclaiming matters of the heart and spirituality).

Table 3

*A Critical Racial Affinity Group Approach to Engaging in Intersectional Healing Praxis*



Even among people of color, Whiteness and other forms of oppression can be internalized by group members and perpetuated consciously and unconsciously among one another. People of Color who benefit from different privileges within a socially stratified society, can recognize their privilege and use it to advocate for others and not perpetuate other forms of oppression. Consequently, engaging in intersectional healing praxis is an important critical approach to learning which rejects all forms of oppression and instead, reclaims the dignity, knowledge and

power that people of Color embody in order to enact one's critical agency within the field.

### **Conclusion**

While the sociopolitical climate post the 2016 presidential election left many educators in disarray, CEOC in particular, understood the election as just another extension of White supremacy. Well before the Trump Era, American teachers have been socialized to be apolitical in order to be perceived as a “professional”. All educators are personally and professionally impacted by this “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” facilitated through interconnecting systems of oppression in the U.S. (bell hooks, 2013, p. 1). In order to disrupt the cyclical nature of structural oppression and social toxicity perpetuated within and outside of schools, all educators—spanning all levels of experience and politicization—must tend to unhealed trauma caused by structural violence and oppression (Farmer, 2005; Ginwright, 2015).

While scholars have documented structural challenges that TOC face in the profession, few capture how they create their own spaces of support to help them navigate oppression and heal from its impacts. Oppression is traumatic and Weller (2015) reminds us that, “trauma remains a source of ongoing suffering, eating away at our worth and undermining our ability to step fully into our lives” (p. 39). McGee and Stovall (2015) argue that,

The process of healing from racial battle fatigue and institutional racism requires significant internal commitment and external support. Instead of relying on traditional notions of human will and resilience, our work needs to

be centered on strategies that prevent burnout and that reject the adoption of traditional ways of coping (p. 510).

I argue that CEoC particularly need access to ongoing critical, intersectional and healing centered praxes to support their intellectual, pedagogical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing, situated outside of sites of Whiteness. This study highlights a holistic approach to critical forms of teacher development and support that center learners' humanity. This approach directly contrasts the ways that learning "in the kind of world we live in"—e.g., capitalism, neoliberalism, colonialism, etc.—predominantly only tends to center the "technical" development that is needed for productivity within an oppressive system that values power over human life.

Teachers have been advised to separate their politics from their practice, which for many educators committed to social justice is simply not an option. Traditional and institutionalized forms of teacher professional development make the sustainability of CEoC in the field difficult as they lack critical approaches to learning and support in order to thrive in the profession. Grassroots collectives serve as a bridge of support for CEoC and are intentionally situated outside of the institutional constraints and hostile work climates that they struggle navigating. Teacher collectives who engage in critical professional development (CPD), such as the ones I am heavily involved in (e.g., Teachers 4 Social Justice, the People's Education Movement, Education for Liberation Network, the Radical Healing Institute, and the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice), offer a radical reconceptualization of teacher support intended to sustain CEoC in the field and more importantly, in the movement toward the larger vision and goal of education for

liberation from all forms of oppression. This study sheds light on critical professional development initiatives that branch from national and local social justice educator movements to support a diverse array of education stakeholders committed to social justice. More specifically, this study also captures the nature of a CRAG, which ultimately drew on the community cultural wealth and collective knowledge of CEoC to support their learning, healing, growth and sustainability in the field.

This research study also highlights how people of Color, across the intersections of oppression, have the knowledge and tools necessary to more effectively understand, share, utilize and serve their own needs as well as the needs of their students. I draw on the stories, experiences and dynamics within this case study to offer lessons that H.E.L.L.A. has toward more humanizing approaches to support educators of Color who have been and/or are still experiencing internal/interpersonal/institutional oppression. I argue that educators of Color need to heal from racial trauma just as much as their students do. Additionally, they must find spaces and practices to help reconcile the contradictions of aspiring to create liberatory spaces within the oppressive conditions of public education. What is at the center of their collective knowledge, combined with a sense of agency, is a deep desire for liberation from oppression and a yearning to feel human. The lack of critical, culturally sustaining, trauma informed and healing centered approaches to teacher development negatively impact the sustainability of CEoC in the field. To this end, this study offers important insights about how a CRAG approach rooted in intersectional healing praxis fosters opportunities for CEoC to address and heal from

the racialized and gendered forms of trauma that impact their experiences in the field and in society.

## Appendices

### **Appendix A**

#### **Lenses of Oppression, developed by Charmaine**

##### **Ableism**

Ableism is the system of discriminatory practices and beliefs that maintain and perpetuate disability oppression. Ableism becomes racialized, gendered, heterosexist, etc.

People with disabilities are often seen as “flawed” beings whose hope of normalcy rests in becoming more like non-disabled people or by becoming “cured.” Disability is not just seen as different, but is seen as wrong.

Within ableism, disabled bodies are compared to a norm of abled bodies. Ableism is related to capitalism in particular, as disabled bodies are perceived as unable to produce, and therefore are “deviant,” “unproductive,” or “invalid.” This definition is based on the work of Sins Invalid and Patty Berne.

##### **Disability Justice**

In the disability justice framework, disabled activists argue that they are not oppressed by their bodies, they are oppressed by a system and society that devalues their bodies.

Disability justice challenges the idea that our worth as individuals has to do with our ability to perform as productive members of society. It insists that our worth is inherent and tied to the liberation of all beings (Nomy Lamm), with input and feedback from Patty Berne and Kiyaaan Abadani. A Disability Justice framework understands that all bodies are unique and essential, that all bodies have strengths and

needs that must be met. We know that we are powerful not *despite* the complexities of our bodies, but *because* of them.

Video of Patty Berne and Mia Mingus: My Body Doesn't Oppress Me, Society Does and Narrative: Wherever You Are Is Where I Want To Be: Crip Solidarity by Mia Mingus.

### **Christian Hegemony**

Christian hegemony as the everyday, pervasive, and systematic set of Christian values and beliefs, individuals and institutions that dominate all aspects of our society through the social, political, economic, and cultural power they wield.

Christian hegemony operates on several levels. At one level is the internalization of dominant western Christian beliefs and values by individuals in our society. Another level is the power that individual preachers, ministers and priests have on people's lives. Particular churches and some Christian denominations wield very significant political and economic power in our country. There is a vast network of parachurch organizations, general tax-supported non-profits such as hospitals, broadcasting networks, publishing houses, lobbying groups, and organizations like Focus on the Family, Prison Fellowship, The Family, World Mission, and thousands of others which wield influence in particular spheres of U.S. society and throughout the world.

Another level of Christian dominance is within the power elite, the network of 7 to 10,000 predominantly White Christian men who control the largest and most powerful social, political, economic, and cultural institutions in the country.

And finally there is the level that provides the foundation for all the others—the long and deep legacy of Christian ideas, values, practices, policies, icons, and texts that have been produced within dominant western Christianity over the centuries. That legacy continues to shape our language, culture, beliefs, and values and to frame public and foreign policy decisions (Paul Kivel).

### **Religious/Spiritual Freedom**

In religious and spiritual freedom, people can take what is most important/inspirational about a religion, but do not allow religious systems to control their systems or actions.

Narrative: Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*

### **Classism**

A system that assigns worth based on social class, Classist practices benefit more class-privileged people at the expense of the less class-privileged people, resulting in drastic income and wealth inequality.

Narrative: Stop Shaming the Poor for Being Poor by Isaac Bailey

### **Economic Justice**

Economic Justice is the principle that economic systems should be based on guaranteeing everyone, regardless of life choices, enough to survive in a dignified manner.

Video: Poverty myths

### **Colonialism**

Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another.

### **Imperialism**

The process whereby the dominant politico-economic interests of one nation expropriate for their own enrichment the land, labor, raw materials, and markets of another people (Christian Parenti).

### **Indigenous Sovereignty**

The right of indigenous people to have self-determination—full power over themselves, their communities and their futures.

Narrative: Leonard Peltier, *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance*

### **Colorism**

In sum, colorism refers to discrimination based on skin color. Colorism disadvantages dark-skinned people, while privileging those with lighter skin.

Research has linked colorism to smaller incomes, lower marriage rates, longer prison terms and fewer job prospects for darker-skinned people. What's more, colorism has existed for centuries both in and outside of Black America. That makes it a persistent form of discrimination that should be fought with the same urgency that racism is.

An old children's rhyme captures the definition of colorism and its inner workings in a nutshell.

If you're Black, stay back;  
if you're brown, stick around;

if you're yellow, you're mellow;

if you're White, you're all right.

In the United States, colorism has roots in slavery. That's because slave-owners typically gave preferential treatment to slaves with fairer complexions. While dark-skinned slaves toiled outdoors in the fields, their light-skinned counterparts usually worked indoors completing domestic tasks that were far less grueling. Colorism yields real-world advantages for individuals with light skin.

- Light-skinned Latinos make \$5,000 more on average than dark-skinned Latinos
- Lighter-skinned Black women received shorter sentences than their darker-skinned counterparts
- Darker-skinned Black defendants were two times more likely than lighter-skinned Black defendants to get the death penalty for crimes involving White victims.
- In one study, light-skinned Black women were 15 percent more likely to marry than darker Black women. (Nadra Kareem Little, "What is Colorism")

### **Color Consciousness**

A theory stating that equality under the law is not enough; it rejects the concept that there is a fundamental racial difference between people, but holds that physical features, particularly skin color, can and do negatively impact some people's life opportunities.

Videos: A Girl Like Me (doll test critique), Compilation of skin Whitening ads, Beauty standards decoded video. Narrative: When I Was Growing Up - Nellie Wong

### **Homophobia/Heterosexism**

Homophobia/Heterosexism is fear and/or hatred of lesbian, gay, bisexual, gender non-conforming, and intersex people. Homophobia is enforced through cultural policing of gender norms (e.g., pink for girls and blue for boys; “real men” don’t cry; slut shaming for women, etc.) and institutional practices and laws. Examples of heterosexist policies in the United States include the continuing ban against lesbian and gay military personnel; widespread lack of legal protection from antigay discrimination in employment, housing, and services; hostility to lesbian and gay committed relationships, recently dramatized by passage of federal and state laws against same-gender marriage; and the existence of sodomy laws in more than one-third of the states (UC Davis Psychology Dept., [http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/prej\\_defn.html](http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/prej_defn.html))

### **Queer Liberation**

The movement to challenge the social and legal discrimination against queers, and to create a world in which queer people can not only have rights, but also experience our full humanity and joy as visible queer people.

Video: Joanna Hoffman – Pride.

Narrative: Gay Rights Are Not Queer Liberation, by Phoenix

## **Patriarchy**

Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence (bell hooks).

## **Feminism**

- 1) Liberation from sexist role patterns, [male] domination, and oppression.
  - 2) A movement to end sexism and sexist exploitation.
- bell hooks
  - Gender roles video
  - Narrative: bell hooks, *Chapter two of "The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love"*

## **Sizism**

Sizism is a system in which we judge people based on their size; often ascribing characteristics of laziness and sloppiness to bigger people.

Narrative: *Excerpts from Hunger* by Roxane Gay.

## **Body Acceptance**

Body Acceptance and Healthy At Every Size are movements that argue we should focus more on overall health than weight, and that we should accept our bodies. They critique the diet industry that is based on shame and making money

from making people who feel bad about their bodies. The Health at Every Size paradigm includes the following basic components:

#### Respect

- Celebrates body diversity;
- Honors differences in size, age, race, ethnicity, gender, dis/ability, sexual orientation, religion, class, and other human attributes.

#### Critical Awareness

- Challenges scientific and cultural assumptions;
- Values body knowledge and people's lived experiences.

#### Compassionate Self-care

- Finding the joy in moving one's body and being physically active;
- Eating in a flexible and attuned manner that values pleasure and honors internal cues of hunger, satiety, and appetite, while respecting the social conditions that frame eating options

#### **White Supremacy**

A historically based institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents nations and peoples of color by White peoples and nations of the European continent for the purpose of maintaining and defending system of wealth, privilege and power. -Challenging White Supremacy workshop

#### **Racial Justice**

Policies, beliefs and practices and actions that promote equal inputs and outcomes for all races. Inputs are the services and “starter kit” each person gets in a society—housing, education, etc. Outcomes are how people end up.

Narrative: Ta-Nehisi Coates, Letter to My Son

### **Nativism**

Belief in the inherent superiority of one's own ethnic group or culture.

### **Xenophobia**

Fear or hatred of people from other countries.

### **Immigrant Justice**

The belief that immigrants frequently come to the United States because of this country's own oppressive policies. Immigrant justice advocates fight for the right of both documented and undocumented people in the United States to have full access to services, health care, education and jobs in this country. The lens of immigrant justice questions the very idea of borders. Decoded video: Where Are You From?

Narrative: The Asian-American Awakening: That Moment When You Realize You're Not White by Connie Zhou

## **Appendix B**

### **2015–2016 Guiding Interview Questions**

#### **Background Questions about Race**

1. How do you identify? (race/sex/etc.)

2. How would you describe your experience with race in schooling growing up? (prompt for elementary/middle school/high school/university)
3. Can you briefly describe your experience in your teacher preparation program in relation to your encounters with race/racism/racialization?
4. Why did you choose to become an educator?
5. In general, what have you found most satisfying about your work as a teacher of Color?
6. In general, what did/do you find least satisfying about your work as a teacher of Color?

### **Conceptualization Questions**

7. Is there anything that you feel is distinctly unique about being an educator of Color committed to social/racial justice?
8. In what ways do you feel that you enact social justice in your practice? How does it show up/manifest through your work?

### **Pedagogical Questions**

9. In general, what are some of the challenges you currently face or have faced as a teacher of Color?
10. What are your goals for you students? Why is \_\_\_\_\_ important to you?
11. How does your racial identity impact your pedagogy?

### **Study Group Questions**

12. Tell me the story of what motivated you to participate in this study group initially?
13. What do you feel you gain from participating in this study group? How do you benefit? Do your students benefit? How?
14. What do you feel is the most valuable aspect of having a teacher of Color exclusive space?
15. How would you describe the differences between our H.E.L.L.A. professional development space and others that you have participated in?
16. The acronym for our group stands for Healing, Empowerment, Love, Liberation and Action, have any of these aspects resonated with you more in terms of your experience participating in this group? How?

## **Appendix C**

### **2016–2017 Guiding Interview Questions**

1. Our group requested that we extend H.E.L.L.A. now into a 3rd year, why do you want to continue our work together?

2. How would you describe the way we work/learn in our meetings? From your vantage point, what is it like to be a H.E.L.L.A. participant/learner every month?
3. Freire defines praxis as reflection & action toward the struggle for liberation. How does H.E.L.L.A. help you think about your own praxis? How has it helped you think about social justice pedagogy?
4. What were some challenges we had this year in H.E.L.L.A.? What is something that you would want to see happen and/or change for next year? How could we make those changes?
5. How would you describe your conversations with folks in our H.E.L.L.A. meetings? Are those conversations any different from how you might converse with your colleagues at school? Your friends/family?
6. Over the course of the past two years, do you think your perspectives and/or teaching has shifted at all while being in H.E.L.L.A.? In what ways? What is it about H.E.L.L.A. that has contributed to those shifts?
7. When you think about the H.E.L.L.A. tenet, Action, how would you describe ways that you've taken action in and/or out of the classroom?
8. In what ways do you feel that you enact any of the other H.E.L.L.A. tenets/practices/activities into your practice? Into your personal life?
9. Can you describe a memorable experience/moment you've had in our H.E.L.L.A. space? Why was it important/valuable?
10. What are some things that you've experienced particularly as an educator of Color that led to feelings of burnout?
11. Have you ever thought about leaving the classroom? If so, what has helped to sustain you?
12. There have been times when our group members have mentioned how hard it can be to come to our meetings sometimes, do you think our meetings might also potentially contribute to feelings of burnout? Why/why not?

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