**How a Black Female School Leader Navigates Structural Constraints to Foster Black Female Students' Agency in an Alabama Black Belt Public School**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Auburn, Alabama
December 9, 2023

Key words: Intersectionality theory, Black female school leader, historically marginalized student agency, Alabama Black Belt region, emancipatory pedagogy, systemic oppression



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## Abstract

Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1990) intersectionality theory as the theoretical framework, this intersectional narrative study focused on how a Black, female school leader in an Alabama Black Belt public school navigated structural constraints to foster Black female student agency (Berry & Cook, 2018; Crenshaw, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Vaughn, 2021). This study aimed to understand the strategies used by these leaders to empower their Black female students amidst navigating systemic challenges, such as limited resources, gender inequalities, poverty, unequal educational opportunities, and implicit biases.

Relying on various rounds of interviews, observations and open reflective surveys, the participant's story was co-constructed by the researcher and the participant via use of Nasheeda et al.'s (2019) restorying framework. The participant's story revealed how she relied on her own "colorful" personal experiences as a Black girl and woman to inform how she navigates structural constraints to foster Black, female student agency and revealed her impact on people beyond exclusivity to her Black, female students. Some noted practices in her story included the following: culturally responsive social emotional learning, emancipatory pedagogical principles, grant writing and being "the Mama"- a term she used to describe her advocacy role when it comes to her interaction with her students and her colleagues.



*Keywords*: Intersectionality theory, Black, female school leader, historically marginalized student agency, Alabama Black Belt region, emancipatory pedagogy, systemic oppression

# Acknowledgments

I am first and foremost grateful to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for carrying me all the way and granting me the strength, resilience, courage, and tenacity to finish this journey. Without His power at work in me and my life, I simply just could not have done any of this. I also acknowledge Shirley, the participant for this study. Shirley, I could never thank you enough for your willingness to participate and to go above and beyond to so powerfully, transparently and beautifully share your story. You have truly changed my life forever.

To the queen of my heart, my mother Teresa, I thank you for always encouraging me and helping me to believe the impossible even when it often seemed beyond my reach. The seeds of resilience, love and faith in God that you planted in me truly blossomed during my time of completing this project, and they are what kept me going when I wanted to give up. I love you, and I will forever cherish your memory in my heart. To my daughter Otilya, your birth and life is truly a gift from God. I love you so much my sweet girl. I also honor my husband Dion, my dad Michael, my grandmother Donna, my sister Janica, my brother Michael, my godmother Ms. Kay and all of my family and friends. Thank you all for always being everything I need you to be. Without your prayers, encouragement, and support, I could not have made it to this moment. I am so blessed to have you all, and I love you all so much.

I also wish to acknowledge my dissertation chair, Dr. Lisa Kensler and my committee members Dr. Hannah Baggett, Dr. Amy Serafini and Dr. Jason Bryant. Your support and encouragement throughout this journey have truly made all the difference in my success at Auburn. I could not have made it without the knowledge and skills you have given me.

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# CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Birthed from the time of the industrial revolution as a dominantly, positivistic panacea for establishing order, peace and equity in a progressively populated country, bureaucracy still pervades every entity of our society (Bennis, 1970; Blau, 1956; Hummel, 1994; Monteiro & Adler, 2022). Yet, many scholars in the literature revealed how this pervasion has seemingly cost more than the United States could afford, as it has often inevitably sought to establish structural constraints (such as compliance, standardization and uniformity) at the cost of inhibiting public school learning experiences (culture, climate, curriculum, pedagogy, teacher training and policy) that empowered student agency — a critical skill needed to establish long-term academic and social achievement (Apple, 2008 ; Bjork, 1977; Freire, 1970; Fuller, 1956; Hummel, 1994; Katz, 1971; Mitra, 2004; Reyes, 2009; Tyack & Cuban, 1997; Vaughn, 2020).

Alabama's Black Belt region, a region reported to host several predominantly historically marginalized public school student groups, was far from an exception to this structural domination (ALSDE.org; Chestnut & Cass, 1990; Clay, Escott & Stuart, 1989; Katsinas et al., 2023; Mann & Rogers, 2021). The literature reported how many U.S. public school learning experiences were often dictated by bureaucratic school policies and standards that minimized their opportunity to intentionally privilege students' agency — "ability to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints" (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Freire, 1978; Kozol, 2005; Kundu, 2020; Morenzoni, 2018; Ritch et al., 2016; Valenzuela, 1999; Vaughn, 2021). This bureaucracy was one that inherently monopolized the degree to which student agency functioned to emancipate and to nurture the learning experiences of all students, no matter their backgrounds or identities, by focusing on transactional, uniform standards for knowledge rather than embracing a standard that was inclusive of all identities and epistemologies (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Freire, 1978;

Kozol, 2005; Kundu, 2020; Morenzoni, 2018; Ritch et al., 2016; Valenzuela, 1999; Vaughn, 2021). This monopolization directly relates to how bureaucracy reinforces and perpetuates systematic oppression within our public school system (Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021) Specifically in the Alabama Black Belt region, where students are disproportionately targeted with poverty, racial bias, violence, environmental injustices, drug and alcohol abuse and inadequate access to health care services, public schools often do not practically consider the systematic plights faced by their predominantly Black, low-income student groups. Though Title One funding is provided to give extra support to low-income schools, these funds are often not properly allotted to provide intentional and responsive space in the school to disrupt the generational cycles of oppression faced by their students. Instead, these Title One funds often function to maintain schooling as is to ensure Title One schools can "compete" with the non-Title One schools, which ultimately disregards the underlying systemic barriers faced by the Black students in Title One schools (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2020).

Consequently, not giving space for historically marginalized students' experiential knowledge and backgrounds often limited educators' efforts to understand what was genuinely and uniquely needed to support students from historically marginalized backgrounds, such as those in the Alabama Black Belt region (Collins, 1990; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Hughes, 2002; Kendell, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). In addition, Freire (1970) and Kundu (2020) revealed how robbing these students of genuine opportunities to practice agency and positioning them as transactional subjects with no genuine opportunity to contribute to the learning experience also pushed these students to places of resistance and performativity against the mandated standards for achievement, thereby yielding prevalent "failing school labels" that did

not reflect the actual talent, intelligence, and resilience of historically marginalized students (ALSDE.org; Apple, 2008; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Freire, 1970; Kundu, 2020; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999; Vaughn, 2020).

Nevertheless, DeMatthews (2015) revealed how school leaders played a significant role in strategically fostering student agency that addressed the oppression of historically marginalized students (DeMatthews, 2015). School leaders possessed a hierarchical advantage in fostering a school environment that strategically resisted the effects of systemic oppression on historically marginalized student groups by using a transformative, transformational, and social justice lens to set the tone for culture, climate, discipline, curriculum, and instruction (DeMatthews, 2015). According to Collins (1990), Evans-Winters (2020) and several other scholars, many Black female school leaders who reported experiences with a matrix of dominations (racism, classism, sexism, sexual orientation discrimination, and many others) based on a combination of their social and political identities often found those lenses (transformative, transformational, and social justice) to be innately embedded into their ontologies and epistemologies (Burton & Weiner, 2020; Collins, 1990; DeMatthews, 2015; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Haynes et al., 2020; Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2013; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Rosser-Mims, 2010).

Consequently, this uniquely shared struggle (with overcoming structural constraints to be agentic) between two historically marginalized groups — Black female school leaders and Black female students — prompted my idea to conduct an intersectional narrative study that explored how a Black female school leader navigated structural constraints to foster student agency in the Alabama Black Belt region — a region that hosts large numbers of historically marginalized groups and contains rich historical accounts that speak to the foundations of systemic oppression

faced by Black people populations. Using Kundu's (2020) definition of student agency — "the potential to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in a deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints" —I implemented this study through the complementary lens of Kimberlé Crenshaw's (2013) theory of intersectionality.

Haynes et al. (2020) reported intersectionality to be a Black feminist epistemological framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities (i.e., gender, caste, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, and height) compound to create various modes of discrimination and privilege throughout many public institutions, including public education (Haynes et al., 2020). Esposito and Evans-Winters' (2022) literature on intersectional narrative research methodology richly guided how I designed and conducted a series of semi-structured interviews, structured observations, and open-ended surveys to capture a glimpsed understanding of how a Black female school leader navigated structural constraints to foster Black female student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school. Through this study, I sought to pursue discourse around the context of supporting Black female students' agency from a historically marginalized perspective. Lorde's (1979) statement at a feminist conference mirrored the sentiments of this study: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never allow us to bring about genuine change." Thus, instead of relying on bureaucratic system tools to stringently foster student agency in our public schools, this study sought solutions around this system to evoke change through privileging a perspective "outside" of those governing the "bureaucratic house" — a Black female school leader's perspective.

## Problem Statement

Cordova & Reynolds (2020) and Kundu (2020) revealed how the bureaucratic demands of state and federal mandates for standardization and uniformity made fostering student agency ("the potential to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in a deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints") in many U.S. public schools a complicated effort for everyone, including the school leaders, teachers, and students (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Hummel, 1994; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020; Williams et al., 2019). Moreover, Crenshaw (1989), Vaughn (2020), and Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) reported how this complication could be worse for historically marginalized groups, as they already face a matrix of systemic oppressions that are generationally associated with their political and social identities (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Restani, 2021; Vaughn, 2020). Consequently, Black female school leaders and historically marginalized student groups often reported structural constraints that presented unique challenges to their agency — "ability to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in a deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints" (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Collins, 1990; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Crenshaw, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). Specifically, Esposito & Evans-Winters (2022) revealed that the Black female school leader experienced interlocking systems of oppression that ultimately shaped "how she engaged in her environment, how she thought about her environment and her choices, and how she constructed her realities in ways that served to make a way out of no way" (p.50). This interlocking system of oppression entailed societal undervaluing of her knowledge, beauty, race, gender, income, and sexuality (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 2017; Kundu, 2020; Smith, 2012; White, 1999) and presented structural challenges to her preserving who she was and what she believed so that she could authentically thrive

(Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 2017; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Smith, 2012; White, 1999).

Likewise, historically marginalized students, such as those in the Alabama Black Belt region, reported structural constraints that often kept them bound in perpetuating generational cycles of oppression, passivity, poverty, and violence (Cordova & Reynolds, 2022; Kundu, 2020; Morenzoni, 2018; York & Kirshner, 2015). This uniquely shared struggle (with overcoming structural constraints to be agentic) between Black women and historically marginalized students prompted the literature search around how interlocking systems of oppression (viewed through an intersectionality theoretical lens) shaped how a Black female school leader navigated structural constraints to foster student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.50). Upon surveying the literature, relevant information was gathered around the following overarching sections for my literature review: definition of study agency, fostering student agency in U.S. Public Schools, and K-12 Public School Education in the Alabama Black Belt Region.

**Student Agency Defined**

Vaughn (2020) revealed that the meaning of student agency, like many conceptual terms, was often subjective to the cultures, identities, and backgrounds of the people it applied to. Vaughn's (2020) systemic literature review of student agency confirmed the present ambiguity around the term while simultaneously capturing three overarching themes that most sources of literature seemed to acknowledge when defining student agency: as multidimensional, as a navigational tool, and as advocacy. In the case of this study, I used literature surrounding the meaning of student agency that addressed all three guiding themes, and that was most intimately related to the challenges faced by historically marginalized students in Alabama Black Belt

public schools. Sociologist Anindyu Kundu's (2020) definition of student agency doubly sufficed my choice — "ability to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in a deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints" (Kundu, 2020, p.23). By acknowledging structural constraints, this definition acknowledged the bureaucratic plights faced by historically marginalized student groups to rise above generational cycles of poverty, violence, and oppression to effect change in their personal lives and communities.

**Importance of Student Agency**

Student agency has served a foundational role in every student's short-term and long-term success and in society (Anderson, 2019; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). It (student agency) was what educator Paulo Freire (1970) noted to be exceptionally fundamental to liberating and empowering the learning experiences for historically marginalized students, as this skill helped rescue historically marginalized students from the "banking model of education" that often positioned them as passive, empty, inexperienced vessels needing knowledge. Thus, Kundu (2020), Safir & Dugan (2021), Vaughn (2020) and other scholars argued how fostering student agency was a necessary step toward challenging the generational cycles of oppression, poverty, and passivity that historically marginalized students often disproportionately faced (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Davis-Kean, 2005; Doob, 2019; Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Freire, 1978; Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Santiago et al., 2011; Vaughn, 2020).

When intentionally fostered throughout the school culture, student agency sparked short-term benefits, such as increased student motivation, enhanced student satisfaction in their learning, increased student leadership and academic success, and inspired greater social justice awareness throughout the school and its surrounding community (Anderson, 2019; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kinloch, 2018; Kundu, 2020; Lin-Siegler et al., 2016; Restani, 2021; Vaughn, 2020). In

addition, research revealed how these short-term benefits of fostering student agency could potentially pave the way for long-term benefits, such as increasing the likelihood that students pursue career fields that could support the future standing of our society as a whole (politically, ecologically, economically, morally) by creating solutions that addressed the current ongoing world crises against climate change, food insecurity, global public health concerns, social and gender injustices and a declining public education system (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Mitra, 2018; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Stewart et al., 2022; Vaughn, 2020).

**Effects of Structural Constraints on Fostering Student Agency**

Hummel (1994) revealed how the role of bureaucracy in education was not discrete. It has served many pros and cons to any institution (Bjork, 1977; Ellison, 1995; Fuller, 1956; Hummel, 1994). Birthed from the time of the industrial revolution as a one-way scientific panacea for establishing order, peace, and equity in a progressively populated country, bureaucracy still pervades every entity of our society (Beniger, 2009; Fukuyama, 2014; Hummel, 1994; Mokyr, 2008). This pervasion has seemingly cost more than the United States could afford, as it has often inevitably sought to establish structural constraints such as compliance, standardization, and uniformity at the cost of inhibiting public school learning experiences (curriculum, pedagogy, teacher training, and policy) that empower student agency — a critical skill needed to establish long-term academic and social achievement (Apple, 2008; Bjork, 1977; Freire, 1970; Fuller, 1956; Katz, 1971; Mitra, 2004; Reyes, 2009; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Vaughn, 2020).

This sacrificial cost of public school learning experiences has significantly affected historically marginalized student populations, as the literature revealed how many of these students often attend public schools where the hierarchical demand to meet standardized criteria

(i.e., standardized test scores, attendance, uniforms, annual state report card performance, etcetera.) took precedence over agentic learning opportunities (i.e., critical thinking, individuality, creativity, voice, choice, and passion) (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Freire, 1978; Kozol, 2005; Kundu, 2020; Ritch et al., 2016; Vaughn, 2021). The consequence of such standardization yielded public school learning experiences focused on maintaining limited forms of knowledge rather than embracing a standard of knowledge that was inclusive of all identities and epistemologies, thereby robbing these students of genuine opportunities to practice their agency in ways that spoke to their current realities and experiences (Collins, 1990; Freire, 1970; Hummel, 1994; Kundu, 2020; Reyes, 2009; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999). In addition, other researchers revealed that limiting student agency exacerbated "achievement gaps" and school injustices that disproportionately affected historically marginalized student groups and often provoked these student groups to become resistant to schooling (i.e., negative behavioral responses, such as fights, dropouts, and skipping class) and to not genuinely engage with the curriculum (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Finelli et al., 2018; Freire, 1978; Kozol, 2005; Kundu, 2020; Rios, 2012; Ritch et al., 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2013; Vaughn, 2020).

**Stakeholders' Roles in Fostering Student Agency**

Kundu (2020) and Vaughn (2020) revealed that the task of fostering student agency for historically marginalized students amidst structural constraints is a collaborative effort that requires support from all stakeholders, including the students, teachers, school leaders, and the community (Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2021). Maureen O'Rourke and Penny Addison (2017) revealed that fostering student agency starts by primarily giving attention to the following: attending to student beliefs and how they see themselves as learners, attending to students' interests and backgrounds, stories, and needs, considering the richness of students' social and

cultural contexts and experiences; and creating opportunities and possibilities for student agency in local and global contexts (p.4).

Similarly, Vaughn (2020) advocated for these fundamental facets of fostering agency but also went a step further by highlighting how the school culture must transform to create space for stakeholders to give attention to those contexts of fostering student agency. Specifically, Vaughn (2021) advocated for this transformation through collaboration among three main stakeholders: the classroom teacher, the student, and the principal centered on core beliefs, behaviors, interactions, and connections (Green, 2017; Vaughn, 2021).

**Instructional Practices that Foster Student Agency**

Cordova & Reynolds (2020), Safir & Dugan (2021) and Vaughn (2020) supported various instructional practices for fostering student agency that involved the collaborative effort of the teachers, students, and school leaders. Some of these instructional practices included the following: voicing, integration of the arts, project-based learning, multimodal learning/designing, and youth participatory action research (Caldwell & Vaughan, 2011; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). Voicing entailed classroom activities that allowed students to share their voices (Vaughn, 2021). Integration of the arts entailed engaging students in activities that allowed them to express themselves creatively in a wide range of practices, such as literature, music, drawing, sculpture, theater, painting, and dancing (Caldwell & Vaughan, 2011; Rupert, 2006). Project-based learning (PBL) was an instructional practice through which students learned by engaging in complex, personally meaningful projects that resulted in a final product (Barron & Darron-Hammond, 2008). Multimodal designing created spaces for students to take the lead in their learning by engaging with materials and technologies to create a variety of artifacts about their inquiries and interests (Vaughn, 2020). Rooted in critical pedagogy and

praxis, youth participatory action research (YPAR) empowered students to function as co-researchers in meaningful systemic research projects that enabled them to analyze oppressive issues in their schools and communities and to develop solutions to address them (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2017; Chou et al., 2015; Mirra et al., 2015).

## School Leadership that Fosters Student Agency

Among the various leadership styles noted in the literature to be most effective for fostering student agency for historically marginalized student groups with an intersectionality theoretical framework, two stood out: transformational leadership and transformative leadership. While the literature revealed that these two forms of leadership were not antithetical to each other, they did differ in their end goals (Hewitt et al., 2014). Specifically, Hewitt et al. (2014) noted, "Transformational leaders make schools as they are better, whereas transformative leaders focus on schools as they might be." (p.4). Consequently, I used the guiding principles for both leadership styles to inform this study's interview questions and observation lenses.

## K-12 Public School Education in the Alabama Black Belt Region

Situated on rich soils that bury historical roots of slavery and generational cycles of poverty and oppression, Alabama Black Belt public schools currently span eighteen counties: Sumter, Greene, Choctaw, Hale, Marengo, Perry, Pickens, Dallas, Wilcox, Lowndes, Butler, Crenshaw, Montgomery, Pike, Bullock, Macon, Barbour, and Russell (Anderson, 2010; Chestnut & Cass, 1990; Clay et al., 1989; Katsinas et al., 2023; Mann & Rogers, 2021; Wimberly & Libby, 1997). Along with its primarily rural geography also has come economic underdevelopment (resulting in high unemployment), slow population growth, and generational cycles of poverty that often have caused many outsiders to only associate it with severe challenges and low-performing schools (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Katsinas et al., 2023).

Moreover, the literature revealed how this region hosted several "failing," predominantly historically marginalized public schools as determined by the annual State Department of Education report card (ALSDE.org; Crain, 2018; Palacios-Barrios & Hanson, 2019). Edweek.org also revealed how this region hosted a high percentage of teacher shortages, which has ultimately caused the State Department of Education to relax teacher certification rules to recruit more teachers to the classrooms. Amidst this teacher shortage were other reports regarding the targeted foci for school leadership preparation and professional development in Alabama: strategic leadership, instructional leadership, climate and culture leadership, ethical leadership, organizational leadership, and community engagement leadership (ALSDE.org). Along with the traditional teaching and leading expectations that come with schooling, Vanderhaar et al. (2003) also reported an overwhelming pressure on educators and school leaders to take on jobs outside of their expertise in order to compensate for the lack of extraneous support needed for their students to succeed, such as counselors, parents, behavior specialists, and security guards. In other words, public schools in the Alabama Black Belt region required different knowledge and skills, as the challenges faced in these schools varied from those of more affluent schools (Vanderhaar et al., 2003).

## Purpose

This intersectional narrative study aimed to understand how a Black female school leader navigates structural constraints to foster Black female student agency at an Alabama Black Belt public school. The literature reported how many Black female school leaders may be inherently in touch with the daily oppressions historically marginalized students face, as they (Black women) have often been positioned by society as inferior in knowledge, beauty, race, gender, income, and sexuality and not freely granted agency ("ability to better one's opportunities and

life changes that manifest in deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints") (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 2017; Kundu, 2020; Smith, 2012; White, 1999). Thus, the road to success in the United States for the Black woman has been paved with structural challenges to preserve who she is and what she believes so that she may navigate and rise above the world of oppression around her (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, 2005; Collins,1990; Crenshaw, 2017; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Smith, 2012; White, 1999). Consequently, the Black woman's experiences fostering student agency amidst structural constraints provided unique first-hand accounts that would intimately inform how to support Black female students' agency in K-12 public schools in the Alabama Black Belt region.

To answer the research questions of this study, interviews, observations, and open-ended surveys with one Black female K-12 school principal in the Alabama Black Belt region were conducted. The interviews consisted mainly of open-ended questions, which allowed me to facilitate true individuality in the participant's responses to each question. The input from the participant provided the meaning to understanding a Black female leader's experience around supporting students' agency in relation to how "interlocking systems of oppression shaped how she engaged in the (school) environment, how she thought about her (school) environment and her choices, and how she constructed her realities in ways that served to make a way out of no way" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.23).

## Research Questions

The research question for this study was the following:

1. How does a Black female school leader navigate structural constraints to foster Black female student agency in an Alabama Black Belt Public School?

The subquestions were the following:

a) How does a Black female school leader in an Alabama Black Belt region public school demonstrate agency?

b) How does a Black Female School Leader engage in her environment?

c) How does a Black Female School Leader think about her environment?

d) How does a Black Female School Leader construct her realities in ways that serve to make a way out of no way?

**Research Design**

The qualitative research approach for this study entailed pairing narrative inquiry methodology with an intersectionality lens. Esposito and Evans-Winters' (2022) literature on intersectional narrative research methodology richly guided how I designed and conducted a series of semi-structured interviews, structured observations and administered an open-ended survey to understand how one Black female school leader navigates structural constraints to foster Black female student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school. Primarily facilitated through several in-depth interviews with a small sample of participants, narrative inquiry supported the idea that "viewed social identities themselves as narratives and believes that people construct identities through storytelling, for it is through stories that people come to understand who they are and how they are positioned in the world" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.68; Nasheeda et al., 2019; Riessman, 2008; Toliver, 2022).

Moreover, historically rooted in the work of civil rights scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality was reported to be a Black feminist standpoint epistemological framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities (i.e., gender, caste, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, and height) compound to create various modes of discrimination and privilege throughout many

public institutions, including public education (Haynes et al., 2020). When paired with an intersectional perspective, an intersectional narrative inquiry study warranted the researcher to do the following:

1) Privilege individual stories of those historically marginalized as central to the processes and products of the research;

2) Promote shared understanding between researchers and participants of the participants' stories;

3) Connect understandings of lived experiences to discussions of race, gender, class, and sexuality as part of a larger political and epistemological struggle for a better and just future;

4) Go beyond scientific and empiricist standards, depending on the authentic voices of participants to generate confidence in research findings (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.82).

Thus, intersectional narrative research was an appropriate research approach for conducting this study because it allowed me to privilege data collection methods (interviews & observations) that centered the worldviews and experiences of a participant who was multiply impacted by marginalized identities – Black, female, school leader. Ultimately, this decision facilitated my understanding of the matrices of oppressions faced by Black women in order that I (the researcher) might create a more authentic narrating space for the knowledge and experiences of Black female participants to be more genuinely seen, heard and privileged as credible and trustworthy sources of truth to the world's understanding of what it takes to navigate inevitable structural constraints to foster student agency (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

**Theoretical Framework**

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is a Black feminist epistemological framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities (i.e.,

gender, caste, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, and height) compound to create various modes of discrimination (Haynes et al., 2020). Several scholars reported how often, more than any other marginalized group, the Black woman experienced a matrix of dominations (racism, classism, sexism, sexual orientation discrimination, and many others) that uniquely privileged her with experiential knowledge of what it meant to be multipliably oppressed based on a combination of her political and social identities similar to the layers of oppressions experienced by historically marginalized students (Collins, 1990; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Haynes et al., 2020).

Crenshaw and Grzanka (2014) noted, "Intersectionality imagines alternative ways of knowing and doing in the interest of forging efficacious tools for social justice" (p.40). Thus, intersectionality provided me (the researcher) with a theoretical lens to expose and penetrate the matrices of oppressions faced by Black women (and other historically marginalized groups) in order that I (the researcher) might create a more authentic narrating space for the knowledge and experiences of the Black female participant to be more genuinely seen, heard and privileged as a credible and trustworthy source of truth to the world's understanding of what it takes to navigate structural constraints to foster student agency (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

## Assumptions

"Intersectionality frames critical qualitative research pursuits in the following ways and with the following assumptions" (Esposito & Evans-Winter, 2022, p.25):

- **Personal and cultural beliefs**. How we come to believe in the legitimacy and value of science and the scientific method is informed by our personal and cultural beliefs and education and schooling.

- **Emotionality in research pursuits.** We can find pleasure and pain in our research pursuits, especially as researchers from oppressed groups become more conscientious about the relationship between research and power, education, hegemony, and culture and domination.
- **Collective agency and resistance.** Individuals' and social groups' lived experiences and how they come to make meaning of those experiences represent their agency and resistance strategies.
- **Research represents power and authority.** The historical knowledge and collective wisdom of those multiply situated along the matrix of domination serve as counternarratives to systemic power and/or oppositional knowledge.
- **Epistemological understandings.** An understanding of how multiple social identities, such as race and gender, overlap to shape what people know and how they come to know what they know (p.82).

In order to think intersectionally and use intersectional methodology, Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) suggested that researchers must accept the following:

- Academe or formal education represents only one way of getting to know the social world. Assumptions and theories about social relationships and institutional authority are also born from having to survive under hostile conditions and unequal power relationships.
- We must accept our own lived experience and how it shapes our critical consciousness and approach to the research process.
- We must embrace differences within and across communities to better understand the social world and how our research participants, especially those multiply marginalized, operate within and across communities.

● Research is an opportunity to learn with and from the Other; we challenge the assumption that researchers only have something to give or take from participants.

● We seek a collaborative research experience in which our differences can help us imagine a better world where we all can do more than coexist; we can thrive together (Esposito & Evans-Winters,2022, pp.13-14).

## Delimitations

My study included the following boundaries:

● Only Black female publicschool leaders that are natives of and currently employed at a public school in the Alabama Black Belt region

● One participant

● Five interviews over five weeks

● Two consecutive weeks of structured observations

● Interview questions that focused on an intersectionality theoretical lens

## Significance

Kundu's (2020) empirical work on marginalized student agency affirmed the significance of this study in the following statement, "The true strength of our institutions are and our overall democracy is in the extent to which marginalized individuals and groups are able to transcend the limits of their background" (Kundu, 2020, p.23). Similarly, this study focused on an ongoing, relevant, but often overlooked concern in Alabama Black Belt public schools that entailed navigating structural constraints to foster Black female student agency ("ability to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints") (Kundu, 2020, p.25). These structural constraints disproportionately functioned as a barrier to agentic learning opportunities for historically marginalized student groups, as they

were often more prone to attend public schools that emphasized standardization over exercising agency (i.e., critical thinking, voicing, debating, creativity) (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020). The literature confirmed how this lack of agentic learning opportunities served as a factor in perpetuating generational cycles of poverty, oppression, and passivity for historically marginalized student groups (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Finelli et al., 2018; Freire, 1978; Kozol, 2005; Kundu, 2020; Rios, 2012; Ritch et al., 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2013; Vaughn, 2020).

Cordova & Reynolds (2020) and Vaughn (2020) addressed student agency from many perspectives but contained scarce reporting from a Black female perspective on fostering student agency. This study utilized the intersectionality theoretical framework to create an authentic narrating platform that privileged a Black female leader's lived experiences and stories — a social actor whose knowledge and experiences are often subjugated because of her race, class, gender, and sexuality. "Intersectionality hinges upon the idea that historically marginalized groups have their own ways of knowing, doing and interpreting their social and political circumstance, which have been historically erased from human history and scientific knowledge" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.55). Consequently, the intersectionality framework gave me the lens to most liberally expose and penetrate the matrices of oppressions faced by Black women (and other historically marginalized groups) in order that I might create a more authentic narrating space for the knowledge and experiences of the Black female participant to be more genuinely seen, heard and privileged as a credible and trustworthy source of truth to the world's understanding of what it takes to navigate inevitable structural constraints to foster student agency (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). This framework obligated extensive time in the field to collect data and to collaborate and partner with the research participant throughout every phase of the research process. According to Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022),

"intersectionality as an analytical and methodological tool presupposes that the multiple perspectives of the marginalized and oppressed offer unique and, at times, divergent viewpoints of the social world and thus research experience" (p.4).

## Definition of Terms

**Alabama Black Belt Region** – Mostly rural regions of the state of Alabama spanning twenty-four counties east to west that hosts historical roots of slavery and generational cycles of poverty: Sumter, Greene, Choctaw, Hale, Marengo, Perry, Pickens, Dallas, Wilcox, Lowndes, Butler, Crenshaw, Montgomery, Pike, Bullock, Macon, Barbour, and Russell (Chestnut & Cass, 1990; Clay et al., 1989; Katsinas et al., 2023; Mann & Rogers, 2021; Wimberly & Libby, 1997).

**Bureaucracy** – refers to a complex organization that has multilayered systems and processes that are designed and implemented to maintain uniformity and control within an organization

**Emancipatory Pedagogy** – refers to a process of teaching that aims to free the teacher and the student from the mental restrictions imposed by the mainstream culture on the way they perceive things (Freire, 1970; Gordon, 1985).

**Historically marginalized students** – students who belong to groups who have been relegated to the lower or peripheral edge of society and denied full participation in mainstream cultural, social, political, and economic activities. Some of the marginalized groups can include people of color, women, LGBTQ+, low-income individuals, prisoners, the disabled, senior citizens, and many more. Many of these groups were ignored or misrepresented in traditional historical sources (Oregon.gov).

**Intersectionality** – both a theory and methodology that recognizes that oppression cannot be understood as additive or in terms of a single axis but instead through several compounding markers of identities (race, class, gender, sexuality) along with several other individual and

group identities that are enmeshed within systems of oppression (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

**School Leader** – principal, assistant principal, instructional coach, department chair.

**Structural Constraints** – the various political, economic, social, and cultural factors limiting human agency, i.e., State accountability standards, standardized tests, school rules and policies, limited resources, unequal educational opportunities, implicit biases,

**Student agency –** "ability to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in deliberate efforts to overcome structural constraints" (Kundu, 2020,p.25).

**Title One School** – a school receiving federal funds for large concentrations of low-income students to receive supplemental funds to assist in meeting students' educational goals (Katsinas et al., 2023).

## Organization of the Study

The completion of my study entailed five chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Discussion, and Results. Chapter one provided an overview of everything covered in chapters two, three, four and five. In this chapter, I introduced my intersectional narrative study and gave a synoptic survey of the problem for my study. I also explained the purpose of the study, listed my research questions, provided an overview of my research design, outlined my theoretical framework, explained my study's assumptions, delimitations, explained the significance of my study, provided a definition of key terms addressed throughout my study, and provided a positionality statement for my study. In chapter two, I provided a review of all the literature relevant to my overarching research question (How a Black Female School Leader Navigates Structural Constraints to Foster Black Female Student Agency) and categorized this review by segments of connecting topics. In chapter three, I provided the methodology for my

study, which included the following parts: the aim of the study, participants' discussion, data collection tools explaining interview and observation protocol, procedures outlining recruitment and rapport strategies used, and outlining data collection and data management strategies used, data analysis outlining methods used to make sense of the data, ethical considerations of the study, trustworthiness of the study, and potential research bias. In chapter four, I discussed the data collected from the interviews and observations I conducted with the research participant at the designated research site. In Chapter 5, I outlined the results and implications of the data collected from the study.

# CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

## Introduction

The role of bureaucracy in education has not been a discrete one. It often serves many pros and cons to any institution (Bjork, 1977; Hummel, 1994; Ellison, 1995; Fuller, 1956; Humes, 2022). Birthed from the time of the industrial revolution as a one-way scientific panacea for establishing order, peace, and equity in a progressively populated country, bureaucracy still pervades every entity of our society (Mokyr, 2008; Beniger, 2009; Fukuyama, 2014; Hummel, 1994). This pervasion has seemingly cost more than the United States could afford, as it has often inevitably sought to establish compliance, standardization, and uniformity at the cost of inhibiting public school learning experiences that empower student agency- a critical skill needed to establish long-term academic and social achievement (Apple, 2008; Bjork, 1977; Freire,1970; Fuller, 1956; Katz, 1971; Mitra, 2004; Reyes, 2009; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Vaughn, 2020).

This sacrificial cost of public school learning experiences has significantly affected historically marginalized student populations, as the literature revealed how many of these students often attend public schools where the demand to meet standardized criteria (i.e., standardized test scores, attendance, uniforms, etcetera) took precedence over agentic learning opportunities (i.e., critical thinking, individuality, creativity, voice, choice, and passion) (Freire, 1978; Onosko, 2011; Kozol, 2005; Kundu, 2020; Ritch et al., 2016; Valenzuela, 1999; Vaughn, 2021). The consequence of such standardization often yields public school learning experiences focused on maintaining limited forms of knowledge rather than embracing a standard of knowledge that is inclusive of all identities and epistemologies (Collins, 1990; Freire, 1970; Kundu, 2020; Valenzuela,1999). This focus on limited forms of knowledge often obscured the

rich stories and lived experiences of historically marginalized students and thus limited valuable knowledge about what was genuinely needed to support students from marginalized backgrounds (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Kendall, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Vaughn, 2021). Consequently, this lack of knowledge further marginalized students within public education, as they and their educators often struggled to navigate a way of schooling that does not truly reflect or speak to their current realities and experiences, thereby robbing these students of genuine opportunities to practice their agency (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Freire, 1970; Hummel, 1994; Kendall, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Reyes, 2009; Rice-Boothe, 2023; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Valenzuela, 1999).

Qualitative reports from several public schools revealed that educators experienced hierarchical pressure from state and local leaders to uphold student achievement in the form of test scores in order to maintain positive, good standing on their annual school report cards (Baker & O'neil, 2016; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kozol, 2005; Rice-Boothe, 2023; Ritch et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2019). Consequently, other researchers revealed that this pressure exacerbated achievement gaps and school injustices toward historically marginalized groups (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kozol, 2005; Ritch et al., 2016; Safir & Dugan, 2021). This pressure also oppressed the unique voices and individualities of the students, thereby pushing students to become resistant (i.e., negative behavioral responses, such as fights, dropouts, and skipping class) to schooling and to not genuinely engage with the curriculum (Finelli et al., 2018; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Rice-Boothe, 2023; Rios, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2013; Valenzuela, 1999; Vaughn, 2020).

Nevertheless, even though supporting student agency in many public school environments was reported to be difficult due to mandated structural constraints (Cordova &

Reynolds, 2020; Hummel, 1993; Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2020; Williams et al., 2019), it was deemed a necessary step toward challenging the generational cycles of oppression that many historically marginalized students often experienced (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Davis-Kean, 2005; Doob, 2019; Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Freire, 1978; Kundu, 2020; Santiago et al., 2011; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2020). The research suggested that fostering students' agency created space for students to exercise their voice and choice to effect change around them (Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). Fostering students' agency also enabled students to tap into their power to lead and inspired them to choose career paths that allowed them to responsively give back to their schools and communities (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kinloch, 2018; Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021).

In his book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire (1970) magnified student agency as an essential skill to transform oppressive structures by engaging students who have been marginalized and dehumanized (Safir & Dugan, 2021). North America's political and institutional positions of power host limited historically marginalized representation. The literature revealed that without adequate representation in positions of power, historically marginalized groups were not given authentic voice and choice in the laws that shaped how their children learn or how the system supports their communities (Apple, 2008; Freire, 1978; Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Thus, fostering the agency of students with historically marginalized backgrounds was about more than meeting the present needs of society; it was also seen as a way to open the door for future historically marginalized representation in places of power to combat the matrix of systemic oppressions their communities face (Apple, 2008; Carter, 2003; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Freire, 1978; Kundu, 2020; Mitra, 2004).

Furthermore, multiple studies revealed that no matter the school demographics, fostering student agency was not a one-person job; it often relied on the collaborative effort of multiple stakeholders (Cook-Sather, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2021). Of those stakeholders, school leaders played a significant role in guiding, supporting, and cultivating this effort through specific, responsive leadership practices (Vaughn, 2020). Thus, this study focused on how a Black female school leader at a public school in the Alabama Black Belt region (one of the most impoverished regions in the southern United States that many associate only with severe challenges and low-performing schools) navigated structural constraints to foster Black, female student agency (Katsinas et al., 2022).

Specifically, the research question considered the following: "How does a Black female school leader navigate structural constraints to foster Black female student agency at a public school in the Alabama Black Belt region?" My interest in this question was more than that of a detached researcher, as I am a marginalized graduate and current educator in the Alabama Black Belt region. In approaching this study, I did so with a critical lens of deeply examining my own practice (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). This literature review includes four major sections. The first section lays out a theoretical framework that will serve as a fundamental lens for the scope of this study. The second section focuses on conceptualizing and defining student agency across the literature, specifically for this study. The third section will present research on fostering student agency through the collaborative work of school leaders, teachers, and students. The fourth section will present research on K-12 Public School Education in Alabama's Black Belt Region.

## Literature Search Strategy

### Documentation of Literature Search Strategy

My literature search strategy entailed using Google Scholar, linked with the Auburn University library databases and Education Research Information Center (ERIC). The key terms I used included the following: bureaucracy, student agency, school leadership, high poverty schools, Title One schools, intersectionality, historically marginalized, systemic injustice, social justice, equity, and Alabama Black Belt schools. The sources I selected for this study aligned with my theoretical framework. My theoretical framework relied on Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality to capture a glimpsed understanding of how Black women and Black female students experience a matrix of systemic oppressions that function to impede their agency (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Kendall, 2020; Toliver, 2022).

## Theoretical Framework

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is a Black feminist epistemological framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities (i.e., gender, caste, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, and height) compound to create various modes of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; Haynes et al., 2020). The literature showed how often the Black woman disproportionately experienced a matrix of dominations (racism, classism, sexism, sexual orientation discrimination, and many others) that uniquely privileged and burdened her with experiential knowledge of what it meant to be multipliably oppressed based on a combination of her political and social identities similar to the layers of oppressions experienced by Black, female students (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Haynes et al., 2020). Specifically, the Black woman is often privileged and burdened to view the world through what Deborah Gray White's (1999) called a triple consciousness, as she can simultaneously see herself through a

Black cultural identity, white supremacy, and patriarchy (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Kendall, 2020; Toliver, 2022). Thus, the Black woman's construction of her reality is heavily influenced by her intersectional marginalization in society. She sees the world from various vantage points, and she functions in a way that allows her to survive and navigate them all (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Kendall, 2020; Toliver, 2022).

Despite the multi-faceted weight of systemic oppression that she faces, the Black woman's knowledge and talents continue to be marginalized, subjugated, and filtered by the bureaucratic and patriarchal systems of the world (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Freire, 1970; Hummel, 1993; Kendall, 2020; Toliver, 2022). A viral video clip revealed an example of this from Black female actress Viola Davis, as she reflected on her struggle of working in a business that knows her value but still does not pay her what she is worth compared to white actors in her line of work. She also noted how she is often offensively called "A Black Meryl Streep," which reinforces how many Black women struggle to value their identity and knowledge apart from allowing white experiences to be a standard for how they (Black women) holistically show up in the world (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Kendall, 2020; Toliver, 2022).

Crenshaw & Grzanka (2014) noted, "Intersectionality imagines alternative ways of knowing and doing in the interest of forging efficacious tools for social justice" (p.40). Thus, intersectionality provided me (the researcher) with a theoretical lens to expose and penetrate the matrices of oppressions faced by Black women in order that I (the researcher) might create a more authentic narrating space for the knowledge and experiences of the Black female participant to be more genuinely seen, heard and privileged as a credible and trustworthy source

of truth to the world's understanding of what it takes to navigate structural constraints to foster student agency (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Kendall, 2020; Toliver, 2022).

The theoretical lens for this study sought to capture the essence of conducting a study that honored the idea that historically marginalized groups (i.e., Black female leaders and Black female students) must be holistically viewed from multi-faceted angles of oppression and identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Vaughn, 2021). Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality created a unique and complex space for a Black female researcher (me) to methodologically consider the layers of identities that a Black female school leader carried as she navigated structural constraints to foster Black female student agency at a predominantly Black Title One school in the Alabama Black Belt region (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Vaughn, 2021).

## Student Agency

### Student Agency Defined Across the Literature

Historically, student agency has been defined in many elusive ways across various educational landscapes (Cook-Sather, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). Nevertheless, when attempting to define student agency, the literature reported that one must consider the context through which this attempt is sought (Vaughn, 2018). Student agency "in general" was not a realistic concept to pursue, and the literature revealed that it was close-minded to attempt to universally address a concept so inherently rooted in a diversity of socially and politically constructed identities (hooks, 1991; Hughes, 2002; Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Throughout the world, student agency took on the traits and cultural values of the location and ways of schooling in place. That is likely why the ambiguity about implementing and achieving student agency still exists throughout the education sector today (Bandura, 2018; Nikolaidis, 2018; Vaugh, 2021).

For instance, several different philosophers and educational researchers defined and described agency differently. The pragmatic philosopher of education, John Dewey, emphasized that choice and intentionality over behaviorism depicted one's agency (Dewey, 1916; Nikolaidis, 2018). Psychologist Vygotsky theorized that individuals exhibited agency through tools and social practices as they cope with and interact within social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). From a social cognitive theory perspective, Bandura argued that agency was associated with an individual's self-efficacy and effort to control their learning experiences (Bandura, 2001, 2018). Bandura defined agency as the human capability to influence one's functioning and the course of events through one's actions (Bandura, 2018; Nikolaidis, 2018).

Bandura also identified four functions through which human agency was exercised: intentionality, temporal extension, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness(Bandura, 2018; Nikolaidis, 2018). The function of intentionality involved forming intentions that included action plans and strategies for realizing them (Bandura, 2018; Nikolaidis, 2018). Temporal extension of agency entailed setting goals and foreseeing likely outcomes of prospective actions to guide and motivate one's efforts. Self-reactiveness involved strategic self-regulation (Bandura, 2018; Nikolaidis, 2018). Self-reflectiveness involved self-examining one's own functioning (i.e., personal efficacy, soundness of thoughts and actions, meaning of one's pursuits, and corrective adjustments) (Bandura, 2018; Nikolaidis, 2018). In addition, Bandura identified three forms of agency through which people exercised their influence: individual, proxy, and collective( Bandura, 2018; Nikolaidis, 2018). Individual agency involved the person using their influence to maximize what they can directly control (Bandura, 2018; Nikolaidis, 2018). Proxy agency involved the person using their influence to influence others with the resources, knowledge, and means to act on their behalf to secure desired outcomes (Bandura, 2018; Nikolaidis, 2018).

Collective agency involved combining their knowledge, skills, and resources with others to shape their future (Bandura, 2018). Other perspectives highlighted how individuals advocate for their agency through challenging institutional norms and sanctioned practices (Mirra & Garcia, 2017; Kundu, 2020) or portrayed agency as a motivational concept that enabled individuals to make choices and decisions (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Furthermore, other scholars declared agency to be rooted in how individuals cultivated the reshaping and constructions of their worlds and identities through dialogue and language (Holland et al., 2001).

Margaret Vaughn's systemic literature review of student agency confirmed the present ambiguity around the term agency while simultaneously capturing three overarching themes that most sources of literature seemed to acknowledge when defining student agency: as multidimensional, as a navigational tool, and/or as advocacy (Vaughn, 2020). First, as a multidimensional concept, student agency was considered multi-faceted and could be associated with many perspectives and orientations (Vaughn, 2020). In her work on developing a multidimensional conceptual model of agency that can be applied to classroom practice and learning, Vaughn (2020) connected a majority of theoretical perspectives of agency across three dimensions: dispositional, motivational, and positional (Vaughn, 2020). The dispositional dimension of the agency referred to the extent to which students can function as entrepreneurial, generative, creative (Tran & Vu, 2018), goal-directed, determined (Bandura, 2001), or resistant (Reyes, 2009). The motivational dimension of agency emphasized students' capacity to manage their actions and ideas and to metacognitively reflect on their abilities (Bandura, 2001). The positional dimension of agency focused on how individuals interacted with the context of school and surrounding social contexts. This interaction employed individuals to exert their influence to

co-create their agency with others within a community of practice, such as peers and teachers, and across various social interactions and contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Furthermore, the second way many sources of literature characterized the meaning of student agency was as a navigational tool (Vaughn, 2020). The literature revealed that agency can function as a navigational tool by which educators functioned in their own agency in order to more mindfully foster their students' agency (Vaughn, 2020; Dyson, 2016; Robertson et al., 2020; Massey & Wall, 2020). This functioning helped educators structure, restructure, and shape agentic spaces within the curriculum and their classrooms (Massey & Wall,2020; Robertson et al., 2020; Vaughn, 2020).

The third way in which many sources of literature characterized the meaning of student agency was as advocacy, which focused on fostering voice and space for marginalized youth and those who work to support agency for and with students in their daily lives (Freire, 1970; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). Specifically, advocacy as agency focused on the ability of marginalized youth to actively recognize issues of power and inequity within educational and social contexts in order to act in a way that enhanced greater individual and community self-determination (Kundu, 2020; Freire, 1970; Valenzuela, 1999). Brazilian educator Paulo Freire supported the advocacy form of student agency. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire problematized traditional pedagogy as the "banking model of education" because it viewed the student (specifically the marginalized student) as an empty robot to be filled with knowledge (1970). In addition, he argued that pedagogy should treat students as co-creators of the knowledge used in their learning experiences and advocated for a liberated voice and space for all students (Vaughn, 2020; Freire, 1970; Kundu, 2020).

**Definition of Student Agency for This Study**

To understand student agency in the context of a predominantly Black Title One school in the Alabama Black Belt region, I relied on the use of critical education sociologist Anindya Kundu's (2020) definition of student agency-"the potential to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in a deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints" (Kundu, 2020,p. 25). In his book, *The Power of Student Agency,* Kundu (2020) privileged the narratives of marginalized individuals situated in Harlem who beat the odds of broken families, homelessness, abuse, and incarceration to become successful (2020). These students' narratives revealed how agency could be harnessed through a combination of social and cultural support that helped these marginalized youth to navigate structural constraints imposed on them by systems of oppression (Kundu, 2020).

Thus, emanating from the idea that students' educational attitudes, goals, and achievements were malleable products of their experiences and social interactions (Freire, 1978; Neal & Neal, 2013), Kundu's definition of agency encompassed several theorists' perspectives surrounding the following themes: context-specific action (Neal & Neal, 2013), goals linked to identity & self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001, 2018), positive resistance (Genovese, 1974; Kelley, 1996) and critical thinking (Freire, 1968/1972; Kundu, 2016; MacLeod, 1987; Giroux, 1983).

In addition, this definition reflected Vaughn's systemic literature review of the three dimensions of agency (multidimensional, navigational tool, and advocacy), and it complemented the intersectionality theory lens for this study. First, the multidimensional part of Kundu's definition was "the potential to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest." This wording was multi-faceted, reflecting dispositional, motivational, and positional dimensions of agency (Vaughn, 2020). It was dispositional because it emphasized the student's self-

understanding and acknowledged purpose within themselves by focusing on the student's "potential" (the student's capacity to intentionally develop in their future) (Vaughn, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Tran & Vu, 2018; Bandura, 2001; Reyes, 2009). It was motivational because it spoke to the student's abilities to "better" their opportunities and life by persistently acting on their beliefs and making choices that lead them to their goals (Bandura, 2001; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). It was positional because it gave room for students to use their social interactions to discern and negotiate "structural constraints" that they experienced within social contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Kundu, 2020; Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2020).

Second, Kundu's definition of student agency aligned with being a navigational tool, as it focused on the student's deliberate effort to enact change in their lives and the lives around them (Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020; Robertson et al., 2020; Massey & Wall,2020). This deliberate effort entailed the students taking steps to appeal to the resources and people needed to achieve their goals (Kundu, 2020; Bandura, 2018; Vaughn, 2020). This deliberate effort was also interpreted by their educators and served as a guide in reshaping their pedagogy and curriculum to better support the student's learning needs (Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020; Freire, 1970). Finally, Kundu's definition embodied advocacy, as it acknowledged the students' needs to overcome structural constraints influenced by their social interactions (Freire, 1970; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). These structural constraints for marginalized students would be the many forms of systemic oppression they face inside and outside the school (Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020; Freire, 1970; Valenzuela, 1999). Understanding how to discern and overcome these constraints was essential to the students following through and deliberately walking out their realized potential (Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020; Freire, 1970; Valenzuela, 1999; Secules et al., 2018). In addition, the advocacy component of Kundu's definition also complemented

Crenshaw's intersectionality theory by acknowledging systemic barriers that historically marginalized students faced while trying to achieve their academic and personal goals ( Crenshaw, 1989; Kundu, 2020).

In contrast, the United States Department of Education Office of Educational Technology (2015) defined student agency as:

> Learners with agency can "intentionally make things happen by [their] actions," and "agency enables people to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times." To build this capacity, learners should be able to make meaningful choices about their learning, and they need practice at doing so effectively. Learners who successfully develop this ability lay the foundation for lifelong, self-directed learning (https://tech.ed.gov/netp/learning/).

Compared to Kundu's definition of agency, the U.S. Department of Education's definition addressed student agency in a more generic and "universal" way (Kundu, 2020). While it lightly touched on the dispositional and motivational facets of Margaret Vaughn's multidimensional student agency model through mentioning of words such as "intentionally" and "making meaningful choices," it lacked attention to the positional facet of Vaughn's agency model and Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1990; Vaughn, 2020).

The positional facet of Vaughn's student agency model and Crenshaw's intersectionality theory took into account the structural constraints of bureaucracy that pervades many predominantly marginalized public school student group experiences in the U.S and that positioned them as inferior and passive in their learning experiences (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Freire, 1970; Kozol, 2005; Kundu, 2020; Ritch et al., 2016; Vaughn, 2020). Thus, by failing to acknowledge the presence of structural constraints, the U.S. Department of Education's

definition did not capture the intersectionality involved in the process of fostering student agency for historically marginalized students, which meant it fell short at supporting and empowering the whole learning experience for historically marginalized students (Kundu, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989). It offered the idea that learners can be agentic IF they get the opportunity to make "meaningful choices" about their learning. However, research showed that public school education does not always intentionally promote learning environments that provide opportunities to be agentic, as many teachers and school leaders report having to navigate "schooling as mandated" to create opportunities for student agency in their schools (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kozol, 2005; Ritch et al., 2016; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). Instead, much of public school education limited those opportunities through strict policy mandates and accountability reform efforts (such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that restricted teachers' capacity to focus on non-tested curricula and forced them to emphasize a teacher-centered approach rather than a student-centered approach to learning (Au, 2007; Botzakis et al., 2014; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021).

## Fostering Student Agency in U.S. Public Schools

### *Importance of Fostering Student Agency*

Student agency serves a foundational role in every student's short-term and long-term success, as well as in society as a whole (Anderson et al., 2019; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). It (student agency) was what educator Paulo Freire noted to be especially fundamental to liberating and empowering the learning experience for marginalized students, as this skill rescued students from the "banking model of education" that often positions them as passive, inexperienced vessels needing to be filled with knowledge (1970). For generations, marginalized groups' voices have been subjugated, and after being

ignored for so long many marginalized groups choose to withdraw from the fight and lose hope for their future (Freire, 1970; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Nevertheless, America's future democracy currently depends on the agency that students exercise now to resist the structural constraints placed on them by society (Kundu, 2020; Mirra & Garcia, 2017).

When intentionally fostered throughout the school culture, student agency increased student motivation, enhanced student satisfaction in their learning, increased student leadership and academic success, and inspired greater social justice awareness throughout the school and its surrounding community (Anderson et al., 2019; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kinloch, 2018; Kundu, 2020; Lin-Siegler et al., 2016; Vaughn, 2020). The Balboa High School and Marin Academy project entailed three teachers (one white, one Afro-Cuban, and one Filipino) inviting their students from vastly different worlds to meet, connect and investigate equity in education. Through this project, the students were ultimately inspired to design and lead a community forum with over two hundred people to share their findings and demand structural change at their school board meetings (Safir & Dugan, 2021). From this experience, the teachers witnessed how their students developed a profound sense of urgency by connecting to each other and to something larger than themselves (Bay Window, 1999; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Such a connection affirms Safir's & Dugan's (2021) work, which says that

> Agency does not emerge in a vacuum, nor does it flourish in a traditional classroom where the teacher is positioned as a content expert dishing out knowledge. It emerges in a learning space where power is distributed, knowledge

is democratized, diverse perspectives are welcomed, and children are intellectually and emotionally nourished (p.102).

Additionally, in their literature, Safir & Dugan (2021) provided an agency framework (Figure 1) that listed four significant domains that can lead to agency: identity ("ways of being, learning and knowing the world are valued"); belonging ("being able to see oneself and be seen and loved"); mastery ("ability to build knowledge and demonstrate understanding"); efficacy ("feeling that one can make a difference") (Safir & Dugan, 2021, pp. 102-104).

**Figure 1**

*Safir & Dugan's (2021) Student Agency Framework*


*Note.* A conceptual model of the four domains that help to foster agency. From Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation (p. 101) by S. Safir and J. Dugan, 2021, Corwin Press, Inc. Copyright 2021 by Corwin Press, Inc.

Furthermore, fostering student agency was reported to yield both short-term and long-term benefits for both the students and the future standing of our society (politically, ecologically, economically, morally, etcetera.) (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). Both the literature and a plethora of media sources report a host of ongoing

world crises we are facing, including climate change, food insecurity, and famine, global public health concerns, social and gender injustices, and a declining public education system (i.e., declining literacy rates) (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2022; sdgs.un.org). The literature revealed how fostering student agency in the schools granted students early experience with critically and vocally navigating real-world issues (Davis, 2017; Freire, 1970; Valenzuela, 1999; Mirra & Garcia, 2017; Kundu, 2020). Students could then later use this skill to pursue careers and opportunities to effect change in the world around them as adults (Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). In his address at the National Men's March in South Africa (sahistory.org, 1997), anti-apartheid activist President Nelson Mandela confirmed the long-term benefit of fostering agency in the following quote: "Children are our greatest treasure. They are our future. Those who abuse them tear at the fabric of our society and weaken our nation." Thus, fostering student agency could prepare today's young people to preserve and strengthen our future nation (Freire, 1970; sahistory.org,1997).

The Vermont-based "Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together" (YATST) organization, founded by Helen Beattie and now incorporated into "UP for Learning," was an extensive example noted in the literature that revealed how student agency transformed students' learning experiences at the secondary level (Cook-Sather, 2020). This organization taught secondary students and instructors to collaborate on analyzing and revising educational approaches (Cook-Sather, 2020). Nearly 2,700 young people have assumed active leadership positions in at least one of UP's activities since 2008. In addition, UP has worked with 113 Vermont schools, or 44% of middle schools and 95% of high schools in all 14 counties. It has also assisted 110 instructors in completing a UP graduate course and developed student leaders through 334 programs in 113 Vermont schools (Cook-Sather, 2020).

Examples of action from the YATST-supported student agency included student-led faculty meetings to introduce the 4-Rs framework (rigor, relevance, relationships, and shared responsibility) and to analyze school data; the creation of a mid-semester feedback system that gave all students a chance to provide feedback on classroom instruction; and monthly student-led Principal Roundtables to involve students in educational decisions (examples from http://www.yatst.org/examples/; Beattie, 2012; Beattie et al., 2015; Biddle, 2017; Biddle & Mitra, 2015). These student agency initiatives were illustrations of how elementary and secondary students can impact their personal learning contexts and contribute to their understanding of the larger learning context (Cook-Sather, 2020). Students experienced and developed a sense of agency by offering their perspectives on their learning experiences and having those perspectives taken into consideration (Cook-Sather, 2020).

### *Barriers to Fostering Historically Marginalized Students' Agency in Public Schools: Striving for "Academic Achievement"*

The literature revealed that a significant barrier to fostering marginalized students' agency in public schools was the mandated pursuit of the federal government's definition and standard for academic achievement (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Rice-Boothe, 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2020). According to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a major law for K-12 Public Education in the United States, "academic achievement refers to the percentage of students at a school whose learning currently meets or exceeds their grade-level standards, as measured by statewide tests" (alsde.org). Academic achievement, as defined by the federal government, was reported to be an often esteemed topic and goal for most sectors of K-12 public education in the United States, as it drove accountability and funding for public school systems (alsde.org; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)).

However, with this mandated accountability of standards in place, the literature reported how this left no genuine space for historically marginalized students at public schools to be seen and heard in the context of their struggles with the systemic oppression that permeated and shaped their identity and place in the world (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989; Kendall, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). Much of their schooling experience emphasized standardized testing, learning, and compliance over freedom and agency (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Freire, 1970; Valenzuela, 1999). Such an emphasis resulted in many of them not being prepared to thrive in a world that demanded more than just basic skills, as their standards-based knowledge did not apply to their real work environments and their real-life experiences with systemic oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989; Kendall, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). Consequently, the literature revealed four areas in public schools' pursuit of the federal standard for academic achievement that posed barriers to historically marginalized student agency: curriculum, pedagogy, educator training, and policy (Apple, 2008; Freire, 1970; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020).

**Curriculum.** Under ESSA, each state may establish its own academic requirements and school curricula (everystudentsucceedsact.org). This is the content that each grade's students are supposed to learn. According to ESSA, states must establish "tough" academic standards in reading, math, and science (everystudentsucceedsact.org). This means that a state's curriculum needs to equip young people, including those with cognitive and learning disabilities, for success in both college and the workplace (everystudentsucceedsact.org). According to the Alabama State Department of Education, college and career readiness is defined as follows:

The College and Career Readiness (CCR) rate is determined based on the percentage of students in the four-year cohort who earned at least one credential. These credentials include a

benchmark score on any section of the ACT, a qualifying score on an AP or IB exam, college or postsecondary credit, ACT Work Keys, military enlistment, or Career Technical Credential (2022).

This definition revealed a heavy emphasis on test scores as an indicator of college and career readiness but needs more wording that speaks to the importance of student agency in helping to prepare students for college and career success (Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). The literature revealed how such a standardized, quantitative focus on college and career success often proved to be a snare to emancipating the curriculum for learning opportunities that promote student agency, especially in predominantly Black Title One schools (Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2020). Several accounts in the literature revealed that a fundamental barrier to student agency in the U.S. public school curriculum is the tendency of state governments to enforce standardized, universal expectations for all its schools (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). This standardization often has left little room for valuing the unique stories and lived experiences that marginalized students inherently present to the learning environment (Kendell, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Evans-Winters, & Hines 2020; Collins, 1990; Hughes, 2002), thereby shunning inclusivity of all students' identities and epistemologies (Freire, 1970; Kundu, 2020; Valenzuela,1999; Collins, 1990). Consequently, this lack of inclusivity further marginalized students within public education, as they and their educators struggled to navigate a way of schooling that did not truly reflect or speak to their current realities and experiences with systemic oppression (Valenzuela, 1999; Hummel, 1994; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Kundu, 2020; Freire, 1970; Reyes, 2009).

Student agency was noted in the literature to be a missing piece in the public school curriculum that created space for inclusivity toward all identities and epistemologies (Crenshaw,

1990; Freire, 1970; Hummel, 1994; Kundu, 2020; Reyes, 2009; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Valenzuela, 1999). It was noted how it gave power to students to genuinely act on their learning in ways that embraced their culture and personal interests (Crenshaw, 1990; Freire, 1970; Hummel, 1994; Kundu, 2020; Reyes, 2009; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999).To make strides toward giving room for student agency in the curriculum, state governments must create space for genuine opportunities for teacher and student voices to be heard and considered within the construction and implementation of the curriculum (Apple, 2008), (Crenshaw, 1990; Freire, 1970; Hummel, 1994; Kundu, 2020; Reyes, 2009; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Schubert, 1985; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Valenzuela, 1999).

In addition, by thinking relationally (power, dominance, and subordination) about education, it was reported how state policymakers and researchers could help transform education into the actual political entity it should naturally be (Apple, 2008). For instance, rather than simply asking whether students have mastered a particular subject matter and have done well on the standard test, theorist Apple (2008) said we should consider other important questions, such as the following: "Whose knowledge is this? How did it become official? What is the relationship between this knowledge and who has cultural, social, and economic capital in this society? Who benefits from these definitions of legitimate knowledge, and who does not? What can we do to change existing educational and social inequalities and to create curricula and teaching that are more socially just?" In other words, curriculum experts should be asking questions that will ensure schooling's role in helping to establish a more just society, a society where marginalized people understand how to act on their agency to effect change around them (Apple, 2008; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020).

**Pedagogy.** While the curriculum was reported as what students were expected to learn, pedagogy constituted how students were expected to learn the curriculum (Schubert, 1985). American classroom pedagogies vary extensively, and research has shown that pedagogy can make or break the quality of a student's educational experience (Callingham., 2017; Cordova & Reynolds, 2022). Pedagogies that emphasized student agency as a learning tool to promote student efficacy and input on real-world issues were those that engaged students the most (Callingham, 2017; Cordova & Reynolds, 2022; Kundu, 2020; Shaw et al., 2019; Vaughn, 2020). Yet, although desired by many teachers, student agency was often forcibly neglected due to having to teach with paced timelines and for higher standardized test scores (Cordova & Reynolds, 2022; Kensler & Uline, 2017). This neglect often leads to teachers teaching to the test and textbooks, leaving little to no room for student voice and choice in their education (Callingham, 2017; Hopkins, 2014; Callingham, 2017). As a result, students grew bored and weary of learning this way because it went against their inherent nature to connect and contribute to their learning (Kensler & Uline, 2017; Szelei et al., 2019). This constricted teaching style ultimately led to student resistance manifested in several ways, such as behavior problems, high school dropouts, performativity, and low learning (Shaw et al., 2019; House-Niamke & Sato, 2019).

**Educator training.** The literature noted that educator training is another barrier to student agency in schools (Henry et al., 2014; Jacob & Lefgren, 2004). This barrier specifically brought attention to universities and professional development organizations for their lack of emphasis on fostering student agency in the schools (Henry et al., 2014; Jacob & Lefgren, 2004). Educators (teachers, administrators, counselors, etcetera.) cannot teach what they do not know (Henry et al., 2014). Many training programs have neglected to train educators on how to

incorporate student agency to engage their students (Henry et al., 2014; Jacob & Lefgren, 2004). Many train on how to manage the class, lead their colleagues, and to emphasize standards (Henry et al., 2014; Jacob & Lefgren, 2004; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). However, none extensively report evaluating standards to expose areas where student agency could be better incorporated into the learning experience (Callingham, 2017). In response to this, teachers entered the classroom with a limited perspective on what teaching and learning was (McCarthy,2015; Meissel et al., 2017). Thus, it seemed apparent why many teachers did not make it a practice to include student agency in their classrooms, as they were often uncomfortable doing something they were not trained or encouraged by leadership to do (Henry et al., 2014). They did not see a need for it because it was not a part of the standards or standardized tests, they are actually held accountable to teach (Henry et al., 2014; Safir & Dugan, 2021). The literature revealed that training programs should teach teachers to do this to increase the likelihood of using it in their classrooms (Melo, 2019; Gentrup et al., 2020; Mitra, 2012). In addition, a lack of pedagogically-trained educators (educators not given needed tools to enhance student agency) indirectly correlated with high school dropouts, lack of student engagement, and inadequate preparation for college and careers (Busteed, 2019; Hardin, 2022; Jacob & Lefgren, 2004; Shaw et al., 2019).

**Policy.** With the new passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the literature reported that states were given more freedom and choice to design and implement their curriculum and standards (Klein, 2016). However, even with this freedom and choice, bureaucratic policies (such as standardized testing) still served as a barrier than a bridge to student achievement for many schools, especially Title One schools (Hudson et al., 2019). These policies were based on numbers and grades that determined the labeling of failing and successful

schools, which often demoralized students' perspectives about themselves, their school, and their education (Cordova & Reynolds, 2022; Hudson et al., 2019; Hopkins, 2014; Kensler & Uline, 2017).

Nevertheless, under the ESSA, states were able to also include other indicators for gauging student achievement. For instance, the achievement indicators for the state of Alabama (currently ranked 50th amongst other education systems) included the following: academic achievement, academic growth, graduation rate, progress in English language proficiency, college and career readiness, and chronic absenteeism (ALSDE.org). While these indicators revealed promising areas for increasing student agency in Alabama schools, they lacked resources and strategies to make student agency happen (Vaughn, 2021; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Instead, they emphasized achieving such indicators primarily through increasing standardized test scores and enforcing standardized policies (Hudson et al., 2019). Consequently, these achievement indicators can only happen with a primary emphasis on the agency of the most impacted stakeholders- the students (Baggett & Andrzejewski, 2017; Chou et al., 2015). Thus, the policy's wording played a significant role in transforming perspectives about student achievement through student agency, and it set the foundation for how schools positioned themselves to serve the students (Hudson et al., 2019; Shaw et al., 2019).

According to the literature, much of America's current bureaucratic education system design is not suitable for the success of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds (Apple, 2008; Cordova & Reynolds, 2022; Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). Some researchers have even declared it inequitable and unjust due to its tendency to ignore students' individualities and passively feed them with standardized knowledge (Apple, 2008; Cordova & Reynolds, 2022; Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). Consequently,

bureaucratic policies posed stagnating issues in predominantly Black, Title One schools because they did not connect with students' unique backgrounds and life experiences (Apple, 2008). They did not consider the students or the educators having to facilitate these students' knowledge (Rodriguez, 2012). They labeled students as test scores rather than individuals with unique talents and backgrounds (Apple, 2008). While it was unrealistic to completely demolish the bureaucratic way of doing school due to its feasibility for quantifying a school's progress, researchers surmised that students in predominantly Black, Title One schools need a policy that genuinely considers them and creates room for the voice and decisions to be genuinely heard (Apple, 2008; Bass et al., 2018; Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021).

**Stakeholders' Roles in Fostering Student Agency**

The literature revealed that fostering student agency amidst structural constraints was a collaborative work that required support from all stakeholders, including the students, teachers, school leaders, and the community (Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2021). This task was facilitated through a collaborative effort (comprised of educators, leaders, parents, community members, etcetera.) to support rigorous hands-on instruction (Dewey, 1916) rooted in problematized learning that challenged oppressive powers at play within and outside of the classroom (Freire, 1970). Maureen O'Rourke and Penny Addison (2017) revealed that the collaborative work of fostering student agency started by primarily giving attention to the following:

> attending to student beliefs and how they see themselves as learners, attending to students' interests and backgrounds, stories, and needs; considering the richness of students' social and cultural contexts and experiences; and creating opportunities and possibilities for student agency in local and global contexts (p.4).

Similarly, Vaughn advocated for these fundamental facets of fostering agency. However, she also highlighted how the school culture must create space for stakeholders to give attention to those contexts of fostering student agency. Specifically, Vaughn advocated for this transformation through collaboration among three main stakeholders: the classroom teacher, the student, and the leader, all centered on core beliefs and behaviors and interactions and connections (Green, 2017; Vaughn, 2021).

### *Teacher's role in fostering student agency*

According to Margaret Vaughn's (2021) work on student agency in the classroom, teachers who fostered agency in the classroom were those who uphold the following classroom practices:

> 1) Honor and respect students' knowledge, linguistic abilities, racial identities, and home cultures; 2) Invite students' visions, ideas, and beliefs into all areas of learning; 3) Adopt a flexible and adaptive stance to teaching; 4) Engage in reflective practice, asking what practices are working, for whom and under what circumstances (p.99).

Consequently, for a teacher to grow in implementing these classroom practices, Vaughn suggested a recursive cycle for fostering student agency that entailed five phases: envisioning, devising and revising, reflecting, acting and en(acting), and composing and creating.

**Envisioning.** Envisioning entailed the teachers constructing visions connected to equitable instructional practices and inclusive of developing agentic students who are capable learners (Vaughn, 2021). This phase called for the teacher to attend to students' beliefs and how they saw themselves as learners and to foster their growth in self-knowledge and self-belief through their actions and interactions with others (O'Rourke & Addison, 2017; Vaughn, 2021). Primarily, this envisioning was best achieved through dialoguing with students, creating

opportunities for students to realize the value they presented to their learning, and continually monitoring the strength in learner identity over time (O'Rourke & Addison, 2017; Vaughn, 2021). Some practical examples of teacher vision statements referenced in Vaughn's work (2021) included the following:

> My vision is to prepare students for life after school, whether that be college or entering the workforce-so, to give them skills in the specific area they need and to more generally know how to open up their ideas and figure things out (Secondary technology teacher, female) (p.89).
>
> My vision is that I think they need to learn and understand…. Here's a concept; How does it apply to you in your real life? Can you use that, or where will you use that in the future (6th-grade teacher, male) (p.89)?
>
> My vision is that I want all my kids to be independent, compassionate, and productive members of society(Special education teacher, male) (p.89).
>
> I would say that my goal is to develop well-rounded individuals…who are able to complete something, pull their experiences and knowledge, and be able to be successful… to provide them with the skills so they can use that for whatever they need in their future (3rd grade teacher, female) (p.90).

The above vision statements revealed ideas for creating space for teachers to develop dispositional skills in students (i.e., productive, problem-solving, and independent) while also focusing on visions that helped students to think about life beyond school and inspired real-world applications of their knowledge (Vaughn, 2021).

**Devising and Revising.** The step of devising and revising entailed teachers helping students to plan specific tasks and goals to work toward their visions through focusing on the

strength of students' personal and social resources in the form of their skills and capabilities, their knowledge and understandings and their dispositions and motivations to learn (O'Rourke & Addison, 2017; Vaughn, 2021). Specifically, teachers could facilitate this work through modeling and supporting dialogue and discussion around the students' visions and co-designing ways to strengthen what they bring to the learning experience so that the students might better understand and develop themselves (O'Rourke & Addison, 2017; Vaughn, 2021).

**Reflecting.** Teacher reflection was needed to help construct contexts conducive to student agency (Vaughn, 2021). In addition, teachers should also consider inviting students into the reflecting step by dialoguing with them about reflective questions focusing on their challenges and problem-solving (Vaughn, 2021). This phase supported student thinking and reflection and invited students to realize their goals in light of their interests, backgrounds, stories, and needs (O'Rourke & Addison, 2017; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021).

**Acting and (En)acting.** By envisioning, devising, and reflecting on their overall vision and intentions, students were empowered to act on their intentions and purpose and to pursue their goals (Vaughn, 2021). This particular step in the cycle mobilized students' positioning in the classroom from passive to active in their learning process (Freire, 1970; Vaughn, 2021).

**Composing and Creating.** Upon taking action toward achieving their goals, students engaged in the process of composing and creating, often through tangible means (i.e., an artifact, a product), through dialogue, or their actions and participation. During this phase of the cycle, students chose ways they preferred to exert their agency (i.e., dispositional-vision, purpose, intentions; motivational-perceptions, persistence; positional -interactions and negotiations) (Vaughn, 2021). Specific instructional practices supported this cycle phase, enabling teachers to

share the instructional floor with students and invite them into the curriculum (Vaughn, 2021), such as voicing project-based learning and multimodal designing.

### *Student's role in fostering agency*

The role of students in fostering agency is intricately tied to the teachers and principal at the school, as they have to model and create space for students to be agentic (Vaughn, 2021). Margaret Vaughn (2021) reveals that upon given space, resources, and opportunity to be agentic, students can do the following:

> Develop a vision for what it is they want to accomplish in a subject, school, etcetera. Reflect on their thinking and actions. Engage in collaborative and individual work to support their ideas. Utilize a variety of materials and modes to share and display their learning (Vaughn, 2021, p.101).

### *Leader's role in fostering student agency*

According to Vaughn (2021), in order to foster student agency, leaders "must interrogate their current school climate and the extent to which agency exists or is absent in their school leadership approach (p.101). Consequently, Vaughn (2021) posited that leaders "must reflect on how teachers and students are positioned in the school- from curricular decisions to routines and procedures to school climate" (p.101). Public education research revealed that this positioning often reflected a need for more support for the agency of teachers and students (Vaughn, 2021). However, in order to shift this positioning and ultimately foster agency in their schools, Vaughn (2021) recommended that leaders do the following:

> Provide shared decision-making and leadership. Cultivate teacher agency through involvement in professional learning opportunities. Honor and

> respect students' identities, home lives and backgrounds, and visions for learning by inviting parents, family members, and community members into shared decision-making processes. Facilitate practices support of student agency (p.102).

Thus, amidst all the stakeholders involved in fostering student agency at a school, school leaders played a significant role in guiding, supporting, and cultivating this effort through specific, responsive leadership practices (Vaughn, 2020). They set the tone for shifting the culture and climate to cater to the teachers' and students' agency (Vaughn, 2021).

## Instructional Practices that Foster Student Agency

The literature supported various instructional practices for fostering student agency that involved the effort of the teachers, students, and leaders (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). This section will outline specific practices for fostering Black female student agency in the Alabama Black Belt region public schools. Some of these instructional practices include the following: voicing, integration of the arts, project-based learning, multimodal learning/designing, and youth participatory action research (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020).

### *Voicing*

Voicing entails classroom activities that create space for students to share their voices (Vaughn, 2021). According to research, students who feel like they can speak up in class are seven times more likely to be academically motivated than those who do not (Quaglia & Fox, 2018). A 239-school, 14-state study specifically claimed that students' voices increased the possibility that students would feel self-worth, engagement, and motivation in their learning (Quaglia & Fox, 2018). The more options, power, and freedom educators gave students,

the higher the challenge and chances for teamwork, and the more engaged and motivated they were (Ratcliffe, 2014; Vaughn, 2021).

The Glossary of Education Reform identifies different types of voices that can be supported in various aspects of the classroom: formal, informal, instructional, cultural, and evaluative (Cook-Sather, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021). The formal voice in the classroom was reported as the application of student's voice to organizational systems, leadership, and governing processes and can be achieved by students participating in student councils, writing a letter to their legislator, or joining an advocacy group (Cook-Sather, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021). The informal voice entailed teachers inviting students' ideas and opinions without any obligation to act on the students' ideas and was achieved by students participating in school surveys or sharing their opinions about current events (Cook-Sather, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021). The instructional voice applied to class environments, instructional materials, research topics, or assignment criteria. The instructional voice could also be achieved by enabling students to choose the format to complete an assignment (i.e., video or essay), allowing students to lead literature circles, facilitating argumentation around knowledge creation in science, or determining a class project of interest in the community (Cavagnetto et al., 2020; Daniels, 2002; Vaughn, 2021).

The cultural voice applied to perspectives represented through class materials (texts, web-based, speakers) that reflected the diversity of the student body and the global society ( Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). The cultural voice could be targeted by seeking out work (presentations, blogs, text, poetry, music, etcetera.) created by individuals who reflect the student body and community or facilitating the creation of student-produced zines ( Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). The evaluative voice entailed students giving feedback to effect changes

in future decisions related to school (Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). The evaluative voice could be achieved by giving students perception surveys about the instructional setting and teacher effectiveness to impact school decisions (Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). As a result of being granted a voice in several of these ways, students across the country were highlighted in success stories of using their voice to enact change in their schools and communities (soundout.org; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021).

### *Integration of the Arts*

Integration of the arts entailed engaging students in activities that allowed them to creatively express themselves in a wide range of practices, such as literature, music, drawing, sculpture, theater, painting, and dancing (Caldwell & Vaughan, 2011; Hardin, 2022; Rupert, 2006). Several studies revealed a broad spectrum of academic and social benefits connected to integrating arts, including higher scores on standardized tests, more community service participation, and less reported boredom in school (Hardin, 2022; Ruppert, 2006).

### *Project-Based Learning*

Project-based learning (PBL) was an instructional practice through which students learned by engaging in complex, personally meaningful projects that result in a final product (Barron & Darron-Hammond, 2008). Driven by student questions and inquiry, these projects gave students hands-on opportunities to think critically, problem-solve, collaborate with others, and present their work (Tamim & Grant, 2013; Vaughn, 2021). To change his school district's test prep mentality, Virginia superintendent Dr. Eric Williams supported PBL for 80,000 students in his district (Buck Institute for Education, 2019. This shift caused their students to value learning more and to be better prepared for college and career acclimation after school (Buck Institute for Education, 2019).

Throughout the PBL process, students were supported as they worked to conduct their own investigations, construct answers and voice their opinions throughout their learning (Merritt et al.,2017; Tal et al., 2006; Vaughn, 2021).

Buck Institute for Education provided a comprehensive, research-informed model called the Gold Standard PBL to help schools, teachers, and organizations improve and assess their PBL (2019). This model focused on students' acquiring fundamental knowledge, understanding, and success skills through seven design elements: challenging problem or question, sustained inquiry, authenticity, student voice and choice, reflection, critique and revision, and public product.

A specific case relevant to using PBL in Alabama's Black Belt region was a PBL experience facilitated by Katy Farber and Morgan Moore called "Projects for Hope" at a rural K-8 school. Using the Teaching Tolerance Social Justice standards, the teachers could instill greater student awareness of identity, diversity, justice, and action (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020, p.248; Farber & Moore, 2020; Teaching Tolerance, 2018). The students also reported gaining social skills, responsibility and independence, teamwork and compromising, communication skills, collaboration skills from group work, and leadership skills (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Farber & Moore, 2020.) Through this project, the teachers proved that students could deeply study relevant issues and have a personalized, project-based classroom while meeting the usual standard objectives and curriculum (Farber & Moore, 2020; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020). The planning for this project was facilitated by using a PBL planning template by Kat Farber, Rachel Mark, and Jeanie Phillips (2016) using resources from Edutopia, Buck Institute, and others (2016) (see Appendix A). This planning template involved the following parts: driving questions, demonstration of learning (what will students create), launch/entry event to launch a project,

culminating event/exhibit to present the project, the timeline for completing the project, learning experiences, and artifacts, scaffolds to support students, reflection, assessment, and project evaluation (Farber et al., 2016).

### *Multimodal Learning & Designing*

Multimodal designing was reported to be a practice that created space for students to take the lead in their learning by engaging with materials and technologies to create a variety of artifacts about their personal inquiries and interests (Vaughn, 2020). Teaching, designing, and learning in this way maximized student success amongst a diverse student population with various learning styles (Vaughn, 2020). Modes were considered to be channels of information, including the following: pictures, illustrations, audio, speech, writing and print, music, movement, gestures, facial expressions, colors, etcetera (Cisco Systems, 2008). Thus, multimodal designing was a medium through which students were strategically engaged to actively participate in their learning. Research by Cisco Systems showed how multimodal designing gave way to helping teachers be strategic in actively engaging their students (2008). Teachers could detect the extent to which their students were active in their learning experience in relation to their learning mode. A cone diagram developed and revised by Bruce Hyland from material by Edgar Dale revealed that active learning entailed receiving and participating in discussions and doing through dramatic presentations, authentic experiences, and doing the real thing (2008). Multimodal designing gave students various options for learning and simulated real-world learning situations in which students would have to rely on multiple senses. Teachers can support multimodal learning and design in their classes by using multimodal texts, supporting digital learning opportunities, and offering multimodal assignments and feedback. Some examples of multimodal learning activities that support multimodal design include the

following: educational games, think-pair-share, case-based learning, multimodal journal entries, and multimedia research projects (Jiang et al., 2020; Vaughn, 2020).

### *Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)*

Rooted in critical pedagogy and praxis, YPAR was acknowledged in the literature as a medium to empower students to function as co-researchers in meaningful systemic research projects that enable them to analyze oppressive issues in their schools and communities and to develop solutions to address them (Baggett, & Andrzejewski, 2017; Chou et al., 2015; Mirra et al., 2015; Safir & Dugan, 2021). The overarching tenets of YPAR, as referenced in Cordova & Reynolds' *Educating for Social Justice* (2020), included the following:

> 1. Research is a collective enterprise. 2. Historically silenced voices are privileged. 3. Focusing on problems of local concern centers on the need for action to address sociopolitical challenges, and 4. Rather than being research subjects, youth are the researchers (p.73).

Consequently, YPAR was praised in the literature to be especially powerful for young people who were experiencing marginalization due to racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ableism, or other forms of oppression because this form of research privileged their voice and positioned them to be active experts in their learning rather than the acting in the traditional, transactional, passive role of recipients of knowledge (Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021).

Furthermore, several sources of literature supported YPAR as a productive step toward reforming the school curriculum in a way that realistically catered to the learning needs of marginalized students by privileging their agency in every phase of the research project

(Buttimer, 2018; Cammarata & Fine, 2010; Caraballo et al., 2017; McIntyre, 2000; Warren & Marciano, 2018; Mirra et al., 2015; Ozer & Wright, 2012).

In addition, current research demonstrated positive results for the use of YPAR within several marginalized school settings (Buttimer, 2018; Chou et al., 2015; Haskie-Mendoza et al., 2018; Irizarry, 2009; Johnston-Goodstar, 2013; Mirra et al., 2015; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Warren & Marciano, 2018; Zeal & Terry, 2013). A systemic review that examined 52 studies of PAR programs in the United States discovered positive results across a range of themes, including the following: agency, leadership, education, social competency, critical consciousness, and interpersonal relationships (Anyon et al., 2018). Another systemic review of YPAR discovered that students also showed an increased understanding of social justice issues, socio-emotional and cognitive development, and agency for social change (Shamrova & Cumming, 2017).
In Anderson et al.'s systemic review of YPAR (2019), tensions of YPAR in school-based settings were noted as the following: "power sharing between stakeholders, time constraints, centralized control over policies, and increasing student agency within constrained educational settings" (Anderson et al., 2019; Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018). However, several studies revealed less tension with using YPAR in alternative school settings and community-based settings (Anderson et al., 2019). Within her systemic literature review on YPAR, Anderson et al. (2019) also noted specific components that were thematic regarding YPAR implementation throughout each of the studies: "relationship-building to learn youth researcher interests, capacity building, data collection, analysis, and dissemination of results" (p.249).

**School Leadership that Fosters Student Agency**

When it comes to addressing leadership for student agency, the literature revealed that there has to be intentionality in how we label and describe such leadership in order to ensure that

leaders prioritize student agency amidst the mandated structural reforms that they have to navigate (Cook-Sather, 2020; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). Rice-Boothe, in her work *Leading Within Systems of Inequity in Education* (2023), noted that leading "to change systemic racism in policies, procedures, and systems every day involved the following behaviors: centering students and families, fighting systems with systems and staying true to your values" (p.133). In addition, leading by centering students and families entailed giving room for their voices, providing needed resources, and involving them in the curriculum analysis process (Rice-Boothe, 2023). Leading by fighting systems with systems entailed implementing trauma-informed practices, culturally responsive teaching, and family engagement (Rice-Boothe, 2023). Leading by staying true to their values entailed striving toward behaviors and ideas aligned with their moralistic beliefs.

Nevertheless, as American public schools have realized the scarcity of resources and support for educating marginalized students to exercise genuine student agency, the need for school leaders who are prepared to face the effects of systemic oppression in their schools was realized (Rice-Boothe, 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021). This preparation called for school leaders to advocate for education that supported the rights and education of all students through fostering a culture, climate, and educator development that focused on transformation over the traditional transactional leadership our school systems have experienced (Freire, 1970; Hewitt et al., 2014; Kundu, 2020; Rice-Boothe, 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2020). However, the literature revealed that leadership preparation programs failed to prepare school leaders to lead from a broader and deeper understanding of social justice, democracy, and equity (Marshall & Oliva, 2006). This lack of preparation ultimately gave way to cyclical bureaucratic leadership measures that promoted school cultures of standardization, rules, and procedures that conflicted with the

critical, emancipatory pedagogy needed to culturally engage and affirm marginalized student groups in a way that fostered their agency and empowered them to use their voices and experiences to advocate for social and political change (Crenshaw, 1989; Freire, 1970; Hewitt et al., 2014; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Rice-Boothe, 2023; Vaughn, 2020).

Moreover, among the various leadership styles noted in the literature to be effective for fostering student agency, two stand out: transformational leadership and transformative leadership. While these two forms of leadership are not antithetical to each other, they differ in their end goals (Hewitt et al., 2014).

### *Transformational Leadership*

According to the literature, transformational leaders focused on improving schools as they were. According to Starratt & Leeman (2011), while transformational leadership involved values, it ultimately focused on "transforming organizations from current dysfunctions toward greater efficiency and effectiveness . . . to greater productivity and, therefore, a more competitive edge in a market environment" (p. 132). In other words, transformational leadership entailed enhancing or altering the status quo while ultimately maintaining and replicating it (Brazill & Ruff, 2022; Hewitt et al., 2014; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Transformational leadership involved three dimensions: "setting directions, developing people, and redesigning the organization" (Hewitt et al., 2014, 2014, p.228).

The transformational leadership style focused on efforts to reform and improve schools by making them more effective (Brazill & Ruff, 2022; Leithwood & Sun, 2012), and it hinged on four principles as detected in a study by Bass et al. (2003): inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Northouse, 2019). Inspirational motivation occurred when leaders were motivated by providing followers with

meaningful and challenging tasks that aroused team spirit, enthusiasm, and optimism (Bass et al., 2003; Northouse, 2019). They also helped followers create positive and meaningful visions for the future (Bass et al., 2003; Brazill & Ruff, 2022; Northouse, 2019). Transformational leaders exhibited idealized influence when they became positive, respected role models for followers, prioritized followers' needs above their own, and exhibited behaviors that reflected the values and principles of the group (Bass et al., 2003; Brazill & Ruff, 2022; Northouse, 2019). Intellectual stimulation occurred when leaders stimulated creativity and innovation by encouraging followers to challenge assumptions, rethink situations, and address old problems from unconventional perspectives (Northouse, 2019). Throughout this process, the transformational leader emphasized seeking solutions from followers instead of criticizing their mistakes (Bass et al.,2003; Northouse, 2019). Individualized consideration occurred when leaders fostered individualized personal development of each follower through providing relevant learning opportunities (via coaching, mentorships, etcetera.) with a supportive climate for growth that catered to the individual needs of the followers (Bass et al.,2003; Northouse, 2019).

Transformational leadership was reported to be a preliminary form of leadership style to enact when first arriving at the school, as it could allow leaders to set a practical foundation for fostering student agency. However, the literature revealed how more than this leadership style is needed to sustainably foster student agency for public schools. The literature reported a hierarchical emphasis that pervaded American public school leadership practices and reinforced a stagnating effort for meaningful school improvements that dominated the voices and experiences of everyone connected to the school experience (Jacobson, 2008; Burns, 1978). The literature suggested that in order to position the leader to enact leadership for social justice, this

hierarchical approach must be decentralized, and instead, a more democratic, ecological approach should be adopted, in which all levels of the hierarchy were given liberated space to exercise agency and give input on the decisions that were made for school improvement (Jacobson, 2008; Marshall & Olivia, 2006). Ultimately this transition to a decentralized leadership approach was one that essentially could allow for a transition from transactional leadership (promotes rigid compliance) and transformational leadership (improves schools as they are) to transformative leadership (transforms schools from as they are) (Brazill & Ruff, 2022; Burns, 1978; Hewitt et al., 2014; Odumeru & Ogbonna, 2013).

### *Transformative Leadership*

The literature reported transformative leadership to be an ideal leadership style for enacting the social justice leadership needed to privilege marginalized students, as it supported educators in growing and striving towards implementing democratic pedagogy and allowed flexibility for new ways of addressing the old, cycling generational problems in the school systems (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970; Hewitt et al., 2014). Specifically, this leadership style supported the intersectional lens needed to lead and teach in highly povertized schools in order to more holistically address the barriers affecting students' agency and long-term success in their adult lives (Bass et al.,2003; Crenshaw, 1989; Karakose et al., 2023; Northouse, 2019).

This support was connected to a study by three Black women school leaders practicing transformative leadership in their respective countries, South Africa, England, and the United States (Moorosi et al., 2018). Using intersectionality theory, these leaders presented epistemologies based on their different locational contexts (Crenshaw, 1989; Karakose et al., 2023; Moorosi et al., 2018). Within this work, the leaders mentioned the dearth of literature on

Black women in leadership, which often marginalized Black women's experiences but positioned them to sympathize with their marginalized students (Crenshaw, 1989; Karakose et al., 2023; Moorosi et al., 2018). Their findings revealed how intersectionality supported their personal struggles with oppression as a leader but also enabled them to enact transformative leadership that inspired their students and educators to exhibit leadership that was "inclusive, fair and socially just" (Crenshaw 1989; Karakose et al., 2023; Moorosi et al., 2018; Northouse, 2019). This study spoke to the power of intersectional, transformative leadership in supporting the agency of students and educators in school settings (Crenshaw, 1989; Moorosi et al., 2018; Northouse, 2019).

## K-12 Public School Education in the Alabama Black Belt Region

Situated on rich soils that bury the historical roots of slavery and generational cycles of systemic oppression (racism, classism, poverty, gender bias, etcetera.), Alabama Black Belt public schools span twenty-four counties: Sumter, Greene, Choctaw, Hale, Marengo, Perry, Pickens, Dallas, Wilcox, Lowndes, Butler, Crenshaw, Montgomery, Pike, Bullock, Macon, Barbour, Lamar, Russell, Washington, Clark, Monroe, Conecuh, and Escambia (Anderson, 2010; Chestnut & Cass, 1990; Clay et al., 1989; Katsinas, 2023; Mann & Rogers, 2021; Wimberly & Libby, 1997). In addition, the literature reported that with its primarily rural geography also came economic underdevelopment (resulting in high unemployment), slow population growth, and generational cycles of poverty that have led to the Alabama Black Belt region having a more significant poverty rate than the entire state of Alabama (Anderson, 1988; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Katsinas et al., 2023).

Moreover, the literature revealed that this region hosted several failing-labeled, predominantly Black, Title One schools, which the literature essentially linked to the

prevalence of white flight (the tendency of white people to leave areas due to a rise in historically marginalized populations), which ultimately yielded an increase in poverty and crime that presented systemic barriers to students' education experiences (Anderson, 2010; Katsinas et al., 2023). Consequently, maneuvering bureaucratic school policies amidst bearing the weight of overlapping oppressions (i.e., poverty, racism, classism, sexism, etcetera.) while at school was reported to be a typical, challenging narrative for many of the historically marginalized students in the Alabama Black Belt region (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Katsinas et al., 2023). In addition, educators in the Black Belt revealed that many of their students perceived school as trivial and disconnected from them, which often led to them resisting and performing at the moment to appear to be abiding by the bureaucratic policies placed on them (Cordova & Reynolds, 2022; House-Niamke & Sato, 2019; Hennesy & McNamara, 2013). Such a student perception and reality could indicate why many of such schools in the Blackbelt have "failing" report card grades, which are based on factors such as student achievement and attendance (Crain, 2018; ALSDE. org).

However, it was not that the students were incapable of learning or that teachers were incapable of teaching. However, it was more so that bureaucratic policies often enforced a learning culture that limited opportunities for students to value their culture, express their individuality, be vocally heard, or to critically think in their learning (Apple, 2008; Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Consequently, there was a noted need to eradicate this cycle in public schools, and the literature reported that it often started with granting students the opportunities to be equipped to vocally participate at the same table as those "superior" to them (Freire, 1968; Baggett, & Andrzejewski, 2017).

Moreover, the targeted foci for school leadership preparation and professional development in Alabama include the following: strategic leadership, instructional

leadership, climate and culture leadership, ethical leadership, organizational leadership, and community engagement leadership (ALSDE.org). These standards could be effectively implemented by exercising transformational and transformative leadership styles (Moorosi et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1989; Northouse, 2019; Rice-Boothe, 2023). However, an intersectional lens was warranted for these leadership styles to effectively support the predominantly Black student populations in Alabama's Black Belt Title One School (Moorosi et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1989). Otherwise, the need to promote social justice and freedom in these schools will continue to be overlooked, thereby causing solutions for school improvement to be in vain (ALSDE.org; Moorosi et al., 2018; Crenshaw, 1989; Northouse, 2019).

Despite the school improvement challenges prevalent in Alabama public schools (Vanderhaar et al., 2003), a quality education that provided college and/or career readiness for every student was expected (ALSDE.org). Along with this expectation came an overwhelming pressure on educators and school leaders to take on job descriptions outside of their expertise in order to compensate for the lack of extraneous support needed for their students to succeed, such as counselors, parents, behavior specialists, and security guards (Vanderhaar et al., 2003). In other words, leading an Alabama Black Belt public school required a different set of knowledge and skills, as the challenges faced in these schools vary from those of more affluent schools (Vanderhaar et al., 2003). As a result, school leaders and teachers were often dissatisfied and chose to leave these stressful work environments (Katsinas et al., 2023). Research revealed that teachers who left Title One schools were not fleeing their students (Katsinas et al., 2023). Instead, they were fleeing the poor working conditions that made it difficult for them to teach and for their students

to learn: school leadership, collegial relationships, and elements of school culture (Katsinas et al., 2023; Simon & Johnson, 2015).

As a result, a limited number of teachers caused limited school achievement (Joiner & Edwards, 2008), and this currently appeared to be the case in our Alabama Black Belt public schools (ALSDE.org). Thus, the research confirmed that Alabama Black Belt public schools could benefit from a transformational and transformative school leader who effectively supports, transforms, and nurtures the teachers and students in an already challenging work environment to achieve greater success (Northouse, 2019). Alabama's Federal Accountability System consisted of six indicators that fall into two categories: Academic and School Quality/Student Success. The academic indicators included the following: academic achievement, academic growth, progress in English language proficiency, and graduation rate (alsde.org). The school quality/student success indicators include college and career readiness and chronic absenteeism (alsde.org).

## Conclusion

How can school leaders ensure that marginalized students are maximally reached and equipped with all they need to be productive citizens in today's world? The literature presented revealed that it is not an isolated task but a collaborative one that school leaders must facilitate with a transformational and transformative frame of mind (Hewitt et al., 2014). Solutions can be found in fostering students' agency by providing opportunities for marginalized students to act on their potential to overcome structural constraints (Kundu, 2020).

Specifically, in the case of this study, solutions were sought in the schooling practices implemented by a Black female school leader to foster a Black female student agency. Moreover, instead of viewing these students with a deficit frame of mind, school leaders need to be transformational and transformative in their approach by creating space for prioritizing students'

lived experiences and backgrounds as epistemologically valuable to the learning environment (Cook-Sather, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989; Hewitt et al., 2014; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020). This approach was reported to be a route by which public schools, like those in Alabama's Black Belt region, can become a reliable bridge to social justice for our marginalized young people (Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2020).

# CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

## Aim of the Study

This study aimed to use Esposito and Evans-Winter's (2022) intersectional narrative research methodological approach to capture a glimpsed understanding of how a Black female school leader sought to foster Black female students' agency amidst navigating how "interlocking systems of oppression shape how she engaged in the school environment, how she thought about her school environment and her choices, and how she constructed her realities in ways that served to make a way out of no way" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.50). Thus, through this study, I hoped to pursue discourse around solutions from the multiply oppressed standpoint of a Black female school leader in support of Black female students' agency. Lorde's statement at a feminist conference in 1979 mirrored the sentiments of this study: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never allow us to bring about genuine change." Thus, instead of solely relying on bureaucratic system tools to stringently foster student agency in our public schools, this intersectional narrative study sought solutions around and within this system to evoke change through privileging a perspective "outside" of those governing the "bureaucratic house" — a Black female school leader's perspective.

Ultimately, this intersectional narrative inquiry study created space for defying historical and contemporary racial oppression by allowing me to center "discussions of race, gender, class, and sexuality as part of a larger political and epistemological struggle for a better and just future" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Tyson, 2003, p.25). Accordingly, this intersectional narrative inquiry research study sought to more effectively comprehend the following (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2022):

1. How power and authority are concurrently fixed and static within and across social contexts
2. How individuals and groups resist, confront, and/or placate oppressive authority and structural power
3. How space (social and spatiotemporal) affects how social actors perceive and enact power
4. How one's place in history and contemporary society influences their approaches to qualitative inquiry and forms of knowledge production (p. 83)

## Research Questions

The research questions for the study were:

1. How does a Black Female School Leader Navigate Structural Constraints to Foster Black Female Student Agency in an Alabama Black Belt Public School?
    a. How does a Black Female School Leader in an Alabama Black Belt region public school demonstrate agency?
    b. How does a Black Female School Leader engage in her environment?
    c. How does a Black Female School Leader think about her environment?
    d. How does a Black Female School Leader construct her realities in ways that serve to make a way out of no way?

## Qualitative Research Approach

The qualitative research approach for this study entailed pairing narrative inquiry methodology with an intersectionality lens. Esposito and Evans-Winters's (2022) literature on intersectional narrative research methodology richly guided how I designed and conducted a series of semi-structured interviews, structured observations, and open-ended surveys to understand how a Black female school leader navigated structural constraints to foster Black female student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school. Initially used by Connelly and

Clandinin (1990) as an approach to describe the personal stories of teachers, narrative inquiry research was rooted in Vygotsky's social constructivism, a philosophy that focuses on how people's lived stories capture the complexities and nuanced understanding of their significant experiences (Ntinda, 2019). Primarily facilitated through several in-depth interviews with a small sample of participants, narrative inquiry viewed "social identities themselves as narratives and believed that people constructed identities through storytelling, for it is through stories that people come to understand who they are and how they are positioned in the world" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.68; Riessman, 2008).

Moreover, historically rooted in the work of civil rights scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is a Black feminist standpoint epistemological framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities (i.e., gender, caste, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, and height) compound to create various modes of discrimination and privilege throughout many public institutions, including public education (Haynes et al., 2020). When paired with an intersectional perspective, an intersectional narrative inquiry study warranted me (the researcher) to do the following:

1) Privilege individual stories of those historically marginalized as central to the processes and products of the research;

2) Promote shared understanding between researchers and participants of the participants' stories;

3) Connect understandings of lived experiences to discussions of race, gender, class, and sexuality as part of a larger political and epistemological struggle for a better and just future;

4) Go beyond scientific and empiricist standards, depending on the authentic voices of participants to generate confidence in research findings (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.82).

Thus, intersectional narrative research was an appropriate research approach for conducting this study because it allowed me to privilege data collection methods (interviews & observations) that centered the worldviews and experiences of a participant who was multiply impacted by marginalized identities — Black female school leader. Ultimately, this privileging facilitated my understanding of the matrices of oppressions faced by Black women in order that I (the researcher) might create a more authentic narrating space for the knowledge and experiences of Black female participants to be more genuinely seen, heard, and privileged as credible and trustworthy sources of truth to the world's understanding of what it took to navigate inevitable structural constraints to foster student agency (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Specifically, the participant's life-story narrative was "valuable in producing data about processes of identification and social structures," as her everyday life functioned as a "melting pot where intersecting categories are inextricably linked" (Christensen & Jensen, 2012, p.114).

According to Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022), it is the intersectional researcher's role to unveil the familiar and taken for granted. In the case of this study, both the Black female school leader, the Black female student, and the Black female researcher (me) are those historically marginalized by mainstream society as "familiar and taken for granted." In addition, Crenshaw and Grzanka (2014) argued: "intersectionality imagines alternative ways of knowing and doing in the interest of forging efficacious tools for social justice" (p.40). Consequently, the "alternative way of knowing and doing" in this study was provided by the Black female school leader (a social actor whose knowledge and experiences are often subjugated because of race, gender, class, and other identity markers) and the "efficacious tools for social justice" came from her (the participant) shared experiences around the research topic (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.30).

## Role of the Researcher

As a Black former high school graduate of a public school in the Alabama Black Belt region and a current educator in a public school in the Alabama Black Belt region, I have my own past and present personal experiences with overlapping complexities of oppression as a Black, female, low SES, first-generation college student, and educator. My past and present experiences with navigating structural constraints in the Alabama Black Belt region facilitated my use of the intersectional lens to help me build rapport and a more productive co-researcher relationship with the participant (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). However, Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) also reminded readers of how having similar personal and professional experiences that may relate to the participants' experiences could also lead to essentialism, which entails me projecting my personal generalizations onto the participant that may not be reflective of her experiences around marginalization (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

Consequently, "centering the lived experiences and knowledge of our research participants requires intersectional researchers to be self-aware and to have keen insight into establishing rapport with participants" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.82). "Intersectional researchers enter the research process with the intent to collaborate with research participants in their social justice pursuits and to avoid the exploitation of participants' shared time, creativity, stories, and knowledge?" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.83). Thus, my role in this research heavily involved decentering myself as a researcher and centering the stories and needs of the research participant (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). My role in this research was also a collaborative one that entailed mutually engaging with the participant throughout the data collection, analysis processes, and benefits of the study (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

Moreover, my work for this study assumed subjectivity of experience and experience shaped by systems of power that have to do with race, gender, sexuality, class, etcetera (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Thus, throughout this entire study, the intersectional narrative methodology warranted me to transparently acknowledge the presence of my own bias as a way of acknowledging that "our stories as researchers cannot be separated from the meaning we make of participant stories" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.68). This transparency also helped the readers of this study to understand how I may have shaped the study (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

To facilitate awareness of my subjectivity in this study, I practiced Pillow's (2015) definition of reflexivity, which entailed critical reflection on how I (the researcher), the participant, and the setting influenced and shaped each other. Thus, I took responsibility for the (ongoing) process of reflection and sought to understand how I impacted various aspects of the study — including my relationship with the participant and the participant's perceptions of the benefits (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). I documented my awareness of my values and personal tastes through critical reflexive journaling. I made a purposeful examination of my feelings, behaviors, and motives in order that I might examine my own personal biases, motives, beliefs, and thought processes in relationship to the research study and proximity to power (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

## Research Design

### Target Population and Sampling Method

"Given that qualitative research typically calls for in-depth analysis and systemic observation, sample sizes tend to be smaller than those in quantitative studies" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.75). Thus, this study focused on the stories and experiences of one Black

female school leader around the research topic. Intersectional qualitative researchers often rely on purposeful sampling by being explicitly deliberate about the following: 1) inviting participants from marginalized groups; 2) collaborating with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, [and] People of Color) as the study is planned; 3) considering criteria related to issues of identity, culture, age, location, and other diversity factors (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

Consequently, through the use of purposeful sampling, I set the criteria for this study as follows: a) Black female school leader (i.e., principal, assistant principal, department chair, instructional coach, department chair, etcetera.); b) past and current resident of Alabama Black Belt region; c) attended and graduated from a public school in the Alabama Black Belt region; d) has recognized history and experience of recognitions in/around the area of student agency and empowerment in her school setting. With permission from the school leader in a rural, local school district where I currently work, I recruited one Black female school leader participant via an emailed recruitment letter. I chose this setting because I already had established access and rapport with many of the school leaders in the district and because this district employed many Black female school leaders that met the study's criteria. One Black female school leader was recruited, and the location of our interviews was determined with input from the participant, while the observations took place in the school where she works.

Throughout the sampling process, the intersectional framework called for me to be reflective on who to invite to the study, why they were invited, and what the benefits/impact would be for those invited (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). The "who" and "why" was determined based on the overarching research question, and the benefits/impact referenced in the invitation letter was that this study could potentially provide opportunity for the participant to join me in presenting the study at relevant research conferences and professional development events, thereby

allowing us to develop a continuous partnership after the study and to collaboratively create a platform for her knowledge to function as a guide for other administrators' understanding of how to foster student agency at K-12 public schools in the Alabama Black Belt region (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

**Recruitment and Rapport**

First, I sought the permission of Auburn University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. Once approval was granted, I sought permission from a high school leader in the Alabama Black Belt region to email the Black female leaders an invitation letter explaining the study's purpose and requesting qualifying persons' permission to be interviewed and observed for the study. Once a participant was recruited, a preliminary meeting was conducted with the participant to establish rapport and trust, to ensure understanding and completion of the informed consent form (see Appendix A), and to address any concerns about the study (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Within the consent form, the purpose of the study and any risks involved were explained. In addition, the procedures by which the data would be collected were discussed (Creswell, 2018; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). The participant was told that she could refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without being penalized (Creswell, 2018; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

I answered any questions the participant had concerning anonymity (Creswell, 2018; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). The participant was assured that all study-related documents would be digitally stored in a restricted-access Auburn University Box drive when not in use. The participant was also allowed to pick a pseudonym to ensure anonymity (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). In the findings, narrative quotes did not contain identifying information (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

## Data Collection Methods

### Instrumentation

For this intersectional narrative study, data collection was achieved through conducting semi-structured interviews via the use of an interview protocol (see Appendix C), in-school observations via the use of an observation checklist (see Appendix D) and administering open-ended surveys (see Appendix E) (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

#### *Interview Protocol*

Because the intersectional framework called for me to value lived experiences and culturally rich stories, I deemed conducting semi-structured interviews the best method for genuinely hearing and connecting with the research participant's stories around the research topic (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). These semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol constructed by me and influenced by the *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research* text (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022) and the *Student Agency in the Classroom* text (Vaughn, 2020).

Per suggested references by Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022), qualitative researcher Seidman (2013) recommended a minimal three-interview series to get multiple interactions and observations to grasp even partial knowledge of what the study sought to understand. Thus, this interview protocol was a three-part guide that facilitated five separate individual 90-minute interviews for a five-week time frame that focused on the following: Interview One—Life history and personal context; Interview Two—Reconstruct Life Experiences; Interview Three–Five—Reflect on the meaning of their experiences (Seidman, 2013). The time frame selected for these interviews was determined through a conversation with my methodology mentor for this study (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

In addition, a preliminary meeting with the participant was conducted via a preliminary meeting checklist (see Appendix B) before the interview series began. The purpose of the preliminary meeting was to establish trust and understanding with the participants (by reviewing ethical considerations, ensuring mutual understanding and completion of consent forms, and providing participants with an authentic reflection of what I hoped to gain from the research and what I hoped to contribute to society at large and the participant involved in the study) and to get to know some cultural attributes of the participant (such as "How long does it take to establish rapport?" How does a participant view time, i.e., circular or linear? How did the participant feel about being asked personal questions during the first meeting? and How much time was expected or appropriate for the researcher to share information about herself?) (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

During the interviews, I used a voice recorder, with the permission of the participant, to record our exchanges so that I could review my understanding of the research participants' stories after each interview, as well as to keep a record to fact-check understanding with the research participant (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). During the interview, I actively listened, observed, and intentionally probed to gather meaning from any broad descriptors referenced by the research participant (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). The interview questions were intentionally phrased with respect to the intersectionality framework, which called for them to be open-ended, to be non-leading to what I wanted to hear, to not directly ask my research questions, and to be intentional about asking the research participant about her experiences and how those experiences were shaped by her race and gender and other overlapping social identities (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). In addition, the interview protocol also referenced questions about student agency per Anindya Kundu's (2020) definition of student agency: "the

potential to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in a deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints" (p.25).

***Observation checklist***

The observations occurred at the participant's school workplace for 75 minutes each day over ten consecutive days. The school workplace locations were randomly changed to accommodate the participant's work duties. Some observation foci that aligned with the intersectional framework of this study included resilience, resistance, vulnerability, personal agency, and how interlocking systems of oppression shaped how the research participant engaged in her environment, how the research participant thought about her environment and choices, and how she constructed her realities in ways that served to make a way out of no way (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

The intersectionality framework called for the observation protocol to focus on all the notable structural constraints within the research participant's everyday workplace as she went about her day-to-day job duties centered around fostering student agency per Anindya Kundu's (2020) definition of student agency: "the potential to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in a deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints" (p.25). It also called for me to observe her direct interactions with the students via in-person and virtual exchanges and her indirect interactions with the students via her in-person and virtual exchanges with teachers and other school-associated stakeholders. As I conducted observations, I used the intersectionality framework lens to guide my observations about how the participant's race, gender, and cultural identities affected her role in her workplace (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

### *Open-ended survey*

Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) recommended that an open-ended survey (see Appendix E) be used with the interviews and observations collected in this study to maximize the discovery of the context of the participant's responses and interactions. After each interview, this survey was given to the participant, and offered free space to express herself and her thoughts in whatever way she chose (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

### *Data collection and management*

Five 90-minute in-person semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participant's work office over five weeks, two consecutive weeks of in-person structured observations at the participant's workplace, and five open-ended surveys were administered. Even though the interview questions were scripted, I was unaware of the content of the responses. The interviews and observations were audio-taped and transcribed by an online transcription service called transcribe.com and collectively stored in a restricted-access Auburn University Box drive. Handwritten field notes were also recorded during interviews and observations and collectively stored in a restricted-access Auburn University Box drive.

In addition, the intersectionality framework guided the questions posed during each of the five interviews: Interview 1: Life History & Personal Context; Interview 2: Reconstruct Life Experiences; Interviews 3–5: Reflect on Meaning of Experiences. After each interview, the data collected from the audio recorder and my handwritten notes were digitally transcribed and stored in a restricted-access Auburn University Box drive. After each observation and open-ended survey, the data was digitally transcribed and stored in a restricted-access Auburn University Box drive.

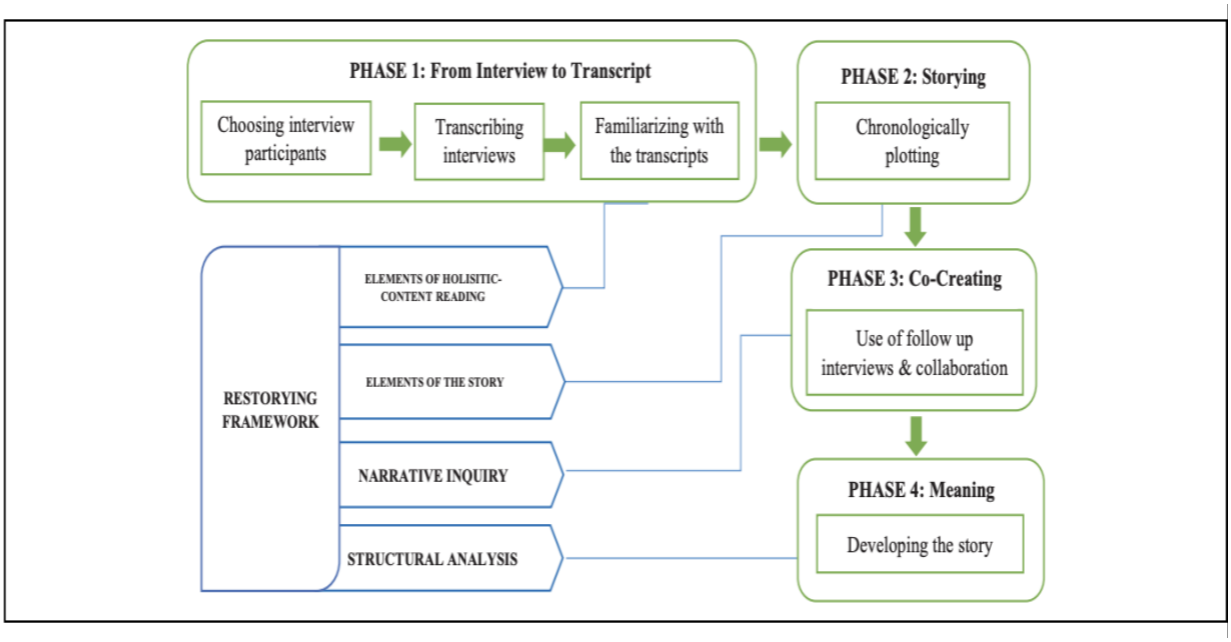
Lastly, an audit trail was conducted throughout the study that provided a transparent step-by-step account of how I collected and analyzed the data, handwritten field notes of what I did, saw, heard, thought, etcetera., and critical reflexive journal reflections documenting my role as a researcher and progressive understandings in relation to the research participant around the research topic and around my personal development as a researcher (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Ortlipp, 2008; Pillow, 2015). All the data from the audit trail was digitally stored in the same restricted-access Auburn University Box drive as the interview and observation data (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

## Data Analysis

Per Esposito and Evans-Winters' recommendation, intersectional data analysis for this study warranted emphasis on narrative analysis so that I might genuinely hear and preserve the participant's story (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Such preservation also sought to pay homage to the recovery of Black storytelling in qualitative research, as described by Toliver (2022). To facilitate this narrative analysis, I used Nasheeda et al.'s (2019) restorying framework, a multi-method restorying framework that encourages creativity in presenting a participant's lived experiences through collaborative and meaningful strategies. This framework (see Figure 2) essentially provided step-by-step guidance on crafting stories from the participant's interview transcripts: 1. From Interview to Transcript; 2. Storying the Transcript; 3. Co-creating the Story; 4. Meaning Making.

**Figure 2**

*Nasheeda et al. (2019) Multi-method Restorying Framework*




*Note.* Multimethod Restorying Framework that outline the four phases of restorying a participant's narrative. From Transforming transcripts into stories: A multimethod approach to narrative analysis by Nasheeda et al., 2019, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *18*. Copyright 2019 by SAGE Publications Inc.

## Phase 1: From Interview to Transcript

### *Choosing whom to interview*

I used purposive sampling to facilitate the recruitment of a participant who had knowledge and experience of being a Black female school leader who intentionally fostered Black female student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school (Evans-Winters, 2022; Oppong, 2013). The primary data sources were semi-structured face-to-face interviews and open-ended reflective surveys. According to Muylaert et al. (2014), interviews play a crucial role

in narrative research, as they facilitate the emergence of the story through collaborative conversations between the researcher and the participant. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed via transcription services at transcribe.com upon completion.

### *Transcribing interviews*

Davidson (2017) emphasized that transcribing an interview is a laborious and time-consuming task that served as the most comprehensive resource for data analysis. The interviews were transcribed in a naturalistic manner by intentionally capturing all verbal cues, such as smiles, nods, sobs, and even extraneous words like "umm." These transcripts were then meticulously cross-checked with the audio recordings to ensure accuracy in the accounts and to facilitate active reflection and deeper familiarity with the interview data (Davidson, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

### *Familiarizing with the transcripts*

To familiarize myself with the transcripts, I utilized holistic content reading and thematic analysis. The holistic-content reading process entailed thoroughly reading the transcript and repeatedly listening to the interviews' audio recordings to deepen my familiarity with the data. Gaining familiarity with the data in this way allowed me to discern key elements, such as the main characters, setting, and timeline of events depicted in the narratives. Employing this process also made it easier for me to understand and appreciate the participant's construction of their individuality within the social context. This included recognizing their role, beliefs, attitude, and relationships in the narrative. I also devoted some time to reflect on various aspects of the story, which included the sequence of events and moments of realization that I might later fully engage with the narrative process.

While it was not recommended in Nasheeda et al.'s (2019) restorying framework, I also engaged in some thematic analysis to add another layer of personal critical reflection to my interaction with the data, as it related to the intersectionality framework. I began this analysis process by inductively coding the data using Atlas—ti software, which entailed three rounds of coding: open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding was achieved by segmenting the data into meaningful expressions and describing them in single words and/or phrases (Saldana, 2021). Axial coding was achieved by relating the codes to each other via inductive and deductive thinking around categories from the intersectionality framework (Saldana, 2021). Selective coding was achieved by creating a core category that connected the sub-categories produced from the axial coding. From this coding process and regular follow-up discussions with the participant, I deduced my reflexivity around the data to six themes: 1. Personal stories tracing the evolution of her life from a Black girl to a Black woman; 2. References to Systemic Oppressions; 3. Emancipatory pedagogy principles/Culturally relevant pedagogy/Social justice education; 4. Resilience; 5. Agency; 6. Transformational Leadership and/or Transformative Leadership. The thematic analysis process facilitated additional familiarity with the data. It was something I decided to do to provide more triangulation and reliability of the data so that I might cross-reference the co-constructed narrative with my own critical reflexivity around the data. Below is a codebook I constructed using guidance from DeCuir-Gunby et al.'s (2011) literature (see Table 1) to inductively and deductively guide my thematic analysis of the data (Decuir-Gunby et al., 2011).

**Table 1**

*Thematic Analysis Codebook Completed for Personal Reflexivity*

| Code | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Personal stories tracing the evolution of her life as Black girl to her life as a Black woman** | Any references in the participant's story regarding references to her Black race and female gender from childhood until the present (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, Crenshaw, 1989; Kendall, 2020; &Evans-Winters, 2022) | "Speaking of growing up, I had a very, very, very, very, very colorful life. I am the product of two Black military parents. My mother and my father were both in the military. My mother is from the Alabama Black Belt region. She was born and raised in a small, rural town in the region. Um…and my father is from Michigan."<br><br>"And also during this time around the third grade, I was going through an identity crisis. I, at this point, realized, um, that I looked different from the majority of my peers."<br><br>"Just being "the mama," I think that's mainly how I show up. I believe this is what allows me to be first and foremost intentional about building personal relationships with my students and creating opportunities for them beyond the stereotypes and misfortunes of society placed on them."<br><br>"And I almost feel like it's expected with me being the woman. I feel treated as though I am supposed to take care of the men in this department, but I shouldn't always have to take care of them. Why can't they just carry some of the weight? Because to me my role as the department head is not just a namesake, but I do the same thing as them. We all come here. We are all earning the same check, but for whatever reason, they just don't put forth the effort that I would like. |

| Code | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **References to overlapping systemic oppression or effects overlapping of systemic oppression** | Any references the participants gives that alludes to her personal struggles or her Black, female students' struggles with racism, classism, gender bias, poverty, experiencing invisibility or hypervisibility etc) (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, Crenshaw, 1989; Kendall, 2020; &Evans-Winters, 2022) | "Coming to the Alabama Black Belt region and going through all the stuff that I was going through at home while also living in poverty on a small street that is often called "Crack City." It was just a lot."<br><br>"Oh, and keep in mind when I say we moved back to Alabama, it was very much in a two-bedroom house, two bedrooms with the little bed area. It was very much my aunt, my mother, myself, my little cousin and my sister. It was very much five of us in a two-bedroom house. I didn't know, and maybe I wasn't supposed to know that according to the government standards that I was homeless, that I was in poverty." |
| **Emancipatory pedagogy principles/Culturally relevant pedagogy/Social justice education** | Any references in her pedagogical practice that focus on allowing students to think for themselves, to embrace social emotional learning, to engage in outlets to the standardized curriculum, to use their own voice and choice to make decisions in how they learn and present their learning, to use their culture and experiences as a reference for understanding the world around them (Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021) | "And I remember I spent the rest of that nine weeks, about two or three weeks, trying to unravel what I did by being intentional about building relationships, something that I should have done from day one. I admit I ain't teach nothing. I ain't teach no content, we ain't learn about no Napoleon, no revolution, American War, no World War. Instead, I readdressed my role and focused on empowering those students and making those students feel okay, making those students feel safe and helping those students see that they are beyond a label and that they are beyond the mistakes that they made. I realized the rules and procedures that the school wanted me to force with all students wasn't gonna work with them." |

| Code | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|
| **Resilience** | Any references in her story that reveal how she makes a way out of no way, how she does not give up in the face of adversity, how she remains consistent in her efforts toward creating opportunties for her Black, female students (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021) | "Teaching students to embrace their true selves means first giving them the capacity to do so. This is where I strive to fill in the gaps for my students by seeking out resources to help make this happen. I believe a great example of this is displayed in my recent efforts to support our LGBTQ plus IA students in the school. So, I was recently awared a $10,000 grant from an organization that is focused on improving the lives of LGBTQ plus IA students. |
| **Agency** | Any references in her story that reveal how she negotiates her roles in the work environment in order to achieve her goals and create opportunties for her Black, female students (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020; Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021) | "Teaching students to embrace their true selves means first giving them the capacity to do so. This is where I strive to fill in the gaps for my students by seeking out resources to help make this happen. I believe a great example of this is displayed in my recent efforts to support our LGBTQ plus IA students in the school. So, I was recently awared a $10,000 grant from an organization that is focused on improving the lives of LGBTQ plus IA students. |
| **Transformational Leadership and/or Transformative Leadership** | Transformational leadership- references to a leadership style that focuses on efforts to reform and improve schools by making them more effective (Leithwood & Sun, 2012), through inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation and individualized | **"**Back in 2018, I became public enemy number one because I advocated for a colleague that was being discriminated against because of his sexual orientation. I became aware of some comments that were made about a particular teacher on his teacher evaluation forms. There were some lies that were told. I knew that admin at the time did not like him because he's gay. So, the teacher was gonna leave it alone, but I couldn't let it go because it just didn't sit well |

| Code | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|
| | consideration (Northouse, 2019). Transformative Leadership-references to supporting educators in growing and striving towards implementing democratic pedagogy, allowing flexibility for new ways of addressing the old, cycling generational problems in the school systems, teaching to the whole child, and centering inclusivity, fairness and social justice in their work (Freire, 1970; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Hewitt et al., 2014; Rice-Boothe, 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021). | with me.<br><br>"When we returned back to the building, I started a Teacher Action Committee as a way to empower female the voices amongst a predominantly male staff. I intentionally asked female colleagues to join and to help advocate for change. I truly believe that women are the backbone of society. This school would fall apart without the women in the background working." |

*Note.* Codebook Used for Preliminary Thematic Analysis Process and Personal Reflexivity

**Phase 2: Storying the Transcript**

Upon familiarizing myself with the transcripts, I chronologically plotted the events by reading and rereading the transcripts several times in order to become familiar with the timing of events that occurred. The data were then organized and reorganized into events, that is, "chronologically plotted." To aid the chronological plot development, the following questions were asked:

1. Who are the main characters in this story?
2. What are the main events?
3. When and where did these events take place?

4. How has the participant positioned herself in the story?

In order to create a cohesive narrative from the transcripts, a comprehensive analysis was conducted on each transcript. This analysis involved employing structural analysis and examining key story elements such as form, function, and phenomenon. It was essential to identify the roles played by each individual within the story, which then facilitated the organization of the transcript in a chronological manner. The story was constructed by utilizing subtitles as foundational elements. The primary objective of the subtitles was to engage with the data and grasp the descriptive and analytical aspects of the personal and social narratives (Nasheeda et al., 2019).

This approach proved beneficial, as it allowed the researcher to discern the participant's perspective on various aspects, such as the portrayal of events, individuals involved, and the emotional highs and lows experienced. Every individual story was situated within the broader framework of time, place, personal experiences, and social context (Clandinin, 1998; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). By following a chronological sequence, a preliminary version of the story was developed with the following subtitles: 1. Childhood Personal Challenges and Triumphs; 2. Educational Journey and Impactful Figures; 3. Striving for Advocacy, Empowerment, and Social Justice; 4. Challenges in the Work Environment; 5. Sources of Resilience and Hope.

**Phase 3: Co-creating**

The collaborative partnership between the participant and me played a crucial role in the process of co-creating her story. Establishing active collaboration was vital, as we both contributed to constructing the individual narrative (Haydon et al., 2018). The collaboration extended beyond establishing a positive rapport (Haydon et al., 2018). It necessitated mutual trust and respect, ensuring the handling of shared information with confidentiality (Dicicco-

Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Building trust involved prioritizing aspects such as maintaining anonymity, honoring the participant's comfort level in disclosing personal information, and ensuring her ownership of the story. Through collaborative efforts, we examined the transcripts from diverse perspectives. Additionally, multiple follow-up interviews were conducted to facilitate the collaborative process of co-creating the story.

***Follow-up interviews and collaboration***

After arranging the transcript chronologically, it was shared with the participant for review to ensure that the story was sequenced accurately and reflected her voice. Several questions were posed, such as "Does this accurately represent you?" and "Do you see yourself in the transcript?" These questions served as the starting point for the collaborative transformation of the narrative transcript. In cases where the participant disagreed with the story, negotiation occurred by asking for additional details that could provide a more authentic portrayal. I closely collaborated with the participant to co-create the story by actively listening and demonstrating genuine interest in her sharing. During these collaborative sessions, clarifications were sought regarding gaps, silences, apparent contradictions, and the meanings of specific words and phrases within the story (i.e., "It is what it is" or "playing the Mama").

The co-construction process involved multiple back-and-forth interactions via text message, ensuring a connectedness as the story unfolded. This active engagement with the participant allowed her to become an active collaborator in co-creating the story. The narratives were examined for embedded meanings in the participant's choice of words, as these collaborations allowed for expressing subjective realities (Czarniawska, 2004). Collaborating and co-creating the story with the participant facilitated attributing meaning to the chronological plot within the participant's personal and social context.

### Phase 4: Meaning Making

During this phase, the narrative process was developed through the application of structural analysis to understand how the participant expressed her experiences (Riessman, 2005). In the interview transcripts, specific words such as "well," "it is what it is," "umm," and "right" carried different meanings. Analytical techniques, including the examination of dichotomies and silences, were employed to derive meaning and fill gaps within the narratives (Czarniawska, 2004). I also sought clarification on the intended meanings of these words by asking the participant follow-up questions. After co-constructing the participant's narrative for this study, the participant expressed a desire to publish her story in a book. Such a response from the participant affirmed Esposito and Evans-Winters' (2022) idea that intersectionality research should be used to support and uplift marginalized voices and experiences, and I gathered from the participant's desire to continue sharing her story with the world that the research experience was an uplifting one for her. I hope to continue to support her with the next steps of publishing her story.

## Ethical Considerations

Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) stated that conveying that I have interpreted the data ethically is a "more philosophical question" that entails me being mindful of questions regarding power (p.153).

> "There is power involved in telling someone's story… "It is important to remember that when we conduct research on/with marginalized communities, we, regardless of whether we share a marginalized race/ethnic, class, gender, or sexual orientation position, still hold power as a researcher. The power imbalance between researcher and participant is such that the participant's voice gets interpreted through yours. That means that the

researcher has the ultimate power to shape the narrative" (Evans-Winters, 2022, pp. 155–156).

Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) challenged me as the researcher to intentionally involve the research participant throughout the entire research process, especially the interpretation phase so that I could allow the analysis and interpretive work I did to be vetted and confirmed by the participant. This was done to ensure that I was most clearly, conveying her story and her voice in the study according to the tenets of the intersectional narrative framework and according to her personal insights (Evans-Winters, 2022). Ultimately, this ethical consideration of power was addressed by giving space and opportunity for the research participant to "talk back" to my data interpretations, which ultimately sparked important conversations about any misinterpretations or misrepresentations of data.

Moreover, prior to conducting this study, I was mindful of several categories of ethical considerations, as outlined by Sarah Tracy (2010) in her article on achieving qualitative quality. These ethical considerations included the following: procedural ethics, situational and culturally specific ethics, relational ethics, and exiting ethics (Tracy, 2010). When striving toward procedural ethics for this study, I took the following actions: ensured no harm to the participant, avoided deception of the participant, negotiated informed consent with the participant, ensured voluntary participation and privacy, and secured confidentiality of all data collected during the study via a restricted-access Auburn University box drive (Sales & Folkman, 2000; Tracy, 2010).

When striving toward situational and cultural ethics, I regularly reflected on whether the means justified the ends throughout the study by comparing the qualitative methods used and the data to be exposed. I also intentionally communicated with the participant about what was ok for

her culturally in the study (Tracy, 2010). When striving toward relational ethics, I intentionally formed a mutually respectful and supportive relationship/partnership with the participant to mediate the power relation between a participant and a researcher (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). I fostered this partnership by intentionally collaborating with the participant and inviting her into all phases of the research process (from data collection and analysis to discussion and findings). I also invited her input on defining the rules for the research and spent time ensuring that the participant understood all ramifications of violating traditional ways of doing the research (Tracy, 2010). When striving toward exiting ethics, I was contemplative of how best to present the findings in a way that would not negatively portray the participant or mislead the audience in their reading (Tracy, 2010). To proactively address inadequate portrayal, I invited the participant, my dissertation chair, and my committee to read through the research document to provide their take on how the study read to them to see if there was any wording presented that could potentially be misread, misappropriated, or misused (Tracy, 2010).

## Trustworthiness

While the intersectional narrative inquiry method assumed subjectivity of experience and embodied the idea that there are multiple meanings and interpretations depending on the theoretical and ideological lenses, I, as the researcher had a responsibility to convey to the readers that I have "correctly" theorized the data, which ultimately means I took steps to maximize strong connections between what was shared by the research participant and what was the meaning of what the research participant shared (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Unlike positivist studies that seek validity, this intersectional narrative study pursued trustworthiness that focused on factors of credibility of the research study, such as prolonged engagement,

persistent observations, triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and conducting an audit trail (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

Triangulation involved using multiple data sources (interviews, observations, field notes, and open-ended surveys) to produce an understanding of the research participant's shared stories (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). In addition, I conducted member checking by testing the data, categories, interpretations, and conclusions for accuracy, taking the specific themes back to the study participant, and determining if the participant deemed the findings accurate (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). The participant was allowed to review their transcribed interviews and observations and to add to or amend their statements (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). Peer debriefing was done by having other scholars associated with my research (my dissertation chair and my research committee) support me throughout the entire study by playing devil's advocate, challenging my assumptions, pushing me methodologically, and asking me hard questions about my research methods and interpretations (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

## Potential Research Bias

Because I used intersectionality, a "new-paradigm" approach, as my theoretical framework, I was guided by the literature that recommended that I not equate bias with "error" and accept that the elimination of bias is not possible (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Lincoln et al., 2011; Roulston & Shelton, 2015). Thus, bias for this study was understood in relation to my theoretical assumptions as an inherent and embraced part of the data. According to Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022), "Narrative inquirers recognize that both research participants and researchers lead storied lives. Our stories as researchers cannot be separated from the meaning we make of

participants' stories." Intersectionality frames critical qualitative research pursuits in the following ways and with the following assumptions (Esposito & Evans-Winter, 2022):

1. **Personal and cultural beliefs**. How we come to believe in the legitimacy and value of science and the scientific method is informed by our personal and cultural beliefs and education and schooling (p.82).
2. **Emotionality in research pursuits.** We can find pleasure and pain in our research pursuits, especially as researchers from oppressed groups become more conscientious about the relationship between research and power, education, hegemony, and culture and domination (p.82).
3. **Collective agency and resistance.** Individuals' and social groups' lived experiences and how they come to make meaning of those experiences represents their agency and resistance strategies (p.82).
4. **Research represents power and authority.** The historical knowledge and collective wisdom of those multiply situated along the matrix of domination serve as counternarratives to systemic power and/or oppositional knowledge (p.82).

Furthermore, as the researcher, I was explicit about my positions and points of view to actively manage both the participant's and my personal biases through reflexive practices throughout the entire study (Chenail, 2011; Finlay, 2002, 2012; Hsiung, 2008; Peshkin, 1988; Preissle, 2008).

## Positionality Statement

It was 2009 when I embarked upon my senior year feeling hopeless and fearful about my life after high school. All I ever knew up until this point was how no Black kid made it out of Vredenburgh, Alabama—a small, rural, poverty-stricken town often stereotyped by outsiders as a place known for excessive drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancies, and high school

dropouts. And even though I was currently ranked number one in my class with a 4.0 GPA, I still struggled to see myself beyond my hometown and beyond my traumatic childhood experiences with domestic abuse. It was also hard and scary to envision myself doing something that no one on either side of my family had done before—attend college. Yet, as the time passed, I intentionally pushed past the noise of my insecurities to apply and ultimately receive the Gates Millenium Scholarship, a scholarship that would entirely fund all my college education (from a bachelor's degree to a doctorate degree). It was this grand moment that boosted my confidence to even entertain the idea that I could go off to college and actually succeed. I went to Auburn University hopeful for what I could academically do but still very anxious and afraid of what my stepfather would do to my siblings and my mom while I was two hours away at school.

When I got to Auburn University, my academic confidence immediately faded when I showed up to my first college math class hearing the professor say, "We will skip the first three chapters of our textbook, because you should have already learned that in high school." In that moment, I looked around the room to see if there was anyone else in the room looking as unsure as me, and to my expectation, it appeared as if everyone else had it all together but me. I even overheard a student say, "Yeah, I'm really just taking this class to boost my GPA." And there I was reminding myself of how I did not belong nor was I adequately prepared to succeed in college. From this day forward throughout my undergraduate years at Auburn Universty, I went into full anxiety mode, spending countless hours at the tutoring center and drinking caffeine into the midnight hours, just to stay afloat in my classes, so that I could keep my GPA up to maintain my scholarship. For every exam I took and every class I attended, my heart raced with anxiety and fear. There were even several times that I had to go to the emergency room only to find out that I was having anxiety attacks. In addition to this, there were also times when my mom and

siblings would have to come and stay with me in my one-bedroom apartment just to ensure their safety from my stepfather. Nevertheless, somehow amidst all of my midnight study struggles, my family drama and my anxiety, I graduated as a first-generation college student from Auburn University and thereafter pursued a masters degree in education while teaching at a predominantly Black, Title One public high school in the Alabama Black Belt region.

Often, as I reflect on those undergraduate moments of struggle and inadequacy, I realize the urgent need to advocate for more holistic, emancipatory learning experiences for historically marginalized students like me. I believe these experiences are those that could serve to disrupt the systemic oppressive dynamics of public schooling that historically marginalized students often disproportionately face. Everyday I struggle with teaching to uphold bureaucratic school policies while simulatenously putting in extraneous work to meet the actual needs of my students that those policies do not account for. Systemic cases of violence, poverty, death, drug, and alcohol abuse often clash with bureucratic schooling practices (i.e., standardized testing, implicit biases, rules for discipline), yielding negative stigmas about historically marginalized students' intelligence and abilities that do not reflect their outstanding demonstrations of resilience and agency amidst all the structural constraints they are forced to navigate.

For this reason, I was drawn to pursue this study because I believe that interrogating systems of power within traditional schooling practices is an avenue through which oppressive schooling practices can be disrupted. Emancipating historically marginalized students' learning experiences warrants that the curriculum be emancipated and gives space for students' voices and choices throughout the learning process. As a future professor of teachers and leaders in training, I desire to facilitate learning and to conduct research that will contribute to the empowerment and emancipation of learning experiences for historically marginalized students in

public schools through the avenues of social justice-oriented leadership practices and emancipatory curriculum strategies.

# CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

## Introduction

In this chapter, one Black female school leader's narrative offers insight into how she navigates structural constraints to foster Black female students' agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school. Her narrative embodies five overall themes: 1) Personal Challenges and Triumphs; 2) Educational Journey and Impactful Figures; 3) Student Advocacy, Empowerment, and Social Justice; 4) Challenges in the Work Environment; and 5) Reflections and Perceptions. The research questions of the study were the following:

Central Research Question

1. How does a Black female school leader navigate structural constraints to foster Black female student agency in an Alabama Black Belt Public School?

Subquestions

a. How does a Black Female School Leader in an Alabama Black Belt region public school demonstrate agency?

b. How does a Black Female School Leader engage in her environment?

c. How does a Black Female School Leader think about her environment?

d. How does a Black Female School Leader construct her realities in ways that serve to make a way out of no way?

An intersectional narrative methodology was employed to conduct this study, which entailed collecting data via interviews, observations, and open-ended reflective surveys alongside my own reflexive journaling and collecting field notes. The data was analyzed through the use of Nasheeda et al.'s (2019) multi-method restorying framework, which entailed four phases: Phase 1—Holistic-Content Reading (From interview to the transcript); Phase 2—Identifying Elements

of the Story (Storying); Phase 3—Narrative Inquiry (Co-creating via collaborating with the participant); Phase 4—Structural analysis (Developing the story). In this chapter, I provide a narrative description of the participant, outline assumptions for the findings of this study and present the findings in the form of a chronologically plotted story that was co-constructed by the participant and me.

## Participant

The study had one participant. The participant was recruited via a purposeful sampling method that entailed emailing her a recruitment letter outlining all the study's major components. The participant is a 35-year-old that identifies as a Black, heterosexual, middle-class female who is the history department chair teacher and has served in education for ten years. She is also a past and current resident of the Alabama Black Belt region who has lived there for at least 30 years. She also attended and graduated from a public school in the Alabama Black Belt region and has a history of experience and recognition in/around the area of fostering student agency and empowerment in her school setting. The participant selected the pseudonym 'Shirley.'

## Assumptions

This intersectional narrative study seeks to provide an inclusive, comprehensive, and nuanced understanding of an individual's experience and the social complexities of intersecting identities by adhering to the following assumptions:

1. Interconnectedness of Identities: The methodology assumes that individuals possess multiple intersecting identities, such as race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and more. These identities are not isolated but interconnected, creating unique experiences and perspectives (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

2. Lived Experience as Valuable Knowledge: Intersectional narrative methodology values lived experiences as a valuable form of knowledge. It recognizes that individuals' stories and narratives provide rich insights into their realities, challenges, and resilience (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).
3. Diverse Perspectives and Voices: The methodology assumes that diverse perspectives and voices are essential to understanding complex social issues. It seeks to amplify the voices of marginalized and underrepresented individuals to challenge dominant narratives (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).
4. Contextual and Situated Understanding: Intersectional narrative methodology acknowledges the importance of context in shaping individuals' experiences. It emphasizes understanding narratives within their social, cultural, and historical contexts (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).
5. Reflexivity and Positionality: The methodology assumes that researchers' positions and biases can influence the research process. Researchers are encouraged to be reflexive about their own identities, assumptions, and power dynamics when engaging with participants (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).
6. Empowerment and Social Change: Intersectional narrative methodology assumes a commitment to empowerment and social change. By highlighting marginalized voices, it aims to challenge stereotypes, advocate for social justice, and inform policies and practices (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).
7. Qualitative Research Approach: The methodology favors a qualitative research approach, utilizing interviews, focus groups, or storytelling to gather in-depth narratives. This

allows for a deeper exploration of the complexities of intersecting identities (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

8. Multi-Layered Analysis: Intersectional narrative methodology assumes that narratives contain multi-layered information about various identities and social experiences. Researchers aim to analyze these complexities to reveal patterns and themes (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).
9. Ethical Considerations: The methodology acknowledges the ethical responsibility to protect the well-being and confidentiality of participants. Informed consent, confidentiality, and participant safety are paramount in conducting this research (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).
10. Intersectionality as a Transformative Framework: Above all, intersectional narrative methodology sees intersectionality not just as a theoretical concept but as a transformative framework for understanding and addressing systemic inequalities and social issues (Collins, 1990; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

Thus, because this study was conducted via a non-positivist worldview-intersectionality- it warrants not making any generalizations or discovering any universal truth about the world. Instead, this study sought to explore the individual and unique narrative of a Black female participant, one whose knowledge serves as a counternarrative to systemic power and/or oppositional knowledge. In order to pursue a quality study with this one participant, I was intentional about gathering a vast amount of quality data — five 90-minute interviews (10 hours), 30 hours of observations, and three open-ended reflective surveys, along with additional follow-up conversations via text to check data for clarity.

## Findings

Nasheeda et al.'s (2019) Multi-method Restorying Framework facilitated the construction of an entire restoried narrative from the transcripts of interviews and reflective surveys completed during the study. The framework contains four phases: Phase 1 — Holistic-Content Reading (From interview to transcript); Phase 2 — Identifying Elements of the Story (Storying); Phase 3 — Narrative Inquiry (Co-creating via collaborating with the participant); Phase 4 — Structural Analysis (Developing the story) (see Figure 2).

The participant's narrative embodies the resilience, empowerment, and advocacy that results from navigating intersecting identities and experiences, ultimately shaping her life and community. By applying an intersectionality theoretical framework, this study sought to understand the complexities of her story and how her multiple intersecting identities interact to shape her experiences throughout the narrative. Using the direct words and phrases used by the participant, the entire restorying of the participant's narrative was guided by Nasheeda et al.'s (2019) multi-method restorying framework and categorized into five chapters as shown in the overview of the findings in Appendix F: 1) Personal Challenges and Triumphs, 2) Educational Journey and Impactful Figures, 3) Student Advocacy, Empowerment, and Social Justice, 4) Challenges in the Work Environment, 5) Sources of Resilience and Hope.

### Title-Colors of Resilience: A Journey Through Education, Advocacy, and Empowerment in the Alabama Black Belt Region

### Chapter 1: Childhood Personal Challenges & Triumphs

#### Childhood Shadows

Speaking of growing up, I had a very, very, very, very, very colorful life. I am the product of two Black military parents. My mother and my father were both in the military. My

mother is from the Alabama Black Belt region. She was born and raised in a small, rural town in the region. Um…and my father is from Michigan. So I'm not really sure of how their love story fully goes, but I do know that they met and married. And then within two years, here I came. And we were in Germany for a little bit, and I know that we transitioned to and stayed in Colorado during my first through third grade years because I know that is where my sister was also born. During my time in Colorado is when I recall truly dealing with my father and his PTSD starting to affect the household. By the time I was in fifth grade, I think my father had done about two or three tours to Korea and as with anybody, this began to take a toll on his mental health. And in my eyes, he was a functioning alcoholic. Um, and so, um, home was not, um, the best place. Um, it wasn't completely awful. Um, but I do just recall things always being very structured and things were, um, quite tense at times. Um, and that was hard because I was a child that wanted a lot more love and attention than I think neither one of my parents were able to provide for me. Um, I am that kid that, um, is very emotional, wore hurt on her sleeve, and I'm still that way now. Um, and again, circumstances prevented my parents, unfortunately, from being able to give me what I felt I needed.

And also during this time around the third grade, I was going through an identity crisis. I, at this point, realized, um, that I looked different from the majority of my peers. Um, if my memory serves me correctly, um, we were one of maybe two or three predominantly African American families. What I mean by that is Black mother, Black father, Black children. And there were a lot of interracial couples, and there were a lot of Caucasian couples. But, I just recall, and I think majority of my elementary pictures is just it being me or me and another person of color. So I remember around third grade having what I like to call an identity crisis, realizing that I'm different and not being able put my finger on it. So at this point, I'm dealing with my own

identity issues and then dealing with a tense household due to some untreated PTSD that my father was going through.

**Seeking Identity and Security**

So around my sixth grade year of school, my father was deployed to Korea again for, at this point, probably the third or fourth time, um, that I have been in school. And my mother, my sister and me moved to a place in the Alabama Black Belt region. And this is where I attended a school where I went from an environment where I was the minority, to where now I was the majority and everybody looked like me, but everybody didn't sound like me. Um, and everybody didn't listen to the same things that I listened to. Um, we had different life experiences. Um, and, um, I was definitely teased, um, teased for that. Um, and I'm gonna be honest, kids can be cruel. And I definitely had to, you know, deal with, you know, some of the harm, the harmless, yet harmful taunting of, of your peers. Um, and so at this point, um, we were in the Alabama Black Belt region for about a semester of school, and then my father got back from deployment, and we transitioned back to Colorado.

And now I am at Hila Middle School back in Colorado… and soon after we get back to Colorado, my parents give me that dreaded, we need to have a family discussion talk where they sat me and my sister down and told us that they were divorcing. And I just remember feeling like my life was in shambles. Um, I had already went through this experience during our first transition to the Alabama Black Belt region because my father was not around and then being back in Colorado with my family together again, which is where I felt my safety net was to now realizing all of that was going to be ripped from me, I was definitely devastated. Um, and then on top of that, honestly, I was a daddy's girl. Um, so to know that my interactions with him were gonna be even more limited, than what they had already became…it was, it was a lot for me, um,

to the point where, um, and I'm not, um, embarrassed to share, um, that I did have, unfortunately a suicide attempt…and to be really honest, it was not addressed in the right manner. I have always been deemed the emotional one in the family. And so me being emotional is not a characteristic that most of my family members really like. I always felt more so like a burden to my family more than I was celebrated. And I think I just had so much going on again. But I just recall thinking if I make it out of this, I would never, if given the opportunity, allow another child to feel the way that I feel in this moment, like…. I want to be for somebody else, what I felt like I needed in that moment. Um, and that was just someone to talk to. Like, honestly, looking back on it, if I needed to talk to my mother and my father, I probably could have. But I just felt like they had so much going on, they didn't have enough time to dedicate to my needs. But, um, yeah, so after my suicide attempt, my sister, mom and I ended up moving back to the Alabama Black Belt region, and we have remained here for the rest of my K-12 years and my adulthood journey.

**Embracing Expression**

So I moved permanently to Alabama with my mom and sister. Oh, and keep in mind when I say we moved back to Alabama, it was very much in a two-bedroom house, two bedrooms with the little bed area. It was very much my aunt, my mother, myself, my little cousin and my sister. It was very much five of us in a two-bedroom house. I didn't know, and maybe I wasn't supposed to know that according to the government standards that I was homeless, that I was in poverty. Again, please excuse me. I don't know if it was second semester in seventh or eighth grade, because the time period was really a blur for me. Um, but I do recall being in my, um, I think she was my reading/homeroom teacher. I don't know how classes were at the time. Um, but her name was Ms. Hunter, and she was a Black teacher. One of the things that Ms.

Hunter encouraged us to do every single day was to write. And so I remember I used to write, and I just used to write my little heart off. And I used to write about, um, anything… I would write about boys I thought was cute… I just used to write about everything in this particular journal. And I remember she used to tell me, like, "I love picking up your journal cuz I never know what is going to be in there." And "regardless of how chaotic you may think this is, just keep writing. I love your writing!" And so I used to look forward every morning again, excuse me, I don't know if it was just homeroom or if it was reading or writing, I don't know what the class was, but I used to love coming to school and going straight to Ms. Hunter's class and being able to write and to express myself and how I felt, because again, at this point I was coming off of a suicide attempt. My parents had separated at this point and my mother wasn't taking it well. Um, and I really couldn't, you know, go to her with, you know, those same emotions. Um, so just being able to write and express myself, um, it meant the world to me.

Um, and again, I told you, if I cry, please forgive me. Um, and even though Ms. Hunter did not verbally say a lot to me all the time, she read every single thing that I wrote, um, when I got my journal back. And I think that I was just one of the ones that like she paid "attention, attention" to because everybody didn't get the same feedback that I did. Um, and every day I would get that journal back and it would be, um, comments like, oh "girl, you know you should have gone and speak to him, or, um, today wasn't a good day, but tomorrow will be better." (Crying) Um, I'm sorry, ... (Crying) uh, that little 10 or 15 minutes we had meant the world to me…. Just knowing somebody heard me during a time in my life where I felt unseen and unheard meant the world to me. And so that made that year go by so much better. And she encouraged me, um, you know, to get outta my shell and talk to people because I'm not gonna lie, there were some people that were intrigued by me. You know, I got the nickname Colorado

girl. That did stick with me forever, um, even up to high school. Um, and Ms. Hunter just really pushed me, um, to get out of that, um, that depressed space. So I have been in Selma since seventh grade…from 2001 to the present.

## Chapter 2: Educational Journey & Impactful Figures

### Navigating Black Belt High School

Um, so then from middle school I went on to my Alma Mater Black Belt High School, where I definitely came out of my shell. Um, I had a core group of friends, and we were very close. And in 10th grade I came across a Caucasian male teacher. And he probably was one of a handful of Caucasian male teachers that I had at the school. But his name was Mr. Henry Pugh, aka P. Diddy Pugh and…hands down to this day, he was the best teacher that I ever had in my life. Um, believe it or not, he was quiet. Um, but anyway, his class was just so intriguing to me and nobody held a candle to his class. Um, everything he told was like a story. It was as if he lived during the Great Depression… as if he lived through the Middle Passage… as if he lived on the Oregon Trail. He just made teaching look so easy. He had a way of making history fun when nobody else liked to do it. And he did his best to tie in Black history into everything that he taught.

And for him to be a Caucasian male teacher at a predominantly Black school that at the time had probably over 1200 students, he had such great relationships and was very big on community building. Um, he was that teacher that everybody went to for a hall pass to class and for snacks (laugh).... now you might have been a little disappointed with his snacks because they might have been the off-brand kind, but he was, he was everybody's home away from home. He understood the type of students that he served, and he didn't make us feel less than. Like this city has always been a city where there is a lot of poverty in it. I know when we relocated here after

my parents divorced, it was several of us in a two bedroom house and I didn't know, and maybe I wasn't supposed to know that according to the government standards that I was homeless, that I was in poverty. I didn't understand that. And even if I did understand that, it didn't matter because again, Mr. Pugh made me feel seen. Mr. Pugh helped me know who I was, and I was proud of it. But it wasn't just me and my story. There were many other students that were experiencing hardships just like me and the reality is Mr. Pugh was a white man from another county who was married to a nurse and had no children. And Mr. Pugh had money. We always heard the stories of the money that he had, but he wasn't showboaty about it. He wore his khaki pants every day, and he wore that polo shirt, and that was it. Mr. Pugh never showed us any type of sympathy. If I was hungry because I was too stressed the night before to get something to eat, Mr. Pugh was who I could go to and ask for a snack. He would never ask, "why are you coming to me at 6:30 or 7:30 in the morning asking for something to eat? If there was anything, we felt more comfortable. When I say we, I mean everybody. We would go to him before we went to the counselors, and teachers would be in and out his room venting to him all the time. I remember Mr. Pugh used to always tell us, "this world is not going to be fair, but I don't want y'all to let society tell y'all that you're not good enough." Oh, I can talk about Mr. Pugh all day (laugh).

And then in 11th grade I met two more fantastic teachers. Um, I met Mr. and Mrs. Milly. I had Mr. Milly for math, and then I had Mrs. Milly for science. And they were complete opposites in their teaching styles. They were very vital to my growth. Um, and then I also met Mrs. Johnson during my senior year and "she didn't play the radio". That was the one class that I was afraid of. That was the one class that if you made that 69.5, it wasn't no, it wasn't no seventy, it wasn't no rounding. You got what you made. Um, but she meant business, and we were fearful of her. But I can tell you this, out of all of the classes that I took throughout high

school, I knew her AP calculus content like the back of my hand when I went off to Tuskegee University.

But Mrs. Johnson just had that classroom management that you just could not, you couldn't make that up. Some people are just born with it. And she was definitely born with that. Um, and so, um, here comes, um, my senior year of high school. And I have been at this point number one in class ranking since 10th grade.

Class ranking wasn't something that I really cared about. I just was in my books. I've always been as like, to call it the friendly nerd. And I remember at awards day getting an award that only went to the number one person in the class, and it had been that way for a while. But strangely later, I never got the call from my school counselor telling me to prepare the valedictorian address. And I soon found out that the young lady who was number two became number one ahead of me. And that the person who was number three became number two which meant I fell from number one in my class to number three. And without going too much into detail, because, um, the counselor at the time is still living, um, the parent of one of the two is still connected to the school district. Um, and just because the, the peers had nothing to do with this, um, I learned unfortunately, hmm, that politics unfortunately have its place. And because I was not connected in class and family names, I didn't need it or deserve it.

Um, the Milly family that I mentioned earlier, um, I had grown really close to, um, this particular family. And, um, Mr. Milly attended Tuskegee University. Um, and so did my uncle on my mother's side. And my uncle and Mr. Milly knew the admissions director at Tuskegee University. And I'm gonna admit, I was in AP classes, and I wasn't thinking about college. I'm going to be honest. I didn't turn in not one college application. Um, I just remember going to a college fair and Mr. Milly talking to the admissions recruiter at the time and she asked me to turn

in some information to her and I did. And soon after I looked in the mail and there was a scholarship and everything was taken care of. And I did not share that information with anybody. Not because it was a secret, it's cause I was so busy… I played volleyball. I had a job, I was in AP classes, everything. And I just, I was not thinking about it. And I'll never forget, um, the counselor came up to me at this girl of the year program and when they announced my accolades, and she was like, "How did you get that money? How did you get that scholarship?" And I just told her I applied. And the look she gave me was like "you're gonna be in trouble" look. And then fast forward two weeks later, and I was not given a call that I was still gonna be the Valedictorian. Um, and my family had gotten some calls, um, from a couple of attorneys that were, um, trying to see if we wanted representation. But, um, we just let things be. Um, and I'm gonna be honest, at that moment, it kind of shook me to my core. And it made me sad that something that I worked so hard for was honestly taken from me just because someone else, quote unquote needed it.

**College and Early Career**

So I enrolled at Tuskegee University in the fall of 2006, and I had an eventful experience. Um, I think as with most children nowadays, you get off to school and you realize, "Ooh, I'm not as career and college ready as I thought I was." But overall I had a great experience. I was on scholarship, so I did feel like I had a little breathing room. Um, but, um, if I could go back and do anything over again, um, I would have perhaps, excuse me. No, I'll take that back. I have no regrets. I have no regrets. And I, I truly did enjoy my college experience. So I went to Tuskegee University, and I ended up graduating with a general history degree.

And I went on to Auburn University at Montgomery, and I did the alternative A program, in secondary social science. And during this time period, I worked for the National Park Service,

and I had the time of my life working at the Interpretive Center being able to share on the impact of the Selma to Montgomery Voting Rights Movement. Also, during this time I got to meet a lot of very high profile people, a lot of people from around the state. My favorite experience was getting to meet my idol Mr. John Lewis… I affectionately called him "my bae" (laugh). So when I came to Black Belt High, like I said my favorite history teacher, Mr. Pugh, did his best in the midst of the 10th grade content to make sure that he highlighted and celebrated the African American experience in history. So I remember he talked about the Selma story, and I remember he talked about John Lewis and him being a student from SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), and I was fascinated that this was a college student that was a rebel. Cause I think I do have rebel tendencies myself. So I think that's what kind of like drew me to him. So I just became fascinated with him and his activism over time, which is why I was so thrilled to finally meet him back in 2014.

When I got notice that he was coming to an area near me, I randomly sent an email to his personal assistant requesting to meet with him. To my surprise through a mutual connection with my mom, my request to see John Lewis was approved. Oh, I don't know what I had going on that day (laugh), but I remember my mama calling and saying, "Baby, we're finna go meet your bae." And I remember saying what? She was like we're fixing to go meet your bae." I got dressed, (laugh) and we were there in minutes. And I remember like, everybody like standing around and I just remember, um, being in the crowd yelling (waving gesture) Sergeant Lewis, Sergeant Lewis. And then here he comes and I like start crying up (laugh)… like I see Michael Jackson. And he was like, "Hi" and then he kissed me on my forehead. And oh my God, I know this sounds gross. But I didn't wash my face for a week. (laugh). I just cried. I'm like, "you are my idol." And he was like, "what do you mean?" I'm, I said, you've done so much for me and

the world. And he was just like, he was just so calm. And we honestly stood there and talked for I say a good five minutes, he sat there and he made time for me for five minutes. Wow. So, and, and it's other people screaming and talking, but I felt like his girl, I forgot my mom was there (laugh). But I felt like in that moment, like I got to see him and I told him "how you talk about good trouble." And I said, "I have used that in the midst of everything that I do." What I now sometimes have to figure out is who's gonna benefit. So if I'm the only one benefiting, then that's really not good trouble. But whenever I do something that is against the norm or outside the grain, or I might meet resistance if it's gonna benefit somebody, I believe that's in good trouble.

## Returning to My Roots as an Educator at my Alma Mater

*My First Year of Teaching*

While matriculating through my Master's Alternative A teaching program, I had the honor of being Mr. Pugh's, my 10th grade history teacher's first and only teacher intern. Um, so about 2 months after my internship was over, I got a call from my work father, Mr. Pugh. He was like, "What are you doing? I told him, "Nothing." And he said, "Great. You need to come to this job interview tomorrow." I went on down by my way and did the interview, and I was given the job on the spot and that's how I got started with my first teaching job at my alma mater. And it was very overwhelming. So the high school was a decent size at that point; we were 7A. We still had over a thousand students, and we had about six teachers per core. Um, but even in those teachers' classrooms, we were still probably sitting 30, almost 40 deep in those seats.

So I had the opportunity to work across the hall from Mr. Pugh. And there was another female in my department, so it was us two women versus the men. And I did not feel completely alone, um, because I had, um, a few teachers who taught me that were still in the building. So I

still had a safety net, so to speak, being there. One day I remember we were in our classrooms and somebody said, Mr. Pugh's not feeling well. Mr. Pugh left to go home. And when he got home within five, maybe 10 minutes, he had a stroke, and he did not return to Black Belt High School. And this was very difficult for me. Mr. Pugh was my mentor, my work father, the man who taught me so much and who I wanted to emulate my style after. That safety net was gone for me. And unfortunately after he left, everybody in my department was either too busy or didn't care to help me. I'm just gonna call it like it is. Um, and unfortunately the majority of them were coaches. And some of the teachers were adamant about leaving, so they really didn't care. The other female in my department was having some classroom management issues. So the help that I needed, the guidance that I would've hoped that would've been given to me from my department head was gone. The teacher that took his (Mr. Pugh's) place was not of any service to me; I'm just gonna be completely honest with you. Um, the help that I did get was from those veteran teachers who taught me and they gave me support. Um, but just support from within my own unit. It was not given to me. And, um, it was rough knowing that Mr. Pugh was sick and going through that first year of my teaching while I made so many mistakes. That was real tough going through that alone. And I made a vow to myself that I would never allow another teacher to sit in that building and not be seen, to not sit in that building and not be acknowledged, celebrated, not receive any help. Cause when I say those men did not help me, they were disgruntled, they were coaches and had other stuff to do. Some of them was stealing ideas from me. And I'm just thinking, y'all should be helping me, not me helping y'all (laugh). Um, it was a rough first year, and again, I vowed that I would never allow somebody else to sit in those shoes that I sat in my first year of teaching. And that is why I go out my way to speak to new teachers and make sure that they're doing fine.

Um, and then also, um, another experience I dealt with my first year of teaching, without going into too much detail, I did have an issue with, um, sexual harassment my first year teaching. Um, and it was not handled properly. And unfortunately, it was something that did require me to go to AEA (Alabama Education Association) about. Well… I did not go to AEA about it. My work father, Mr. Pugh and some others went to AEA about it because I was just gonna leave the situation alone. Um, um, and with that, again, without going too much into detail about the situation, the young men in the class were questioned about what happened. All the young men took the side of the young man and nothing was done until admin got pushed by AEA. Um, and Mrs. Tempero, what made that whole thing a situation? So interesting. I had these children as 10th graders. Do you know, two years later when they became seniors, I had one come to me and tell me that he apologized for not sticking up for me when he was questioned about that particular situation and how sorry he was, and that his mother and his sister would be disappointed if they knew what he did and the lie he told, but he was too afraid of the social repercussions that would've came from telling the truth. And even though it was years later, that meant the world to me, that those students thought enough of me to apologize for something that had happened years prior.

Um, and so it is also from that experience that not only did I wanna be somebody else's Mr. Pugh, but I also wanted to make sure that these young ladies understood their worth. Um, and so it is also from that experience that not only did I wanna be somebody else's Mr. Pugh, but I also wanted to make sure that these young ladies understood their worth. And even if they didn't understand their worth, they understood the power in their voice. And that is also something that I always preach about in my classroom. And at times it can get me in trouble. I'm

just really just big about people using their voice. But nevertheless, that was my first year of teaching in nutshell.

*Teaching Experiences While Working Under Many Different Principals*

Throughout my nine years of teaching at Black Belt High School, I have worked under four school principals and three superintendents and with each new leader, I have witnessed the entire school climate and culture change.

My first year principal was Mr. Jones. So basically he was my principal for my first year of teaching going into the first semester of my second year. During only my second year of teaching at the beginning of that school year, Mr. Jones made me department head of the history department, sponsor over the School Government Association, and the chair of probably like seven or eight other committees. And when I tell you I picked up that notebook and said, no ma'am (laugh). And I went to question him, and he told me that I was a born leader and that I was going to sink or swim, but he wasn't worried about me sinking cause I was gonna swim. Cause I was trained by the best. However, in that moment, I was overwhelmed. I said a lot of profane language (laugh). Um, but hey, I guess I survived. So that is where me, I guess, being a school leader began to develop because of all these responsibilities that he put on me.

And then another female principal (Mrs. Clark) came and finished my second year of teaching out. And this was quite honestly with you, the only principal that gave me instructional feedback, she was a tough cookie. She ain't play no games. Um, but just getting an email from her in November of that year to just send me kudos and let me know that I was doing great meant so much. And then even though I was like a newbie teacher, she still shared my stuff with people. Like that meant the world to me and that let me know then that my love language is

words of affirmation and everybody's love language is different, but I was definitely gonna act on it as much as possible.

Another year later, we got another principal, and she was female as well. Um, and I do wanna go ahead and say her name. Her name was Mrs. Jessica Peterson. Um, but Mrs. Peterson, to this date, I would like to say was one of the most influential principals that I had. And I think it's because we both spoke the same language, and that was community building. And she was very big on creating a community so that we could rise together. And I remember she sent a group of teachers to the Ron Clark Academy and then empowered us to take steps toward modeling our school after concepts we learned at the professional development. And she really invested a lot into her faculty and staff. And she really empowered the teachers to be their best selves. For instance, if I was passionate about technology, she was gonna find me a technology workshop to go to. If Mrs. Lett was into science, she was gonna send her to a workshop. She was really big about helping us all become our best self. And one of the things that she gets credit for that my first principal didn't, I think underneath her leadership, I became comfortable, um, with kind of being in the forefront and being I guess you could say a school leader. I am thankful for Mrs. Peterson because this whole peace, love, and happiness person that I am today, um, I've always been that person and at times I felt like I had to censor that to make other people comfortable. But she embraced that, and she truly did advocate for us all to be our authentic selves as long as we were in the business of doing right by these children. Um, but then unfortunately, she got moved within my third year of teaching and then we had another administrator (Mrs. Amy) that came, and she was only there serve as an interim principal to finish the last month of school out.

And now we have, um, the principal that has been here, um, the longest. His name is Mr. Green. Um, and over the last five years I have experienced a lot, but it has shaped me into the educator and leader I am today. When he started working here, I realized that his vision and my vision were different.

*Teaching Under Mr. Green's Principalship*

During Mr. Green's tenure, 2018-2019 was the roughest year for me. Um, personally I had experienced a miscarriage, and there were just some petty things that were going on amongst some of the faculty members. Um, I'm not gonna point fingers or do anything like that because it really is irrelevant. But there was just some petty things that were going on below the surface, and unfortunately misinformation was given to Mr. Green prior to him meeting me and some of the other teachers in the building. And unfortunately, that affected how I and some other teachers were treated in the building. And, um, I was hurt. And I took some professional decisions Mr. Green made regarding me very personal. One of those decisions was me being moved from teaching 12th grade to teaching 9th grade. Um, and it's not because of the grade level so much so as it is the content. When it comes to teaching history, everybody fights for one of two spots. Everybody wants government econ or everybody wants World History 2. And I had to wait until the last senior teacher left because he had held down 12th grade for a long time. I had to wait until he left to get that spot. So being moved to 9th grade, a subject that I did not like, um, after sticking around working hard to get that 12th grade spot… to get that taken away from me…that, that, that was, that was challenging for me. Um, and I'm not gonna lie (sigh), it brought back a lot of childhood trauma. Um…I felt unseen. I felt tolerated and not respected. I felt like a bother. Um…(sobbing)… and I probably said some things out of anger. That was just a really rough year (sobbing). And I'm dancing around a couple things just because I do not wanna get

emotional… (sobbing…sigh). Um, but that was a really, really, really rough school year for me (sobbing). And I went back in that space where I needed my safety net, Mr. Pugh, my 10th grade history teacher and mentor. And he wasn't there. (sobbing) I felt like that kid who needed her journal (sobbing). And so I don't know what happened that particular school year, but I said, "you know what? (sigh) I am not going to allow anybody to steal my joy." And from there I began developing some really good relationships and bonds with my students. And I said to myself, "Shirley, you are somebody's Mr. Pugh (10th grade history teacher); you are somebody's Mr. and Mrs. Milly (11th grade math and science teachers); you are somebody's Mrs. Johnson (AP Calculus teacher); you are somebody's Mrs. Hunter (middle school reading/ writing teacher)." Just remember that. And I just started creating my own space in the building. Um, I remembered my why, which was those children (sobbing) and those educators that saved me from a dark place. And again, I just started creating my own space. I started finding like-minded individuals to occupy those moments. Um, and I just created a little community within the community. And eventually for whatever reason I was chosen to be teacher of the year that following school year. I was shocked that my principal and the leadership committee at the time had chosen me…cause again, we were not on the best of terms. And that is when, I guess, that's when the magic started happening for me. And at that point, I realized that I am a valuable member of this school community. And somebody's watching and somebody needs me. I'm somebody's Mr. Pugh, Somebody's Mr. & Mrs. Milly and somebody's Ms. Hunter. And even though I'm uncomfortable in front of others, God has put me in this position for a reason.

**Chapter 3: Striving Toward Advocacy, Empowerment & Social Justice for My Students**

**Just Being "The Mama"**

Just being "the mama," I think that's mainly how I show up. I believe this is what allows

me to be first and foremost intentional about building personal relationships with my students and creating opportunities for them beyond the stereotypes and misfortunes of society placed on them. With some students, the bond is instant. With other students, there is some work that has to be done and then there are some that our personalities just clash or they were dealing with something, and it is beyond my comfort zone or skillset to be able to provide them with whatever that they need. So I am intentional about building relationships with my students. On day one of class, I am very, very, very intentional about doing different types of icebreakers all throughout that first week. Within that first week, I also make it my business to make my parental contacts and to provide my students with artistic ways to express themselves. Even the ice breakers are done in a way to cater to everybody's learning style. And over time I've been fortunate enough to where majority of the students would acknowledge that they know I care about them because I show it. And having them know that I care for them sets the foundation for why I teach, how I teach and what I teach.

However, I can honestly say that I have not always sought to support my students the way way I do now. It was not until year 2019 when I was fortunate enough to have encountered a 9th grade class that I like to say changed my life forever. It was through this experience that I realized the huge gap between my students' needs and my willingness to support them. Before the school year even started, just because I had heard so many things about this particular ninth grade class, I already felt miserable, frustrated and defeated about this incoming class. I had heard this particular incoming 9th grade class had run off three teachers in the same month while they were in middle school. They also had an incident in middle school that resulted in them being in the same classroom for the remainder of the school year. So just knowing these things about this 9th grade class before they got to me caused me to put a wall up from the jump. And

when I say them children worked me for every dollar that I made the first two months (laugh). Everyday, I questioned whether or not I was gonna come back the next day, every single day. And it wasn't just me, it was all of their teachers. I mean, as ninth graders they fought tooth and nail. They fought all day every day. Um… boys and girls…they just fought and they didn't care about the consequences.

My 4th block, 9th grade class was especially challenging. They ain't wanna do nothing. When I say they didn't wanna do nothing, and this is how I was perceiving it then, "they didn't wanna do nothing." They wouldn't do no work. They weren't rude to me, but still would not follow my directions and were still defiant. I couldn't get across to 'em. I couldn't reach 'em. I used to pray that they would skip, but they never skipped. They were there every day on time. And I just knew they were there to drive me nuts and that was their life's mission. And I have a picture of a note in my phone that a sub left me for that class around September 2019 that read "they were the class from hell." So after I got that sub note, I made a habit to send an email before being absent from work to admin to be like, "Hey, I'm gonna be out. If admin is not in my room, they're gonna fight." And sure enough, every day I was not there, they would fight.

But I remember one day I yelled to this class and said, "What do y'all want from me?!" And I will never forget it. A young man by the name of Mike Lemon told me, "You don't even like us." And I looked at him and said, "What are you, what are you talking about?" Mike responded and said, "You've had an attitude with us since the first day of school. You don't wanna be here. We don't wanna be here. What do you want from us? You asking us what do we want from you? What do you want from us? How do you expect us to perform? And you don't even like us. You don't even know us." And I'm not gonna lie, I brushed it off. And when they left that day, I remember crying in my room. I didn't go to afternoon duty. And I remember I

cried because he was right. I had heard about them before they got there, and I had already judged them. I had already labeled them, and I didn't get to know them. I think it was so much chaos, maybe that first day, I don't even think I did an icebreaker with them. I think I went straight to work. I didn't do those core things that you should do, which is build relationships. I broke one of my cardinal rules, one of the things that hurted me as a child. I didn't let those students be seen. I didn't let them be heard. I didn't get to know them. Some of them I realized I knew their last names and didn't know their first names. So I realized I was projecting a lot of myself onto them.

And I remember I spent the rest of that nine weeks, about two or three weeks, trying to unravel what I did by being intentional about building relationships, something that I should have done from day one. I admit I ain't teach nothing. I ain't teach no content, we ain't learn about no Napoleon, no revolution, American War, no World War. Instead, I readdressed my role and focused on empowering those students and making those students feel okay, making those students feel safe and helping those students see that they are beyond a label and that they are beyond the mistakes that they made. I realized the rules and procedures that the school wanted me to force with all students wasn't gonna work with them. For instance, if I knew these students already had two strikes before they came to me, if Mike or Jess or another student said a cuss word, and I knew anywhere else that would get them put out, I would address it in my own way. I wouldn't put them out because I knew the label that I and everybody else had on them. And I didn't want that to be one other thing that was on them. And from that point on, my relationship with this entire senior class became different. I was intentional about getting to know them.

I realized that I didn't understand God's placement for me with those students because I was too busy being in myself. I was too busy in my own head to realize that those kids were

there for me, and I was there for them. And so it took (laugh) until about November, but we finally got some structure and order in there. I think the work that I did with those set of students, whether it was good or not, their reputation amongst their class was kind of heavy. So I think other students hearing about how those particular students felt about me changed my relationship with all of them. And so over the past couple of years, I feel like I have turned into this maternal figure (crying). And maybe I needed them just as much as they as they needed me. Because in a weird way, I had suffered a miscarriage and the loss of an uncle and I was in a downward spiral and doing a lot of things in my personal life I'm not proud of. But baby, these children had me so wound up. I didn't have time to be depressed or anxious anymore. I had to figure out how I was gonna survive and get to and reach these kids. And now I just don't know what I'm gonna do at their upcoming graduation in May. I just know I'm going to be an emotional mess. Like I don't think they know how much they have changed my life. It made me change how I view discipline, how I look at students, how much I emphasize social and emotional learning and maintaining a healthy mindset and how I push female empowerment to the forefront. I am the only core teacher that they had their ninth grade year that is still here so I'm the only consistent adult that some of them have had in their lives since elementary school. So being their teacher, in some of their eyes being their favorite teacher, being somebody they'll never forget, I don't, I don't think they'll understand at all the magnitude of what they've done for me in my teaching career. I really don't (crying). Alright, so let me stop before I start crying even more.

**Why I Teach**

I don't understand how people can get in these classrooms and not teach these children and think it is okay. I don't get how leaders can make decisions that they know are going to negatively impact our kids. And then act surprised when our students don't perform. I don't get

how admin are upset that these kids are tearing the school apart, but we don't celebrate them when they do well. We don't give them opportunities to be free. We don't ask them what's wrong with them. I can sleep at night knowing that I am trying. I may not give a hundred percent all the time, but to know that I got up, and I went in with the intentions of doing right, and I do right, I can go to bed at night. I don't understand how people can sleep at night, knowing that they're doing these kids a disservice when life is already doing these kids wrong.

I feel like it is my duty. It is my charge. It is my mission. It was written in the book for me to do right by these kids. And when I don't do right by them, I pay for it. Whenever I need to show up and be present for them and I can and I choose not to, I pay for it. It bothers me. I'll lose sleep over it. The aura in my room is off. I'm sorry. I cry about everything (laugh). But God would be so disappointed in me. I don't understand. We all have bad days. We all have them. Most of us have had traumatic incidents that happened to us throughout our lives. And that is what has driven us to come to these Title One areas cause we want to show these primarily Black and Brown children that it can get better. That "I made it." That "I may not know what's going on in your house, but trust, when I was your age, I had a lot going on in mine."

**What I Teach**

So when it comes to what I teach, I feel as though it is my job to expose these children to the law of the land as Black and Brown children. They must be equipped with the law. They must know their rights as citizens, and they must also know their rights as students in the school building. Because a lot of times I feel as though we treat these 14 to 18 year old young students, as if they do not have agency, as though they don't know how to talk, as if they do not know how to make decisions. Do they need a little crafting and guiding? Absolutely. Do they need a little help maybe putting their thoughts together? I think we all do at times, but they still have a voice.

And I feel as though sometimes as adults, we don't like when children ask questions. But I always tell my children, "it's not what you ask; it's how you ask it." So when it comes to the standards that I decide to teach more in depth than others, I think of how it is going to affect them in the long run. If I have 17 standards, the reality of it is I can't address all of them in nine weeks. So what are my benchmark standards within these benchmark standards? Which one do they need to know more information about? What is more important for them to be equipped when they walk out in society? Because to say that they're gonna be viewed the same as their counterparts at the private schools or down the road in another county, that would be…that would be a lie. So I know a lot of people are very cautious when it comes to teaching history now, especially with all of this CRT (Critical Race Theory) lingo ban and those thoughts and concerns that are out right now. So I try my best just to teach my students the information and let them make inferences on their own.

And as a history teacher, I feel as though I have a responsibility to teach every side of the story by helping my students to acknowledge past struggles and use those triumphs as motivation, as they persevere through life. I think the misconception, especially when it comes to history, is that we're trying to raise Black nationalists, that we want all children to hate people that are not of color and to start some type of race war. And I think that is the misconception. And I think in our school community, we teach Black excellence, but I don't think we teach all sides of Black history and Black excellence. I think we focus so much on slavery. We spend so much time on the struggle that we don't focus on the resilience. We don't focus on the perseverance. I think the Black history of the Alabama Black Belt region is important. I think slavery and all of that is important, but I think that there are so many other sides to history and an aspect of Black History that I don't think in our current school community that we focus on

enough. For instance, we don't talk about the Harlem Renaissance era. And I just wish that all sides of African American history could be celebrated. Nevertheless, I think the only way that this school could be a medium for the social justice we need at Black Belt High is for it to have local school leaders and state level support to do so. Because a lot of times we act like issues don't exist or some people may just be afraid.

**How I Teach**

I love organized chaos. I think it has its time and its place. The classroom environment that I strive toward is one that is self-regulating. The students come straight to class and prepare for their bell ringer. They entertain each other. They talk and have a good time. And then when it's time to work, everybody is ready to work. And then after I've given them what I want, need them to have, and they're able to manipulate that content in their own way and find a way to make that connection to what they have going on. Then we're back to that organized chaos. That is what I daily strive for. I wish for all of my students to feel like they're a part of a family. I want us all to love each other.

So, what I have come to embrace as foundational pedagogical practice to make this family piece a reality in my class is teaching the whole child. There was a time where I did not truly see or hear my students and there are several experiences from my past that have helped me to emphathize with my students even in how I teach. So along with teaching history content, I also strive to empower and push my students to embrace their true selves, to embrace social emotional learning and to use their voice and choice to enact change around them. Also, I don't always have the money to always physically support my students in every way that I can and need to. So that's where the grant writing comes in for me. I'll write up a Donor's Choose project and ask for help to get something for my students. I will try to find a grant to just help

improve their time, energy, and space with me and that's just how my desire to write grants came along. Like, how can I make this better? How can I finance it? I can't go to admin, so here is another outlet.

*To Embrace Their True Selves*

Teaching students to embrace their true selves means first giving them the capacity to do so. This is where I strive to fill in the gaps for my students by seeking out resources to help make this happen. I believe a great example of this is displayed in my recent efforts to support our LGBTQ plus IA students in the school. So, I was recently awarded a $10,000 grant from an organization that is focused on improving the lives of LGBTQ plus IA students. This grant will provide money for me to sponsor an LGBTQ plus IA student-led book club that will be called Living in Color and for an end of the year field experience trip for about 10 students. We will read, discuss and reflect on six books: one is about Black male voices, one is about Black female voices, one is just about being proud of who you are in general, and the last three books are related to the gay rights movement. One is about Harvey Milk, who I think was the first Black activist and elected official in San Francisco. I think the other book is about Atlanta Pride and how it started, because it's one of the biggest pride festivals in the country. Then, the last one is about the post-nine club shooting that happened in Orlando. Another big piece that this grant will fund is taking the students on a field experience trip. This trip will serve the purpose of exposing the students to an environment that is more accepting of their sexuality. So by the end of the school year, the group will decide on whether they want to go to Atlanta or Orlando to be a place where they will be able to see adult people that are also gay but that are unapologetically living their lives. Like I'm hoping that's what the students realize and are inspired by. That they see that it does get better once they leave the small conservative town they are in. It truly means so

much to me to be able to create another space for my students to thrive and realize their potential to succeed beyond where they are (crying).

So in the midst of writing the grant, I really got into it. I was intentional about sharing ways on how I can positively impact a group of students who I know are marginalized in the building. There's nothing we do in the curriculum that highlights LGBTQ plus IA trailblazers. Because even in history, we don't really talk about James Baldwin or Bernard Rustin and other people who were gay. Either people don't talk about it or they talk about their life experience without acknowledging their sexuality. So I really got into writing this grant. And so in the grant application, I talked about being in the south and being in a very conservative town. I also talked about how being in the Bible Belt made it even more of a conservative area. I was trying to figure out a way I could expose students to both some positive and negative sides of history. Again, at the end of the day, it's still history. And then still give them space to share their voice and an opportunity to share their emotions and their experiences in a comfortable space.

*To Embrace Social Emotional Learning*

In the midst of everything that has gone on this school year—student death and a natural disaster—I am intentional about empowering my students by making sure that they know that they are seen and heard and encouraging them to realize that it's okay to not be okay sometimes, but it is not okay to stay there and to remember the importance of taking care of themselves and not to rely on anybody or anything to make them feel better, like they're great, they're awesome and that they need to know that for themselves. Apart from my own childhood experiences with mental health, what has encouraged my emphasis on social emotional learning in my classroom the most is the year of virtual learning that took place due to COVID. My students went through so much and would often voice their need for help…or that they needed somebody to talk to and

that they were stressed, they were hungry, and they were tired. When we were returned in person from virtual learning due to COVID, I was intentional about facilitating a social emotional learning space that would give room for my students to act on opportunities outside of the standardized curriculum to have fun and exercise freedom in their school experience. So far, the outlets that we have engaged in are gardening, art and Mental Health Mondays.

One of the things the students requested was maintaining a classroom garden that could be used to grow food and flowers. Upon getting this request, I sought out and applied for several grants through Alabama Power, local city grants, and the Alabama Bicentennial grant, and I am so fortunate to have received enough funding to maintain our classroom garden for about three years now. Over this time, I have grown a love for gardening and how it allows my students to see their work in real time and make those real-world connections. It's something that a lot of them (my students) enjoy. The gardens that are in my classroom are hydroponic systems and typically take, I think, about four to five weeks to grow the plants. Each month we have a the SEL word of the month. And what I'll have my students do is they vote on the teacher that they wanna deliver the flowers too and then the students deliver it to teachers who have made an impact on them and their learning experience. Over time, I have witnessed how maintaining a school garden facilitates my students' ownership of their learning. It is something that they can be proud of. It is one of very few things that they have control over. It is one of the few things that they can use to express creativity. It is one of few outlets that they have to have as their own.

Another responsive resource I have used this year is art. I had a student last year who was a character in herself. And I found out the only thing that calmed her and many other students in my class was painting. So after seeing how much it calmed my students to engage in art, I applied for and received a $700 Donor Choose funding to provide this mental outlet for my

students as a reward system. And then even if some of the artwork, like the messages and stuff that they would put on there, like there'll be days like most of the artwork was done during like Black history or Women's history month. But then some days we'll just do freestyle and paint whatever's on our heart in the moment. And so I noticed that some of them would draw some stuff that concerned me, which led me to reach out to a particular counselor. So it is through the art that I have been able to create a free space for my students to escape the weight of the world around them and to just be in the moment.

Another outlet in my class are the Mental Health Days I have in my class. Typically on Mental Health Day, we will have some nice jazz music playing. And the students have one of two options. They can either express themselves through drawing or writing, or they can do nothing. I'll often of course open up the floor for us to have a discussion. And there are times that I may notice that some people are participating in the conversation more than others. So I'll give them an opportunity to paint, draw, talk to their peer, or take a nap. I'm gonna be honest, a Mental Health Day is me trying to get the kids to unplug because I have noticed the importance of unplugging myself. So depending on what time you come into class, you might see us addressing the elephant in the room. You might see me still talking with students as a whole group, or you might see me circulating around talking to them. But my preference is that they are unplugged, not on the phone. They're either talking with somebody or they can listen to music and then have their head down. A mental health day is a day to reset their mind.

*To Use Their Voice and Choice to Enact Change Around Them*

To me, voice is the emotion and choice is the action. And so as their teacher, and even in my role as a school leader, I feel like it is my responsibility with my students to make it safe for them to express how they feel and to help guide whatever decision that they're gonna make as a

result of that choice. I think that as students they have to figure out how to make rational choices and not allow their feelings and their emotions to drive every single thing that they do. Overall, I feel I empower student to use their voice and choice by giving space for them to be heard and valued, space to be student leaders for the school, space to independently and collaboratively learn and space to take ownership of their future college and career goals.

*Space to be Heard and Valued*

I feel like I promote student voice and choice with my students when they come to me and I don't shut anything down. If it's something that I don't think is rational or is gonna happen, I may try to redirect the thought. But just providing that space and opportunity for my students to just be able to talk freely. And then helping them maneuver through how they're gonna react as a result of whatever is going on. Again, I feel like that's my role.

Every day I start class with "quick write sets." And I love to use social emotional learning question templates. So I'll ask questions like, "Is your cup half empty or half full?" Or ask, "Give me a word that describes your mood." And what I love about these questions is how they naturally create space for conversation amongst my students. I also do check-ins where I will also provide one-one feedback. Students love getting my feedback and you would be surprised at how many times my students have said," I really didn't know you were reading that or thank you for reading that."

*Space to Be Student Leaders for the School*

As an SGA sponsor, I am a firm believer that I am just a teacher representative and my job is for my students to find avenues to express how they want the school run. I ensure that there are student leaders in each grade so that there is someone representing each grade level.

I may say, "Hey, I would love if y'all did this," but a lot of times they don't like my idea.

Sometimes they don't. But my job is to help them prioritize maybe some things that they wanna do. When it is time to have more structured meetings, we do that. I give them the opportunity to speak freely. If you were to come into our SGA meetings, you'll find that it is mostly student-led. They create their own goals. They determine what they want the school year to look like for them and their peers. I simply just provide the vehicle for them to make their goals as successful as possible. I mostly just encourage them by not shutting down their ideas, unless I know it's gonna go against policy. And even with that, depending on what it is, I'll help them find ways to get around, something that might be a roadblock with admin. For example, I have not over the past three years sent admin. my student government association list. They don't know who's in SGA. Well they know the officers like who's the president and who's the vice president. But I don't tell him who are the class representatives for a reason. Because depending on the class representative's relationship with the principal or any other administrator, that is how we'll tackle a certain issue. So for example, if the kids wanna dress out of uniform or the kids say, we're not having fun or we're not doing this. We'll look at the student leaders and say, "Okay, you play football, I need you to go talk to him about X, Y, and Z." Or if it's another student body issue, depending on again, the relationship that a particular student has with admin, we will send them to the admin as just a student, while admin does not know that they are a voice for their particular class.

*Space to Independently and Collaboratively Learn*

Now, as far as student voice goes in the classroom, all in all, I am just intentional about being flexible and responsive to the needs of my students collectively and individually.
Like I honestly, um, love a deconstructed choice board. That's what I like to call it. And that is typically how I like to introduce the concept as a whole or I break it into pieces, but I give my

students choices on how they want to learn and how they want to show me mastery. So if somebody's a writer, then they'll write. If somebody likes to design, like I've had students like create websites on just big unit topics. I just give them autonomy to choose how they want to present what they know or that they get something. So an assessment for one student might be that multiple choice assessment. Somebody else might be drawing something on poster board. I like to give them the autonomy to show me that they get it.

Another thing I always do is have conversations with my students; every single day I open up with a bell ringer. One or two questions are always related to content. And one of the questions is always like, "how are you feeling? What's going on? What do we need to talk about?" And of course I'm looking at those responses and there's things sometimes that need to be addressed right then and there or, you know, I'll talk to them one-on-one. But I think, again, going back to something that I said earlier, being present, just them knowing like, I'm here if you need me. I think if I had that in school, it would've helped me. So I just try to do that for them.

I am also intentional about taking my students on field trips so that they can be exposed to people, cultures and places outside of their hometown. Because for many of them, they have never even left their hometown. It makes my heart melt to see my kids get so excited about something as simple as going to a restaurant that they have never heard of before or doing something that they have never done. Just recently, I was able to secure grant money to take my students on a free trip to Atlanta to the Botanical Gardens. It was truly an amazing experience for us all.

*Space to Take Ownership of their Future College and/or Career Goals*

A lot of times my planning period is spent talking one-one with students and providing them with the extra help they need that they are not able to get at home or within the school. This

help is often in the form of career planning, college applications, FAFSA, connecting them with other adult mentors. For instance, I knew a particular student that wanted to go to college for pharmacy. I had a sorority sister that was currently in pharmacy school at the time to connect with that student and provide some mentorship. I had another student that was applying for the Gates Millennium Scholarship that I put in connection with another line sister who was a Gates scholar. Another time is when I probably sat here and did FAFSA applications and talked to parents probably more than the counselor did. There have also been times where I have had to recommend some students be placed in DHR. So it has been a lot of me preparing students for their next steps. And then for some of them, I just focus on pushing them to the finish line cause that's what they need.

**Beyond My Classroom**

*Supporting My Colleagues*

I feel that advocating, empowering and promoting social justice for my students goes beyond what I do directly for and with them. It can also be seen in how I support the other teachers in our building. One of my core values is community-building. I truly believe that in the midst of doing this work in what often feels like a toxic and chaotic schoolwork environment, having that support there, having somebody that we can laugh with, having somebody that we can cry with, having somebody that we know shares that experience is so important. I don't have to talk to the teacher every day, but to know that if I had a problem, depending on what it is, okay I know I can call such and such. Like I hope that nobody in this building feels like they can't call on somebody for something you may not want to, but like just having the option to, I think that's what, that's really important. But the reality of it is, I am a school leader. I have been in this school nine years, which is longer than most of the teachers in our building and which

makes me one of the senior teachers in the building. During this 9-year time frame in this same school, I've worked under five principals and four superintendents. I've seen about 2000 students. So I believe any experiences that I've had, good and bad, throughout this time frame has allowed me to be a source of light and information for my colleagues.

*Speaking Up*

Back in 2018, I became public enemy number one because I advocated for a colleague that was being discriminated against because of his sexual orientation. I became aware of some comments that were made about a particular teacher on his teacher evaluation forms. There were some lies that were told. I knew that admin at the time did not like him because he's gay. So, the teacher was gonna leave it alone, but I couldn't let it go because it just didn't sit well with me. Other teachers kept telling me to leave it alone. And I just, I just could not leave it alone. And so with that teacher's permission, we went to the central office and had a conversation about his experience. Admin was reprimanded. And unfortunately, I was also reprimanded by the admin Mr. Green, by being moved to ninth grade the following school year. I shouldn't have been; I could have fought my move, but I just let it be. If you look at my current principal's track record, everyone else that was moved to a different subject, they were asked, but I was not asked. I found out by looking in our online school registration system that I was going to ninth grade. And when I asked why was I being moved to ninth grade, it was, "Oh well we have a challenging group that is coming over and you're the best fit." And I knew that wasn't the case. I knew it was a reprimand. He couldn't punish the teacher that he discriminated against cause that's why he got in trouble, so I was the only person left for admin to put their frustrations on.

*Technology Support*

In the midst of COVID, I had several colleagues to call on me confidentially to get

support with using technology for their virtual classes. I'm a techie person so I was able to get on my techie stuff and got to excel beyond my wildest dreams. And so I had a colleague that has been teaching a lot longer than me that called me crying on the phone because they didn't know what to do. They barely knew how to put grades in the online grade reporting system. They weren't tech savvy at all, and they were two steps from quitting. And so, I think at this time we had gotten some vaccines. I was like, "are you vaccinated?" And they told me 'yes'. And I went to their house. We did a tutorial on Schoology and Zoom, and I stayed at their house the first day for about three hours. And then I went back a second day the whole day, like the whole teaching day. I told them you don't have to do what I do. And so after that second day they felt more comfortable. And like to this day, every time I see them, they smile at me. And that eventually motivated me to create and disseminate Ed Tech newsletters to teachers in our school who need them because apparently the teacher I helped told somebody else who told somebody else. So now, currently, on a confidential basis, I help six colleagues with educational technology. I have a group on Microsoft outlook that I email monthly to provide them with new technology resources that I use in my classroom and explain how I feel it could be of service to them and their students, and how it could transform their life.

*Emotional Support*

I think my biggest role amongst my colleagues is providing emotional support. Many of my colleagues silently witnessed the reprimand I experienced from my current administrator because of how I advocated for my colleague who was gay. They also saw how I became disgruntled by this and how I became more vocal and started speaking out even more. Maybe I should have shut my mouth, but I think I made, in the words of my mentor, my idol, John Lewis, "I was making good trouble." And I think for the most part, I make good trouble. I think that my

colleagues recognize that I make good trouble, and therefore they do come to me a lot just asking for support and venting. And as tiresome as it may be, I allow it. Again, I'm all about people being seen and being heard and feeling comfortable making decisions. And so I have become that fountain that people pour into. And at times it can be very heavy. But that's just where prayer comes in. And I have to ask God to help me be a source of light for others, but not allow that to diminish my own light. And so, yes, I have a lot of colleagues that come to me for that emotional support. I think and I would hope that my coworkers know that I am a teacher advocate all day long. I love our students just like the next person. But I truly feel like we, the teachers, are not seen in this building. I don't think that we're seen in this district. And I get it, our principals are getting slack from the superintendent, the superintendent is getting slack from the state department and school board. The school board is getting slack from the parents. So like, it's just this cycle. But we as teachers are paying for everything. And we are the ones that are in the direct line of fire trying to save and rescue these students. And I don't feel as though we are appreciated.

*Teacher Action Committee*

Um, so I, some kind of way came out of this little shell, and I started creating a community again within the community. So I was able to attend a workshop before COVID shut down everything. And at this workshop, the teachers were talking about how they kind of had a similar experience and they came up with a teacher action committee. And it was a bunch of teachers that were like-minded that pretty much created a safe space in the building for their colleagues to vent. They didn't have a union or anything like that. And they just created a space for teachers to come talk and vent and do things of that nature. I went to this workshop in February of 2020 and then the world shut down March of 2020. So during this time, we all were

shut off and I was dealing with my own mental health issues, but I made sure to construct the groundwork for starting a Teacher Action Committee when we returned back to school. When we returned to the building, I started a Teacher Action Committee as a way to empower the female voices amongst a predominantly male staff. I intentionally asked female colleagues to join and to help advocate for change. I truly believe that women are the backbone of society. This school would fall apart without the women in the background working.

*Attending Culturally Relevant Professional Development*

I prefer to attend professional developments that identify systemic issues that our city faces. My favorite PD that I went to in the past nine years was the Dare to Lead training at UWA. It helped me to evaluate how I show up so I can better help others, including my students, to show up. That PD meant so much to me. At that training I had to do some exercises, and it helped me reflect on my core values. And I think every last one of us from Black Belt High School, maybe not every last, but I think most of us all had different core values. When I sat there and I thought about it, Black Belt High has everything that it needs. It has everything it needs amongst the staff to have the same reputation as every administrator, every department head, every teacher in that building, collectively, whether it's knowledge or connections and resources. We all have what it takes, and I think it takes a team effort.

The Restorative Justice (RJ) training I attended back in 2018 was a key PD that forever changed how I view "discipline." Our students are beyond their problems, and the RJ training truly helped me look at my students beyond the problem because I learned their behavior is a cry for help to a deeper issue. The Model Schools Conference was another great PD because I saw leaders using effective strategies in schools that look like ours work behind community and systemic issues.

## Chapter 4: Challenges in the Work Environment

Constraints to Student Success at Black Belt High School

Since my time as a young student and now educator in this area of the Alabama Black Belt region, some trends have remained in the public education system that I believe are a disservice to many of our students. Some of these trends include: emphasis on athletics over academics, emphasis on vocational studies over four-year studies, bias against students with low socio-economic status, lack of parental involvement, nepotism, classism, lack of leadership consistency, poverty, high faculty/staff turn-over, Teach for America's teacher training, lack of certified teachers, mandated school policies, and lack of political and social justice awareness.

*Emphasis on Athletics over Academics*

One theme from my time as a student and even now as an educator that I believe is hurting many of our students is the idea that "the ticket out of the hood is athletics." We're getting all of this extra money and hiring like 50 coaches to come and perform athletically. For whatever reason, for example at Black Belt High School, the ticket out is athletics. So we spend a lot of money in the athletics program, yet I'm sitting here with 10-year-old history textbooks with my old classmates' signatures in them. That's an issue. But the football team is about to get some new helmets. They're about to get some new gear that they just got last year. We preach education, but we practice athletics above all because every person that has shown up here is a coach as of recently. And then some of these coaches are even outside of their areas of certification. But because there was a spot, a way was made to get them here. So for whatever reason at Black Belt High School, our ticket out of the hood is athletics.

And the reality is we are giving these kids false hope because the majority of them don't make it out. So now we have a student, for instance, who's the quarterback of the football team,

and we put all this attention on him for performing athletically, but he barely made it through academically. So now here he is his senior year, second semester in my class, wishing "dang, I wish I would've taken my grades more seriously." We failed him. We let him do whatever he wanted to do for four years because he was the quarterback of the football team. But because he did not perform academically, he don't know what his next step in life is. A talent on the football field but didn't do what he was supposed to do in the classroom. But we excused it because of his athletic performance on the field.

*Emphasis on Vocational Studies over Four-Year Studies*

Another trend that I see now that I saw then is that there seems to be this very big focus on vocational studies. We always say career and college ready, but I feel like sometimes we don't really look at the four year aspect of it, if that makes sense. We are so quick to put students in an internship and send them to the community college, as if the community college is the only place that can provide assistance to our students.

*Bias in Dual-Enrollment Student Selection*

And another theme I see happening from then and now is how students are selected for dual enrollment. It's supposed to be for these students who live below the poverty line, because they wouldn't have an opportunity to go to college any other time. But it seems that we put everybody's child in the dual enrollment program except for the children who need to be in there. So dual enrollment is often full of all the teachers' kids and doctors' kids and the people who are well connected. And even now, when it's time for students to sign up for dual enrollment and other things, the privileged kids are contacted first and then when they need to fill in the numbers at the end, then they will finally give other less privileged students an

opportunity to sign up. So that's something that I have unfortunately seen just from my experience from then and now.

*Classism*

Classism is a theme of then and now. And when it's time to get that scholarship money, the ones that have, they don't get the same money and opportunities and for whatever reason it's like a fight to the top cause you need them to be in that top spot so they can get that money because they're not getting financial aid. Does that make sense? So I saw a lot of that and I have seen it in a couple of classes here where the students that were more well connected miraculously ended up at the top of the class at the very end.

*Community Violence*

There has also been an issue with community violence. It has sadly become a norm for me to have students come in and asked if they can be excused from work because their house or someone they loved was shot up the night before. Gun and gang violence is so heavy in our community, and we have lost several students to the grave or prison system because of it.

*Lack of Parent Participation & Engagement*

Another theme is a decrease in the amount of parental participation. I don't know if that's a thing I should acknowledge, but it is what it is. Like I don't even think I know if we have a PTA. I know we have one, but I hardly ever hear about it. If there was something I could change as a whole in the school systems, it would be parental involvement. Being intentional about truly involving parents outside of open house and outside of parents coming out to support their kids at senior night at the football game or at a Title One meeting. Because the reality of it is, we live in a cycle of poverty. Like some of these parents my age, their parents maybe didn't do more because of a lack of knowledge.

*Teach for America Teachers*

I am not saying that I am anti-TFA; I know that they serve a purpose. A majority of my non-minority colleagues do come from TFA, and I do have a love-hate relationship with the organization, because I feel like it's one of those things where it is a band-aid to a deeper problem rooted in education disparity within our school and other schools across the Black Belt. But the irony of it is a lot of my non-minority colleagues understand that they represent this problem, and they understand that the organization is a problem, yet they still participate in the issue. They understand that this is just a bandaid, and that they were placed here to help temporarily fix the problem and return back to their privileged hometowns within 2 years. And because many of them have never lived in poverty or experienced many of the things my students experience, I have witnessed it to be hard for some TFA teachers to sympathize and empathize with specific student struggles in the classroom. Because if a person has never lived through it, never seen it, or know how it shows up in their daily walk, it is hard to operate in the midst of it.

Some of them (TFA teachers) have found it hard to acknowledge that some of these kids just come to school for a meal. Some of the TFA teachers don't understand that, and they don't understand where that comes from. They don't understand that we have a lot of violence in the community. They don't understand that that shows up with students sleeping in class. They don't understand that that shows up with students acting out of frustration because of what is going on at home. But then on the flip side, you do have some that understand, but instead of being empathetic, they're sympathetic. They project a "I'm trying to save you by just teaching you the curriculum" mentality, as if education "as is" is the key, when in reality, teaching the state curriculum is not gonna solve the issue that many of our students don't have food at home.

Teaching the history of the presidents is not gonna solve the issue that "my daddy is whooping my butt right now." Being just focused on "teaching the standards" in a Title One school is just not a realistic approach to dealing with the systemic issues that are in this perished area, and it is clear that many of the TFA teachers just don't get it.

So a lot of times I find myself helping the TFA teachers who are on my hallway get acclimated. I guess I'm perceived by them as being the approachable Black woman on the hall, and that kind of makes me feel like the mother of the hall too. And it is a role that I of course don't necessarily like, but it is what it is. And I think a lot of times I am like that buffer, and I have to give that motherly love. And it's funny because some of them, especially one White male TFA teacher in particular, love to question me and is puzzled by things that they already know the answer to. A TFA teacher asked me one time, "Why did this kid come in here sleepy?" I thought to myself, "Sir, you're frustrated that they are sleep, but you don't know that their house got shot up last night. Did you forget we just had a natural disaster a little while ago, so you don't know where that child's living at." But I feel like in my motherly figure role with my non-minority colleagues, I often become that reality check that I don't wanna be for them. For instance, a kid may not come to a TFA teacher and say, "Hey, I am hungry. I didn't eat last night." or "Hey, my mom was gone somewhere with her boyfriend last night, and I was up with my younger siblings." So a lot of times it's me telling them, "Hey, it's something going on, maybe you need to ease off." And do they always listen? No…absolutely not. But I find my role being that reality check…being that mama. But as the Black woman, I don't wanna always have to be the mama, but I always feel I have to be.

*Student Labels*

Some common labels that are placed on my students are "ghetto, thug, bad troublemaker,

promiscuous." The label that is placed on my students is that "they can't get right and won't do right." And they are at a lost cause because they are dependent on a lot of the grown people that do cause confusion in the school district. Sometimes I just feel like these kids don't have a chance. When people hear about the name of this town, they think of struggle. Whether they think about when they shot in our school or when we had to have state intervention twice in our school. They may think of when we had a student death in the building. They may think of when we had another issue with students using drugs. Then, there's this perception that our students just won't do.

*Lack of Leadership Consistency*

So, there is no consistency…and what I mean by consistency is leadership. I mean, Mr. Green has been the principal here, this is year five and in my nine years of teaching here he is the longest serving principal I've had. And if he makes it to next year, he'll be Black Belt High's longest serving principal. And that ain't nothing to celebrate honestly. I mean it will be a big thing if he comes back. But the fact that in him making it to year six will be the longest tenure that somebody has is really sad. And then when I think about the context of my situation, even within my department, you know, this is year nine for me, and I've been in my department the longest. Up until just this year, I have been the only tenured teacher in my department. So there is no consistency.

Also, I have had several superintendents in my 9 years of teaching. My first year it was a male that was acting and then the other seven years have been two other women and now we're back to having a male. And there has definitely been a shift that I don't think that we were prepared for. The power shift that we're currently experiencing in our district has been interesting to watch because I saw how people treated the former superintendents because they

were women and how they go about things now with a male superintendent are completely different. I noticed how the female superintendent didn't get the same respect or credit or acknowledgement for decisions that she made. She had a harder time because she was a woman. In addition, because of this power shift at the top, I feel like the administrators in the building are not on the same page and them not being on the same page has caused even more confusion to what was already a chaotic and unpredictable school year. The power shift has caused me to reevaluate whether or not I wanna return. My students are being affected by the power shift because some of the decisions that are being made are not in the best interest of the students. I feel like some of my colleagues feel the same way. There is a shift going on in the building. There is a shift in the district. Yes, change was needed, but how this change is happening makes us all uncomfortable and uncertain about what is next.

*Lack of Relationship Building*

And because of the inconsistency in faculty and staff employment at our school, I believe that there is also a lack of genuine relationship building with the students. One of the things that we should preach more about that we really don't is relationship building. It is hard for a kid or even me as a grown up to build a relationship with you knowing that you're gonna be gone the next year. So it's hard to build relationships when you know that person is leaving. So you're kind of like always on edge. So I think that also adds even more to the lack of consistency.

*Nepotism*

I also believe that we have a class issue in the community itself where we have predominant families that kind of control everything and with them kind of beefing amongst themselves, it doesn't really leave any bread for the rest of us to have, so to speak. And unfortunately, some of us or some people have this mentality of "Oh, I made it out and I gotta

take care of everybody that brought me out." But the problem is the people that brought you out may not mean you no good now. And I think that is an issue of that kind of "I owe you one" type of thing. And I think that's what's going on as far as the leadership on maybe a district level. I think that's the problem that we currently have going on. Because who's getting the position nine times outta 10 has nothing to do with who would be the best person to help serve these kids. It's I owe you one because back in 1974 you gave me some food when I needed it, but that has nothing to do with how that employee is servicing these kids. And it's obvious that we're not serving these kids with some of the things that are going on. A lot of these kids are acting out and crying for help.

*Lack of Certified Teachers*

Some days I really just think about why am I still in this profession? Because once upon a time, highly qualified meant something. I went through this teacher preparation program and that meant something. I got this master's, and it meant something. But now we got people sitting in classrooms that have been on the emergency certificates for 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 years. Now what are we doing to these children? We want these kids to perform to a certain level for the adults that we put in charge of them. Yet, I believe the adults need to be held to a certain level. Don't get me wrong, I'm not a good test taker; took me three times to get the Praxis done. But dang it, how have you been sitting in this classroom teaching this content for five and six years now? And trust me, it's been some people who have been sitting and they have no desire to get what they need to put themselves in a better position to service these kids. That's a problem. So what do we do? We just keep extending the emergency certificate process. So that's another issue.

*Mandated School Policies*

When it comes to enforcing school policies, I am a little bit of a rule breaker if it means

that I can better service my students. Some school policy negotiations I have had to make include emphasis on social emotional learning (SEL), technology integration, hall/lunch duty procedures, headphone/cellphone policy, eating in the classroom, and classroom behavior expectations.

*SEL, Technology Integration, Hall/Lunch Duty Procedures*

SEL is a mandate that that we should all be following, but I don't think nobody really does. But because that's meaningful to me, that is something that I embed regularly, even on some days more than standards-based instruction. With the technology integration mandate, I may not have enough Chromebooks depending on the day of the week, so I do let my students use their phones. I'm either gonna use the technology or I'm not. So that either means they are gonna use their phones or they're not. When I take my kids to lunch, I don't force them to the right side of the hall in a straight line nor do I hover over them in the cafeteria while they are eating. I tell them what time we leave and what time we come back and everyone just moves at liberty according to those timelines.

*Classroom Behavior Expectations*

In the classroom, especially for my students that are regularly suspended and sent to the alternative school, I try to be intentional about letting all of my students show up however they feel most comfortable being present as long as it doesn't harm or distract learning for their peers. Whether that's using profanity or standing up to do their work, laying down on the counter, like however they felt like being present, I embrace it because I know they can't be themselves when they leave outside my classroom. I also let them eat in class, because I don't play about my students being hungry and trying to learn. For example, I had a kid one time bring a whole loaf of bread out of his book bag with some peanut butter and jelly. I looked at that student and said, "Go ahead and eat honey." Cause I don't know why that student had food like that, but if he

snuck it up in here and is trying to eat and it is only the second block of the day, I'm gonna let them eat. Cause I don't know if they ate last night, I don't know where they got this food from. "Maybe somebody brought it to you." And I know they don't want them to eat in the classroom, but if my baby want to eat, I'm gonna let 'em eat.

*Testing, Testing and More Testing!!*

Because of all the standardized tests thrown on my students by admin, I didn't give not one test in my classroom to my students this year. I hate testing. I hate serving on the testing team. Don't get me wrong. I see its purpose. I understand that we need to assess students and see where they are. But I also know if, for example, if James Lowe was sleep through the first lesson, he will sleep through the second lesson, and he will sleep through the third lesson. When he gets the test, he's gonna make a zero, I already know this. No test is gonna tell me that James Lowe does not know this information. But I also know that James Lowe is displaced. I know he's displaced because he's one of few that get to come in out of dress code every single day. So what is more important to me, allowing him to get some rest or give him this test that he is going to "fail" and give him more anxiety and put even more stress on his life than he already has.

Sometimes I wonder "where is the line drawn for sympathy to end and empathy to begin? This year alone, we have tested our students every three weeks, for ACT prep, for ACT workeys, for midterms, for AP exams, for mock exams, and for district assessments that never went anywhere. Like I really think between March up until the seniors last day, they had something to do every single week. It was just too much. I wasn't about to add to that; I just wasn't going add to that. So I didn't give not one test for my class. Their final exam was about 10 short answer questions. And within them 10 was stuff like, how was your school year? How are you feeling today? I was a little checked out, I can admit, but also I can't help but think about how I am

expected to care about providing these students with a quality education while also having to create a safe space to do so. I am expected to have an engaging class, but then admin is pulling them out at least once or twice a week for testing. And I think this year we tried to recover from COVID, but we had three traumatic events and it felt like we were having to hit reset three times within the same year. And also just reading my student responses throughout this year about how they were just ready to graduate and leave the school, how they were stressed and how they were anxious and sad. After reading my students responses, I was just like, "I'm just gonna have to pivot." So in that moment, I realized that I couldn't properly serve my students' well-being and do all of those assessments. I just had to cut a loss for one. So yeah, assessment is not in my vocabulary this year.

*Standards-Based Instruction*

Teaching social studies is really scary for me right now. Well for one… they ain't changed our standards since 2010 and at this point, I don't think they're gonna look at them until 2026–2027. Um, so being fearful of what I teach now because of the recent CRT (critical race theory) ban and what somebody got to say. But it has made me mindful of how I'm teaching and how it can be perceived by others. For instance, I'm not gonna lie sometimes when my classroom door opens I'm thinking, "Lord Mackie gonna come up in here and he's gonna be upset with me."

Now, clearly from the artwork in my room, I'm not that mindful of or care that much about it because the stuff that's on the walls is very much pro-Black. But this is my students telling their story without any compulsion or guidance from me. But I can say the difference made between myself and some of my other colleagues is that I am intentional about trying to show that I am proud to be a Black woman without saying it. I don't think I have to tell you that

like, White people are bad or this is what they did to us. I don't have to preach that to you every single day. I think hopefully in the way that I teach and the way that I present myself that you understand I'm a Black woman. I'm proud to be a Black woman, and if you're a Black child, I hope you're proud to be a Black child.

*Lack of Adequate Minority Representation on the State Board*

I don't believe it helps that we only have about one or two people representing the counties in the Black Belt region on a predominantly White state school board. And to add to this, we only have about only two minorities on that board that can speak to the African American experience. Nevertheless, all of their jobs as leaders is to make decisions for the betterment of all children. But it seems that no decisions are made with minority children at the forefront of those decisions. Honestly, it makes sense because we do not have many people on the board who can empathize with these children's experiences.

They don't know what it's like for these kids to struggle. So therefore the policies that they make are only about affecting the masses. So they're not thinking about us except for when it comes to how we affect how the state as a whole looks. But if how we operate does not affect the masses, they ain't thinking about us. They think about us when they have to, when they have to do the failing school list, that's when they think about us and how they can help improve the delivery of instruction to make things "better."

*High Faculty/Staff Turnover*

Faculty and staff turnover is an issue that we've had in the building since I've been here. For example, as I said before, I've only been teaching here 9 years, and I have been here longer than more than over half of the staff. The lack of consistent leadership has led to uncertainty and anxiety that riddles through our building. It affects potential relationships. I am careful about

how I interact with even colleagues in my own department because I'm unsure they're gonna return next year. So a lot of times I feel like why get invested if they're gonna be gone soon. Um, I feel like the students feel like every teacher in that building has a role and is placed there for a reason. And I feel like at least one student can say that a particular teacher is their person. But unless that teacher has been there for a while, the students are nervous and they're hesitant about building relationships because they don't know if those teachers are gonna come back. And I don't blame them for that.

So I could be wrong, but I think teachers are adamant about leaving the school because our leaders seem to be focused on everything but making the place better. We have had a change in leadership, a power shift, and I feel like that power shift has taken admin off their rockers. And I feel like they are job-scared… every last one of them. I feel like most days they run this place like a business and not a school. There is no way they could be thinking about us when they send us last minute emails. There's no way they could be thinking about us when they didn't advocate for us to stay at home the day after a student died in our building. And there were several of us that were in that building. And I think so many teachers want to leave, not because the kids are bad. There are many other districts that have their issues because the kids seem as though they are completely off the rocker. They're leaving because of leadership. And at our school, our leaders make decisions day by day without thinking about how it is going to affect the teachers or the students. Or they think about how it's gonna affect the students but not the teachers. I'm not sure how many decisions are made where there is a teacher at the table and if there is a teacher at the table, it's the same one or two teachers.

Because there are people that I have spoken to in this building that says there are administrators that have not said more than, "Hey, bye" to them or "good morning or good

evening. How are you doing?" That is the extent of the conversation. These people in this building, there's some situations that have happened that if another teacher hadn't brought it to their attention, they wouldn't know. You don't have to be all up in our business, but leaders should know, "hey, such and such is sick. Or Hey, such and such is having a hard time in this particular class block." We all operate like factories in that building.

*Lack of Political and Social Justice Awareness*

I would like to address the lack of political and social justice awareness that we have in our school community. I think so many people are afraid to address issues related to the separation of church and state, but the reality of it is we are in the Black Belt and there is a lot of overlapping and it should not be, but you know, it is what it is. But there are so many things that are going on in our community election wise, political wise. I feel like we focus on politics when it's election time. And other than that we don't pay any attention. We don't teach students why it is important to understand how politics shape and mold the education system. I don't know why we don't address classism because we have it whether we like it or not. I don't understand why we don't address environmental issues that we have and even how we think about how we have sliced these district lines in our community. I don't know why we are so afraid to address how people should be treated regardless of race, gender, age, creed. I don't know. It's just so many things that we could address: poverty and healthcare. Because I think being aware of those things and how we can potentially address them are also a part of what makes us global citizens that are able to fight that are able to compete in a global society, which is a part of the whole mission statement for our school. How can we help make the world better when we don't acknowledge and address different issues that are affecting a lot of people around us? Because just coming to school to learn a little science, learn a little history, learn a little health, learn a little English.

That is not enough. That's not enough for these kids to go out and get a job. That's why when they go off to college, it's such a culture shock. That's why when we went off to college, it was such a culture shock. Our teachers taught us content and that is it. They didn't teach us about the world around us. We're not teaching these kids about the world around us, but hey to each its own.

By not addressing social inequalities, we also reinforce them in the school practices of today. We are made aware of many of these inequalities through mandated PDs at the beginning of the year that train us on homelessness, signs of suicide, violence, and food disparity. We know all these things are present. We have all these people that make all this money, yet we really don't address the root of the problem. I don't understand. We know what the issue is. We know that it makes no sense how our predominantly Black Title One public school and other nearby private schools can be this close, yet our test scores look so different. The facilities can look so different. We can sit here and say it's a lack of funding. But then when you think about it, we get more funding than them. So like that really isn't the root of the answer. What's really the root of the answer is that we're not listening to and responding to the actual needs of our kids.

Politics has its place. If there is something that I feel as though will benefit my students or help me so that I can better help my students and I know somebody that can help me get around the yellow tape to do it, I feel like it it is okay to make good trouble as John Lewis would say. I feel like that good trouble is, it is okay to break a rule. It is okay to not follow policy if there is going to be a positive effect behind it for my students and/or colleagues. So going to my administrator and trying to make him feel bad for perhaps not coming to an SGA meeting and knowing it's gonna make him feel bad, but then I turn around and try to rope him in by saying, "well, hey, since you didn't do this, can we do this instead?" Like, yeah, I shouldn't do it, but

hey, it's, it's for a good cause. I feel like the rule of thumb for determining whether I am making "good trouble" is if it does not positively impact a large majority of people and if it is going to be a disservice to anybody, then I won't do it. So, that is what I mean by politics has its place. There's always room for bending, there's always room for negotiation. I feel like people use connections and resources and information to help drive policy change.

## Constraints to My Success as a Black, Female Teacher and Leader at Black Belt High School

### *A Typical Workday for Me: Navigating Work-Life Balance Struggles*

Now, I will say I have had to do some work and I'm getting good at it, better at it. I've had to do some work with my personal and work balance. I am all in for my students, and I don't think that's safe for everybody. Um, well, my workday is very long. Um, not on purpose. It's just, it is what it is. Um, teaching is my life. Um, whether it is summertime, Christmas break, I do not have a healthy work and personal balance. I'm working on it. Um, and I have gotten better. It doesn't consume my every waking thought and moment, but the reality of it is, my work is my everything. I put my all into everything that I do, therefore, it consumes a lot of my time. Um, and work is not just five days a week from 7:30 to 3:00. Um, work very much consumes, um, six outta seven days. And that's only because I have been intentional about unplugging at least once a week. Um, yes, there are days when my workday is not five days a week, but sometimes just due to other obligations, work does consist of even the weekends.

But nevertheless, I wake up between 4:30 and 5:15 every single day. Um, the earlier I wake up, it's due to obligation that was not fulfilled the night before, or maybe everything was fulfilled, but I'm just anxious, nervous, depressed, upset, or something just has my mojo off. So I'll get up in the morning, I'll meditate and pray as long as I need to. I am very intentional about when I wake up in the morning, praying over my day, praying over my students, over my

colleagues, because I may not get that moment to do so. And then after, I will dedicate about 20 to 30 minutes after my meditation to work on something and be productive. So I'll work for a few minutes and then I will, of course, do the usual and get dressed and yada, yada, yada, yada. If I am not driving because I do carpool, I am working on my computer on the way to work. I turn my hotspot on on my phone, and I will start working. So work will start for me before I arrive to the school campus. If I'm not working at six o'clock, I will also use that time to plan my day by making a 3-part list that focuses what has to happen, what I would like to happen, what needs to happen but can wait. And I will get to work and get started on something that needs to happen, or I'll make a plan for tackling the things that are in that first column (what has to happen).

By the time I get to work, I usually only have time to do one thing, and that is to write out my school-mandated agenda board. Because by the time I get to work within five to 10 minutes, somebody needs me. Whether it is somebody in the front office, whether it is a colleague or there is a student waiting on me, somebody needs me in the morning. So on a good day, which is not often, but on a good day, I am left alone to like write on my board, hang out and get my head right for the day. Um, but for the most part, I don't, I usually walk right into work and something requires my immediate attention. My door is already open when I enter my classroom because my door does not fully lock, so therefore sometimes I walk in my room and there might already be a kid in there or there might be a colleague waiting on me or admin might have my door propped open waiting for me to come down the hallway. So when my day starts, I am most stressed at the beginning of the day. I teach two AP classes… AP government and AP macro. They're both classes that should be taught over a semester, but I only have nine weeks to teach each one of them. So I always have to make decisions on whether to follow the CD based

on what requires the most time and energy and what will work best for my students.

So, my first block class is the most intensive, again, trying to get in that semester worth of work in nine weeks. And then I have the same class, second and third block. And then I have another class fourth block. So I have three preps. Um, and then, my planning is fifth block. Now my third block is my smallest class. It was my smallest last semester and this semester. It is roughly seven students. And on a good day I have four. Um, so there are many days when I don't have anybody. There's many days where it's just one or two of us. So my lunch block misses a lot of content. I try to move forward with just the two or three that I have on a daily basis. But it is hard because those two or three are not always the same. And also admin is aware that I don't have that many students. So a lot of times I'll get pulled out for stuff during lunch block. And then also my other students know that I don't have that many students and they will come and visit during that block. During my lunch block when we return from lunch, I do have a small group of students. It's about three that eat their lunch in my classroom. While my other students are working, I do allow them to eat at a table in my room. This group of students was in my lunch block last semester, and we were in the cafeteria together when we witnessed, unfortunately, a student pass away. One of my students is one of the ones that brought it to our attention that, um…. I don't wanna talk about that anymore. But, um, yeah, so that group, I had those three students that were with me at the table at that point in time. So now, they do not go in the cafeteria to eat lunch. That is of course, they unfortunately have to walk through the cafeteria, of course to get to the gym. But as far as sitting down eating their meal, they do not do that. Um, they all take the same third block teacher. I've had a discussion with her and she is okay with them, um, coming to my room. So typically if they do eat lunch, somebody will bring them a tray to my room, and I do allow them to eat lunch in my classroom. And then fifth block

is my planning. However, once a week is a stretch, but I will say once a week I'm able to utilize my planning to get work done. I think it's more accurate to say two to three days a month, maybe once every other week. But for the most part, if I am not having a meeting during my planning, I am with my students. Whether that is with the SGA and we're planning something, whether that is with the group of students that are in the Rotary club that the superintendent has me working with and helped organize his meetings with, or whether it's just students that I have for one reason or another that do not like going to their fifth block class or they just know it's my planning and they wanna spend that time with me. And I know that it is against the rules. Um, we should not be housing students that are not on our blocks during that time. Um, but I would be a hypocrite. Um, I remember being in high school and any block that I had an elective that my teacher would allow me to. I do this because I don't want the moment that a kid needs me and wants to talk and I put them to the side because yes, who wouldn't wanna take, who wouldn't wanna do their work at work and not have to take it home with them. But I would much rather use that time to help somebody if I could. Um, so, planning is usually spent talking with girls about girl stuff or helping a student do work or just allowing somebody to sit there. Cuz I have several students that are in co-op with no jobs so some of them will get sitting there. Um, but on my planning, any given day, you, you might find one student in there, it might be two, it might be five, it may be 10. You just, you just never know what you're gonna run into when you come in my room during my planning period. So at the end of my school day, I kind of plan and prep for the next day. On my ride home, if I am carpooling and not driving, I work on my computer. Once I get home, I get dinner figured out and around seven to nine on a good night, I plan and prep for the next day but on a bad night that seven to 10 could stretch anywhere from 11 to 12 o'clock at night. I don't get much time during work hours or during my planning, so I have to use

that time when I get home. But again, I have that list, what has to happen, what I would like to happen, and what needs to happen that can wait. Do I get everything that I need done? Absolutely not. Cause I do have a lot on my plate, but I do what I can, but I am trying my best to work on that balance. It ain't, it ain't going really well, but (laugh), um, it's going.

*Teaching in Survival Mode*

For me personally, I always feel like I am teaching in survival mode, because I never know what's going on or what could be about to happen. And because there has been so much trauma in the building. Even just within the past six months, there has been so much trauma linked to gun violence and student drug abuse and because of that we are already heightened. Like I wake up everyday wondering, "Is something gonna pop off today?" Everyday I arrive to work with a plan and the awareness that this plan could easily get thwarted by unexpected events such as school lockdowns, bomb threats, internet outage, fights, etc. Just not knowing what's gonna happen is so mentally exhausting. Am I gonna get an email at 7:30 that says I have a program that I need to take my kids to? Is the internet gonna be out? Was there a fight? No. Was there a shooting last night? And if the shooting happened last night, were the students that I teach in it or affected by it? Because the reality of it is, unfortunately nine times outta 10 when something happens in the community, the students were either involved or aware of what happened.

So then I need to find out what happened last night. And that also often will determine what kind of day we're gonna have. That's something that I can't change, it's just when you're in this type of environment, you just have to, to learn to make adjustments. So now I have gotten to the point where if my plan A doesn't work, then I just don't have a plan B. Because having that plan B and C became too stressful. I'm gonna be honest, I think that there's a rainbow at the

end of the storm. Literally, after experiencing a natural disaster firsthand, I realized that life is not promised, and I think it taught me to live and it taught me to treat every day like it might be my last day with my students. And I feel like that's kind of more of it. But like I've just kind of like decided now that if my plan doesn't work, we're gonna sit here and talk or just find other creative ways to process the crazy events happening around us. I just can't continue to put this stress on myself because my students see it in me and I don't want that to be one other thing they are having to experience while literally trying to survive their home life.

*A Toxic Work Environment*

Since 2018, I have been regularly going to a therapist once a month. The best thing that ever happened to me since I've been working at Black Belt High is when COVID happened and the copays for a mental health visit went from $50 to $15. So now I can go 24 times a year instead of 12, and I've gone faithfully. And at one point I was thinking about going out for mental health FFMLA for four weeks. So, I'm not ashamed to admit I was not in a good head space before now. I had a panic attack in September 2019, Labor Day weekend to be exact and had to stay overnight at the hospital. And I know I did have to take off one day from work. So prior to 2019, not even prior to… it's, it's always been toxic. My work environment has always been toxic. Unfortunately, being a department head and being over SGA and other committees in the school, I have had my share of subgroup experiences. And in some cases, when you don't react in the way that certain people want you to react, then now you become a part of the problem. At times being here has taken the joy out of teaching. As grown people, we preach to students to not let things bother you. Words are just words, but words are hurtful. Since 2019, I have gotten to the point where I have been able to form somewhat of a wall, maybe not a brick wall, but I've formed a wall to where I don't give my 100 percent like I used to, and I have been

less stressed out. But I have felt like there is a disconnect between me and my students and my practice. And I had to forge that wall in order for me to survive because I cared so much. It drove me up the wall. It drove me up the wall when I couldn't teach a lesson just because it was some other random event taking place at the last minute. It drove me up the wall when I couldn't teach because I also had to watch somebody else's class. It would drive me up the wall when we would have a brawl in the hallway and the kids' minds were focused on the fight and the aftermath of the fight. It would throw me off when I'm getting observed and nobody else is getting observed.

It definitely made me sometimes question how Black Belt High School was my saving grace when I was this lost child. And I feel like somebody else feels like they're a lost child and like I feel like each teacher is here for somebody and I feel like because other people aren't pulling their weight, I have to go over and beyond. But I also feel like, "dang, but that's not, that's not fair to me." And this environment has made it to where I feel that there's no way to give my 100% in this environment and it not take a mental toll on me. It's not humanly possible. It's not. So it is what it is. And I think there are some things that would make it better. For instance, we could hire personnel for how they could actually service the students and not just because they're coaches. Because now I feel like we're cheapening the students' academic experience. Not saying because they're a coach, they're gonna be awful. But hiring them because they are a coach and not what they can do for these kids is not ok. Again, it affects me and my mental state because most of them come in my department. It is toxic, and we have to find ways to maneuver through the toxic mess. I feel like God, for whatever reason, did place the mama bear hat or crown on some of us for a reason. But we all have to take that crown off from time to time. And there are even times when I think about leaving Black Belt High School. But it's what I know. It's what I've always known. And at times I can't bear the thought of like starting over

somewhere else. I just can't imagine it. I, I can't imagine it honestly. I have an ongoing job search now, and I have listed about eight schools besides Black Belt High School that I'll be willing to go to. But when it is all said and done, it's like this is my home, this is family and I don't wanna feel like I'm leaving my family, as toxic as it is. Like this is the family that I chose, and I don't, regardless of how bad it is, I don't wanna feel like I've abandoned my colleagues. I don't wanna feel like I've abandoned my students.

*Always Feeling the Need to Censor Myself*

I often find myself censoring my true spirit to make people comfortable. Censoring is me being quiet, going into my shell. My zodiac sign is one that makes me go into my shell, especially when I'm on the defense. And that's what I do when I don't feel comfortable expressing my feelings out of fear of judgment or reprimand. Censoring is me dying inside. Censoring is me bottling everything up. And me being this happy-go-lucky, good trouble warrior, I feel like that is the essence of who I am. I am peace, love, and rock and roll if needed. But I have become "a silent weapon". And what I mean by that is, it is only when needed. Censoring is just not me being myself and me turning into someone that I know I'm not. Like, I feel that even my colleagues have seen how my demeanor has changed. I'm not vocal, I don't say anything unless I absolutely have to because I always feel like someone is always watching.

When I say somebody is always watching, I'm talking about from an administrative and a student perspective. These students watch everything. These students know what teachers are dating in the building. These teachers know when colleagues are pregnant before they come out and tell 'em. They know when we're having a bad day. They watch us. And I think we all know those students, especially those young ladies, that look at us like their school moms and they hold on to everything that we tell them. And I try my best not to allow my mood and what I do to

affect them in a negative manner. I get that I'm entitled to have bad days because I am human. But I don't want my students to have a negative experience because of me. I have relationships with colleagues that have better relationships with admin and other people than I do. But one thing I'm very big on is other people's experiences. And I don't want their experience to be my experience.

And what I also mean is that admin is always watching. Um, just to be blatantly honest, I know that I am probably the only person in my department that goes over and beyond and that takes their teaching craft extremely seriously and puts in work beyond the job description. Like, I'm doing my job beyond the 7:30 am to 3:15 pm work hour schedule. And so I always feel like somebody is looking at me. I feel like some people are looking at me because they want me to succeed and don't want me to get sidetracked. But I think people are always watching me because they expect me to do good. And when I don't do good, it's a problem. And I also feel like there are people that are praying on my downfall. Because whenever I have those moments where I'm not on my A-game, it is acknowledged more so than when I'm doing what is expected.

*Not Feeling Genuinely Seen or Heard by My Administrators*

On the opposite end of the spectrum, outside of the expectation to perform for evaluations and check off boxes, I do not feel that I am genuinely seen and heard by the administrators. So for the most part, I do what I want when I want because I feel as though nobody is watching me. Nobody cares. I'm not STEM; I'm not ELA. There's not a microscope on me. And because there is not a microscope on me, I like to look at the history department as though we are viewed as the required elective. So unless it's Civics Exam time or unless they need me to help somebody do something, or whether it's SGA that is needed to do something, I

just move in any way that I want to because I'm not seen and I'm not heard. I don't feel that what I have to bring to the table is of the utmost importance right now. And at first it bothered me, but hey, if I'm an afterthought, then I can kind of do what I want and it's not gonna be on anybody's radar. That may sound bad, and I can laugh about it now, but again, I am used to not having that microscope on me to make decisions that I hope positively influence the school environment. I feel that need to have faculty meetings. These emails are nice, but we need to have faculty meetings. We need to see our administrators as instructional leaders. I need for them to come to my classroom and provide me detailed feedback. I need to see them outside of walking in and out the classroom. I want them to know that we have gardening systems in my room that are growing fruits and vegetables. I want them to know and not hear through somebody else's mouth that I'm getting grants to close gaps in learning for my students.

*Being a Black Woman in a Predominantly Male School Environment*

Especially being in the history department, I am always conscious of, okay, today I'm teaching about Napoleon, or today I'm teaching about George W. Bush, but I feel compelled and to always find a way to tie it to Black history. I kind of feel like that is the expectation, even if whatever I'm talking about, and they might come in the trash even if it deals with absolutely nothing in that point, dealing with African American history, I feel like I have failed my students if I do not find some type of connection to tie it. So since I feel that sense of obligation being an African American teaching history in a predominantly African American city, I feel an obligation to always tie the content to Black History, no matter what state standard I am addressing.

Then me being a woman in a predominantly male content, I feel obligated to, excuse my French, teach my ass off because the men either all have been coaches who are lacking in what

they do in the classroom or they just don't perform to my idea of a quality standard for our students. And that is okay. But everybody doesn't necessarily need to feel obligated to go over and beyond. Like, I've even gotten to the point where okay, work is from 7:30 to 2:50, maybe a little time before and after, that's fine. As a woman, I do feel obligated to carry the weight of the men in my department. Some of the men have been in this field longer than me, but I feel like I have to carry the weight of the department on my shoulders.

And I almost feel like it's expected with me being the woman. I feel treated as though I am supposed to take care of the men in this department, but I shouldn't always have to take care of them. Why can't they just carry some of the weight? Because to me my role as the department head is not just a namesake, but I do the same thing as them. We all come here. We are all earning the same check, but for whatever reason, they just don't put forth the effort that I would like. Even with, you know, one or two of them being from the community, I just don't understand.

Part of it I think is that the men see it as, "that's the woman and she got it. She's gonna handle the paperwork." It's an expectation that I'm gonna handle the paperwork and then maybe it's my fault because I play into that. But I think it is both sides, me as a woman and them as men, I think we both play into the gender role that the woman is here to teach and can take care of the paperwork and the man is gonna be the disciplinarian. My school community is very male-dominated. We have more male teachers than ever before. Now do I think that there is an importance to having male leadership and just a male presence in education…absolutely. Because the reality is, we have a lot of fatherless homes. The men in our building serve as fathers; they do provide a level of protection and security that some of us need and desire. And there's nothing wrong with that. But in our school community, these male figures are viewed as

disciplinarians. They have been placed there to be classroom managers and to be hallway managers and assist with discipline. But that is not what these teachers are paid for. These teachers need to be in the classrooms teaching content. They shouldn't have to be concerned with helping security and admin control the halls and making sure that the kids are not in a restroom or making sure that the women on the hallway are safe. That is not and should not be their primary role in the school, but that is their primary role in our school community. The implied understanding is that our school doesn't have order, so we need the men in the building to help us fix it. They have private, male faculty meetings where they discuss how to protect the women in the school. Now again, is it nice to have males around? Absolutely. Because if a fight breaks out in front of me, I don't have to worry about it. I know somebody else will get it, but heck, these men might get tired of breaking up fights as well. And just to, just to know that somebody was placed next to me just because I am a woman and the perception is I need that protection and that life is gonna be better just because they're there. I just personally don't like it. But maybe that's just (laugh) the feminist in me.

But yeah, I feel as though in our school community, the perception is women are there to teach and the men are there to make sure that the women can teach. But the reality of it is, is that we are all there to teach these children. And it is admin's job to make sure that the necessary resources are there while we are to help as needed.

## Chapter 5: Relying on Sources of Resilience and Hope

### My Christian Faith

I didn't grow up in a very religious household. I recall going to chapel on Mother's Day and Easter, and that was the extent of it until I came to the Alabama Black Belt region. When we moved back to Alabama during middle school, and we began staying with my aunt we HAD to

go to church every Sunday. It was different for me, but I went because that is what I was told. So I went because I had to when we were with her but when we moved out my aunt house, I only went to church on the usual Mother's Day, Easter, sometimes Christmas (yes I was one of them type of people) (laugh). And two days before my 18th birthday I was assaulted by a friend's boyfriend, a popular member of the community and someone who I saw as my friend. From that moment until probably my junior year, I was a WILDDDDD THANG (laugh).

Then one day I remember sitting down thinking it has to be more to life, and I asked to go to church with my friend who played the organ at a church. I went and for a while I wasn't "feeling anything" but I kept going. Eventually I started teaching, and I felt like the students were pouring more into me than I could bare. Work was hectic and I didn't really seem to have a good grasp at several other things. One day I sat there and realized a) I wasn't baptized, and b) "I give up trying to control narratives that weren't meant to be controlled." I don't know what it was but one day I asked God to allow me to be what he wants me to be for these kids, and I truly felt him telling me "you have to come to me first." So, March 11, 2018, I got baptized, and I honestly felt a weight lifted off my shoulders. Work started to become bearable and the disconnect I was feeling, I felt was starting to close. Since then, I have found myself being more vocal at work and have turned into the advocate I didn't know I had in me. At work, I truly feel like I am a bridge for opportunity for the students and the teachers. A position I didn't want to be in and perhaps I was going through so much hell because that's a role God wanted me to be in, and I was running from it. Now I think the disconnect I was feeling was me running from Him. He put me at that school for a reason. When things get rough, He is the only thing I need. That is why now I can truly say "it is what it is" and mean it.

My Community Within the Community

So I am blessed to have different colleagues that I can go to for different things. There's places I can go, cause we all know how I am about food. If I need a little snack, I got people I can go to for that. If I need some spiritual advice or if I need to vent and know that I'm not gonna get somebody that's gonna have me running off the rails. I have people that I can call and consult for that. I have made friends in this space. I am so grateful for my colleague and friend Mr. Love. He has truly become my light in such a dark hour. He has been there to hold my hand through so many difficult situations in that building, and I know he's done this for other people as well. And there's no amount of money that I could pay him for how much he has positively impacted my life. So my community, my safe space, are my colleagues who I feel like I can go to, whether it's good or bad or indifferent. And not only are they not going to judge me, but they're gonna help me find a way, reassure me that everything is gonna be okay. And there are also individuals that in the midst of the madness, they're in it, they're in the good fight with me. I think if I was in this situation, and I didn't have anybody, I don't think I would've made it as long as I did. And I know that's why a lot of people leave or wanna leave. They feel like they're in it by themselves.

Another part of my community within the community are my sorority sisters from Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) and from the National Sorority of Phi Delta Kappa (NSPDK). Both of these sororities provide me with special connections I can rely on to get things that I need to benefit myself and students through networking. Specifically, NSPDK combines two things that I love and that is God and education. I think my whole life is centered around my job. And more so recently I have become more intentional about building a strong relationship with God. And so being in this sorority has richly impacted how I move in this education space. Being a strong Christian woman that is doing everything they can to impact positively the lives of these children and being around women who know the struggle of being on this computer at 12 o'clock at night,

knowing that you need to go to sleep or spend time with a family member, like they understand, and they'll pray with me. They'll give me suggestions; they'll give me help; they'll give me advice. The NSPDK sorority provides me with a safe space to say, "I love my students and I love the Lord, and we all are together gonna figure out how can we make this space better for them." Also, my involvement in these two sororities often makes me feel safe in how I move because of the networking and the relationship that I have built with my sorority members. I think this is my first time even saying that out loud, but there is a safety net with that.

Unplugging

Unplugging to me is not doing anything work related, whether that is getting on the phone, on the computer, because to me, I affiliate the computer with work because I work eight hours a day, and I am probably on or near a screen about seven out of those eight hours. Unplugging is me coming home, going into my prayer closet, aka my bathroom cuz my bathroom is where I pray and I meditate if nowhere else. And I try to leave my worries of the day in the restroom. I pray about it, talk about it to myself, and I just try to leave it where it's at. And in my free time I like to talk to friends and family and watch a little trashy TV. I love me a good 90-Day Fiance. But unplugging is doing anything non-work related only because I put so much of myself into my work that I'm realizing that I am a teacher. Like that is my identity, but I'm so much more than that. So I'm trying to work on, making sure that I have safe boundaries so I'm not overworking myself.

Embracing that "It Is What It Is"

I used to be very type A, and this might be due to my military family upbringing. So I'm very used to routine. I get up at 5am to the point that even now, even if I don't set my alarm, I'm getting up at 5:30 in the morning. If I'm gonna get up at 5:30am, I'm gonna be in the shower by

5:45. By a certain time I'm gonna be dressed and by a certain time, I'm gonna eat lunch. So I'm used to structure, but being here in this work environment has made me feel everything but structured. So it used to stress me out when I would spend so much time inside and outside of work hours lesson planning, but something regularly would come up in a school day that prevented me from implementing what I had planned. This used to bring me so much anxiety about being the best that I can, because I always felt like this hectic school environment was stagnating my progress as a teacher and ultimately my impact on student learning.

On top of this, I used to get so frustrated with my current administrator because of how he only looked at the big picture when planning our school goals. For example, one time he had a goal to move these kids three points on the ACT, but he never really shared a plan for how we were gonna get there. And so it was left up to the teacher to just figure out the details and of course everyone just did what they thought they knew to do, which often resulted in even more disorder and lack of teacher participation in the goal.

But anyway, during the year 2018, I just had a lot going on after losing my uncle and experiencing a miscarriage. Work during this time became extremely chaotic. And honestly it got so bad that I eventually had a nervous breakdown. I was in Mobile, Alabama, and I was with a friend, and I was just like, "I'm not in a good head space and I need you to take me to the hospital." And on the way to the hospital while I was in the car with them, I ended up passing out from a really bad panic attack. So my friend had to pull over and call the ambulance. Once I got to the hospital and they were able to get me back stable, the doctor walked in and told me that I had just gotten really dehydrated and needed rest. But I remember thinking in that moment that something worse could have happened. And it was in that moment while laying on the hospital

bed that I realized that I have to learn to take care of myself because if I don't take care of myself, it's not gonna end well. And something could happen to me prematurely.

And in the midst of that, I just really thought about how I obsess over trying to control everything. I'm not gonna lie. Anything that I can control, I'm gonna control it with a fine-toothed comb. And then being the only woman in my department and acting as the mama bear for many students and colleagues at my school added to my wanting to control things beyond my control. And I just remember talking to my therapist, and she was having me talk about all the things that were bothering me. And then I realized 90% of it had nothing to do with me. It was somebody else's weight that was on my shoulders. And I just really thought about how God is making me uncomfortable because I'm not going to Him with my troubles if I'm stressed about something. Or if I need direction or if I'm sad, I'm not going to Him. I'm not praying. I'm not asking for guidance. I'm trying to do everything like I'm superwoman, and I'm not superwoman. And I was led to believe that I'm so superwoman, and that I'm needed, and I'm valued that I did not have time for rest and just a personal life. So in September 2019, that hospital emergency was the most humbling experience that I had. And it inspired me to be even more intentional about emphasizing mental health with my students and colleagues. So now when I hit roadblocks, I practice surrendering my stresses and cares to God, this often is expressed by the statement, "It is what it is." This statement is may way of saying, "God help me, or God, what we are gonna do, or God, what you want me to do." Recently, there have been times when I just get mad about certain things. Just this week, I got so furious about something that I felt my heart beating and my immediate response was "it is what it is." And just by saying that one statement, I moved from furious to calm. So now, I realize that if I can't control it, it ain't nothing I can do about it. I mean I can acknowledge that whatever it is is stressful and doesn't make sense, but

ain't nothing I can do about it. So it's not like I'm giving up, it's me making a decision to focus on what I can control in that moment.

Embracing My "Colorful Life"

What I mean by colorful life is I feel like I have one of those lives that could be in a lifetime movie. I have always been the teacher's pet. I was a textbook good child. But little did my teachers know, I had a lot of stuff going on at home. Dealing with parents that were too young to have children, one of them being an alcoholic and then my mother eventually having a nervous breakdown after my parents separated. Having to start all over. Living in a two bedroom house with all of those people, moving from school to school in the midst of my parents' marital issues and my father's PTSD. And then having my own identity issues. Coming to the Alabama Black Belt region and going through all the stuff that I was going through at home while also living in poverty on a small street that is often called "Crack City." It was just a lot. But that is also why I don't always trust the kids' smiles because sometimes when a kid smiles, there's so much pain behind it, and I get that. So no matter what, I just won't want my kids to know that I see them, that they're not forgotten about. And that it may not be a good day today, but it is gonna be a good day tomorrow. And for whatever reason it is not a good day tomorrow, we're going to have a good day the next day. Bad days are going to come and good days are gonna come. But as long as those days come, we can fight to see another day.

I truly, truly, truly, truly, truly know that God put me back home at Black Belt High as a testimony that anything is possible with faith and hard work and having a healthy mindset. You may not be where you wanna be, but you can be somewhere, and you can do something. And even if a student doesn't "make it out," whatever it is that God has in store for them, as long as they do the best at whatever he has for them in the midst of this planting season, it is all gonna be

okay. I am completely grateful and thankful that God chose me to be a vehicle of hope and optimism and a safety net. And deep down in my heart, if I left tomorrow, it would break my heart, but I could go in peace because I know I came and I gave my blood, sweat and tears. I wish I had the answers to change this corrupt system, but I don't. And I'm not going to say that I'm going to die trying, but I'm going to come close to it 'cause it means the world to me and I'm indebted to those that came before me to do my best as long as I can. And until God tells me it's time for me to move along, it is my hope and my prayer that at some point we could just have community, and it would just make it so much more worthwhile as we fought the good fight and made good trouble.

## Summary

This narrative provided a summary of the participants' data on how a Black female school leader navigates structural constraints to foster student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school. An overview of the participant's experiences was provided in tabular form. Together the chapters provided a detailed structural and textual description of a Black female school leader's experiences navigating structural constraints to foster student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school. As a Black female school teacher and leader, she shared rich descriptions of her childhood struggles, her educational journey and impactful figures, her advocacy, empowerment, and social justice strivings, her perspectives on the challenges in her work environment, and her sources of resilience and hope. This rich data was used to answer the concluding chapter's central research question and subquestions.

# CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter analyzes the findings from an intersectional narrative study about how a Black female school leader navigates structural constraints to foster student agency. The central research question explored was the following:

1. How does a Black female school leader navigate structural constraints to foster Black female student agency in an Alabama Black Belt Public School?

The subquestions were the following:

a. How does a Black Female School Leader in an Alabama Black Belt region public school demonstrate agency?

b. How does a Black Female School Leader engage in her environment?

c. How does a Black Female School Leader think about her environment?

d. How does a Black Female School Leader construct her realities in ways that serve to make a way out of no way?

This chapter will provide 1) a description of the sample and population for this study, 2) an overview of the key findings in relation to my research questions, 3) an interpretation of the findings, which will entail unpacking and interpreting my findings and explaining what they mean within the context of this study, and 4) a closing summary which will summarize key findings and provide recommendations for practice and research regarding this study.

## Description of the Sample and Population for this Study

"Given that qualitative research typically calls for in-depth analysis and systemic observation, sample sizes tend to be smaller in size than those in quantitative studies" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.75). Thus, this study focused on the stories and experiences of one Black female school leader around the research topic. The participant was recruited via a

purposeful sampling method that entailed emailing her a recruitment letter outlining all the study's major components. The participant is a 35-year-old that identifies as a Black, heterosexual, middle-class female who is the history department chair teacher and has served in education for ten years. She is also a past and current resident of the Alabama Black Belt region who has lived there for at least 20 years. She also attended and graduated from a public school in the Alabama Black Belt region and has a history of experience and recognition in/around the area of fostering student agency and empowerment in her school setting. The participant selected the pseudonym 'Shirley.'

## Overview of Key Findings

This intersectional narrative study answers the central research question and subquestions through semi-structured individual interviews, open-ended surveys, and observations. One participant provided a narrative about her being a Black female school leader navigating structural constraints to foster student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school. As discussed in Table 3, five major chapters were developed which richly guided the findings within the participant's experiences near the research questions: 1) Childhood Personal Challenges and Triumphs; 2) Educational Journey and Impactful Figures; 3) Striving for Advocacy, Empowerment and Social Justice; 4) Challenges in the Work Environment; and 5) Relying on Sources of Resilience and Hope.

**Table 3**

*Overview of Findings for the Context of the Study*

| Research Questions | Summary of Findings |
|---|---|
| Central Question: How does a Black female school leader navigate structural constraints to foster Black female student agency in an Alabama Black Belt Public School? | A comprehensive examination of the participant's narrative (chapters 1–5) revealed that her approach to navigating structural constraints to foster Black female student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school is one that relies on experiences from her childhood struggles **(*racial identity crisis, lack of emotional support and struggling with sense of belonging*)**, from her educational journey and impactful figures along the way **(*using emancipatory pedagogy, experiencing poverty, exposing patriarchy)***, from her striving for advocacy, empowerment and social justice for herself, her students and her colleagues **(*being "The Mama," resisting student labels, managing mental health, empathy, building relationships, emancipatory pedagogy)***, from her informed perception of challenges in the work environment (***exposing and navigating constraints to student and teacher success at Black Belt High School)*** and from her sources of resilience and hope (***her Christian faith, her community within the community, her unplugging, her embracing "It is What It Is" and embracing her "Colorful Life.")***. Using an intersectional analysis approach, all five chapters of her story were analyzed to identify an intricate interplay of factors, such as race, family dynamics, mental health, socio-economic status, geographic transitions, and gender norms, that intersect to position her to empathize and respond to the agentic needs of Black students in her school who come from similar backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, geographic locations and cultures as her. |
| Subquestion 1: How does a Black Female School Leader in an Alabama Black Belt region public school demonstrate agency? | In Chapter 3–Striving for Advocacy, Empowerment and Social Justice, the participant's narrative revealed that she demonstrates agency by relying on wisdom from her idol John Lewis, by being willing to make "good trouble." This good trouble often means she has to ***negotiate compliance to mandated school policies and to seek resources outside of the school through grant writing and outside networking*** in order to ensure that she best creates a safe space within the constricted space |

| Research Questions | Summary of Findings |
|---|---|
| | for herself, her students and her colleagues to think, speak and be heard. |
| Subquestion 2: How does a Black Female School Leader engage in her environment? | In Chapter 4–Challenges in the Work Environment and Chapter 5–Sources of Resilience and Hope, the participant's narrative revealed that she engages in her environment by ***acting as a "silent weapon"*** in order to get the work done that she feels needs to be done for her students. This means she is intentional about ***censoring*** her true self in the face of the public and administrators because she does not feel that everyone would understand or would even try to thwart her efforts. So to silently keep her work going, she has formed and relies on a "***community within the community***" where she keeps a close circle of support where she can go to for guidance and emotional support. For her colleagues and students, she engages in her environment by primarily ***playing "the mama"*** to many of her students and colleagues. This mama role is one that relies on her to be whatever is needed for her students and colleagues. Some examples of stories she references and provides documentations on include providing emotional support to grieving students, speaking up for discrimination against a gay colleague, forming a book club to support LGBTQ-plus IA students in the building, writing a grant to support artwork and classroom gardening for social emotional learning, and regularly giving up her planning period to help students with college applications, FAFSA and emotional support. |
| Subquestion 3: How does a Black Female School Leader think about her environment? | In Chapter 4–Challenges in the Work Environment, the participant's narrative revealed that she views her work ***environment as a factory*** where there is no genuine interest in the well-being of the people, but only in the work that can be produced to check off boxes in order to satisfy state report card requirements. This factory reference she speaks of reflects the ***effects of bureaucracy and patriarchy*** that plague our public schools today. In her sharing of several stories, she reveals several constraints to her students' success and her success as a teacher and leader and also how she strives to work around those constraints to still reach her students and colleagues and create space for their voice and choice in their education experience. |

| Research Questions | Summary of Findings |
|---|---|
| Subquestion 4: How does a Black Female School Leader construct her realities in ways that serve to make a way out of no way? | Shirley's complex marginalization in society allows her to create and approach her environments from a complex vantage point that allows her to navigate ***multiple realities at the same time*** in order to make a way out of no way. Though it may often leave her feeling exhausted and mentally weigh down, Shirley's reality entails ***censoring herself*** to appease the patriarchy that makes her feel like she is both invisible and hypervisible while simultaneously ***being "the Mama"*** who is a ***"silent weapon"*** and a ***"proud Black woman"*** that is not afraid to negotiate compliance if it means supporting her students and colleagues. To manage the weight of navigating the multiplicity of her realities, Shirley relies on what she believes to be her sources of resilience and hope: ***her Christian faith, her community within the community, unplugging, and therapy***- outlets that give her space to take care of herself apart from the weight of navigating her complicated view and experience in the world |

Note. Overall summary of findings gleaned from narrative provided on how a Black female school leader navigates structural constraints to foster Black female student agency.

## Discussion

All chapters of Shirley's story reveal an intersectional matrix of several facets unique to her childhood struggles, her educational journey, her striving for advocacy, empowerment, and social justice, her perception of challenges in the work environment, and her sources of resilience and hope that collectively inform how she navigates structural constraints to foster Black student agency at an Alabama Black Belt public school. The discussion of the central research question and subquestions provides an intersectional analysis of the participant's story, which entailed relying on Crenshaw's (1990) intersectionality theoretical framework as an analytical tool to examine how multiple oppressions manifest in the participant's life (and other characters in her story) as she fosters student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school. In addition,

Kundu's (2020) definition of student agency ("the potential to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in a deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints") guided the lens for finding connections to fostering student agency throughout Shirley's story.

**Central Research Question: How does a Black female school leader navigate structural constraints to foster Black student agency in an Alabama Black Belt Public School?**

"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not lead single-issue lives" (blackpast.org, 2012). This quote shared by Audre Lorde in 1982 captures the essence of intersectionality at work throughout Shirley's story. A comprehensive examination of the participant's narrative (chapters 1–5) revealed that the participant's approach to navigating structural constraints to foster Black student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school is one understood through an intersectional look at the matrix of oppressions she has experienced from her childhood to the present. Narratives guided this intersectional exploration the participant shared about her life story based on experiences from her childhood struggles, from her educational journey and impactful figures along the way, from her striving for advocacy, empowerment, and social justice for herself, her students, and her colleagues, from her informed perception of challenges in the work environment and from her sources of resilience and hope. Using an intersectionality lens, I analyze all five chapters of her story to identify an intricate interplay of factors, such as race, family dynamics, mental health, socio-economic status, geographic transitions, and gender norms, that intersect to position her and other characters in her story to empathize and respond to the agentic needs of Black students in her school.

**Chapter 1. Childhood personal challenges and triumphs—Racial identity crisis, lack of emotional support, and struggling with a sense of belonging**

As a child, the participant's identity was shaped by an intersection of poverty, gender, race, ethnicity, and geographic location that manifested in her struggling with her racial identity, lack of emotional support, and a sense of belonging (Collins,1990; Crenshaw, 1989). Shirley identified as an emotional Black girl born into a Black military family with a Black mother from the Alabama Black Belt region and a Black father from Michigan who experienced mental health struggles (PTSD and alcoholism) that she felt often prevented them from giving her the love and attention she needed. She also mentioned how her family was not accepting of her emotional nature and often made her feel like a burden. According to the literature, dealing with racism and prejudice (direct and indirect) throughout one's life can have a negative impact on one's mental health (McKenzie et al., 2021). Such a struggle with mental health in the Black community is further supported in the literature by acknowledging how Black people are five times more likely than White people to be sectioned under the Mental Health Act and how women are more likely than men to experience common mental health disorders (McKenzie et al., 2021). In addition, in her book *Hood Feminism*, Kendall (2020) depicts this pressure placed on Shirley by her parents to ignore her emotions and play into a form of "restrained, emotionally neutral politeness" as respectability politics, which she describes as "de facto rules for marginalized people to follow in order to be respected in mainstream culture, but they reflect antiquated ideals set up by White supremacy" (p.89), which ultimately "impede the progress of those with the fewest resources" (p.90). Dealing with respectability politics which places a matrix of oppressions on her, the participant began even in her childhood navigating the clash between mainstream bureaucracy within the systems of the world around her and her nature to be agentic in her expression of emotion and her sense of belonging in the world (Crenshaw, 1990; Freire, 1970; Hummel, 1994; Kendall, 2020; Kundu, 2020).

Thus, it could be said that Shirley's childhood home experiences were plagued by the systemic effects of racism, prejudice, gender bias, and classism, which manifested in her home in the form of mental health issues and emotional depravity that ultimately robbed her of the love and attention from her parents that she naturally wanted and deserved as a child (Crenshaw, 1990; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020; McKenzie et al., 2021). All of this ultimately caused her to question her identity and sense of belonging in the form of a suicide attempt (Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020; McKenzie et al., 2021). Consequently, Shirley's childhood reveals an interplay of social factors that inherently shaped her foundation as an empathetic Black female school leader who has empirically faced, to some extent, the systemic struggles that many of the Black students at her school face (Crenshaw, 1989). Overall, this chapter demonstrates how the participant's sense of self, emotional health, and overall journey from elementary to middle school were influenced by race, family dynamics, mental health, socio-economic status, geographic shifts, and gender norms (Crenshaw,1989; Esposito & Evans-Winter, 2022). Throughout the rest of her narrative, as she transitions into adulthood, she continuously references her experiences from childhood and how she strives to be for her students what she felt she needed at their age, and that is ultimately displayed through her efforts to provide her students with resources and opportunities to ensure their agency amidst the constraints of the matrix of systemic oppressions they face (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990; Freire, 1970; Esposito & Evans-Winter, 2022; Kundu, 2022; Vaughn, 2020).

**Chapter 2. Educational journey and impactful figures. Emancipatory pedagogy, experiencing poverty, exposing patriarchy**

From her teenage years into early adulthood, the participant's identity continued to be shaped by an intersection of poverty, gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and geographic location

that challenged her to eventually push past her suicide attempt and to deliberately rely on resistive outlets and impactful figures to help her to express herself and agentically achieve her college and career goals (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw; 1989; Freire, 1970; Kundu, 2020). Upon moving from the state of Colorado to the Alabama Black Belt region as a teen, the participant noted how she felt like she transitioned from being a minority to a majority, as she was now attending a predominantly Black Title One middle school where everyone looked like her and where a teacher paid particular attention to her.

Ms. Hunter, a Black teacher, was the seventh-grade teacher who regularly wrote back and forth to her in her journal, ultimately making her feel seen and heard "for the first time" and making her find passion in expressing herself through writing. Upon analyzing this part of Shirley's story, I noted how she did not reference any impactful figures until she arrived at a predominantly Black school in the Alabama Black Belt region, which could have been because she did not have teachers in Colorado who could empathize with her struggles with systemic oppressions. The literature identified the dialoguing strategy Ms. Hunter used with Shirley as one called voicing, which supports students' agency and strengthens learner identity over time (Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2021). Ms. Hunter's identity as a Black woman in a predominantly Black Title One school and poverty-stricken town could have granted her the empathy needed to help Shirley feel seen and heard through her instructional approach (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Freire, 1970; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2021).

Upon transitioning from Ms. Hunter's middle school class to high school, Shirley acknowledged how she felt more purpose-driven and a greater sense of belonging while navigating poverty living conditions in a single parent home. When she arrived at her high school, which was also a predominantly Black Title One school, she ran across other teachers

who were impactful figures who made her feel seen and heard in the way that they embraced Black History in their lessons even though it was not required, in the way they went out of their way to give her and her peers extra snacks and support, and in how they helped her get a scholarship to college even though she felt she did not have the "family connections" needed to get one on her own.

Shirley's story, though still plagued by the intersectionality of racism, gender bias, prejudice, classism, and many other social ideologies, took a turn for the better when she found refuge in a place and in people who knew how to empathize with her intersectional systemic struggles (Crenshaw,1989; Freire, 1970). Such a shift in her life is affirmed in the literature to be a possible result of experiencing emancipatory pedagogy that is often referenced to be a responsive pedagogy for reaching historically marginalized students and supporting their agency (Apple, 2008; Freire, 1970; Schubert,1980). Emancipatory pedagogy often entails working around and/or beyond the constraints of the traditional education system (standards, tests, rules) to reach the students. It is often demonstrated in providing the students with outlets to the standardized curriculum for self-expression and exercising agency to achieve their goals within the context of their culture, language, and identity (Apple, 2008; Freire, 1970).

Amidst the highs she experienced navigating high school with some impactful figures who helped to foster her agency and her sense of purpose, Shirley was simultaneously experiencing poverty living conditions. According to the literature, poverty is a form of systemic oppression that can lead to a lack of opportunities and access to resources, ultimately affecting a student's educational experience and adulthood, reinforcing family and community generational cycles of poverty (Cordova & Reynolds, 2022; Kundu, 2020; Vaughn, 2021). Viewing Shirley's family's fight with poverty through a lens of intersectionality entails looking at the many factors

that exacerbate economic inequalities in impoverished Black communities, such as climate change, health inequity, racism, and classism, which are all deeply embedded in the economic, political and social entities of society (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020). Thus, Shirley's experience with poverty cannot be separated from broader structural inequalities that shape society, such as gender, race, class, and disability (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020).

Later on as a first-year teacher at her alma mater, Shirley shared how she experienced sexual harassment from a male student during her first year of teaching and how it was initially mishandled and forsaken as a trivial matter by a male administrator to the point that even she was willing to let it slide. This experience affirms how Black women are often disproportionately targeted with sexual assault and conditioned by society to accept and overlook it out of not wanting to appear too emotional or angry (Barlow, 2020; Kendall, 2020). This experience also reveals how patriarchy exists within public school experiences and seeks to normalize devaluing Black women because of their gender and race (Crenshaw, 1989; Kendall, 2020). Nevertheless, it was this experience that compelled Shirley to open her eyes to how she played into the normalized devaluing of Black women, which she now opposes through her efforts to speak to her Black female students about knowing their self-worth, thereby fostering their agency (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2023; Kundu, 2020; Kendall, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021).

**Chapter 3. Strive for advocacy, empowerment, and social justice. Being "the mama," resisting student labels, managing mental health, empathy, building relationships, and emancipatory pedagogy**

Shirley describes her overall role in the school as being "The Mama," which is one that affirms Beauboeuf-Lafontant's (2002) idea of "womanist caring," which emphasizes how Black female teachers demonstrate an embrace of the maternal, political clarity, and ethic of risk. It also reveals Shirley's ability to see herself through Deborah Gray White's (1999) idea of triple consciousness by simultaneously seeing herself through a Black cultural identity, White supremacy, and patriarchy (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2023). When using this title, Shirley seems also to be speaking to her role in empowering and supporting her students beyond the stereotypes and misfortunes placed on them by society. This indicates her awareness of the intersecting identities of her students and the need to address their unique challenges to support them (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Kendall, 2020). In addition, Shirley's choice to use "The Mama" title also reflects the role that society often demands and has demanded of Black women in America, as Black women have historically born the weight of mothering other people's children and lives so that the country as a whole could thrive from the start of slavery until this present moment, while she is often left alone to take care of herself and still perfectly present herself the world (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw,1989; Kendall, 2020).

As a Black woman, Shirley's multi-layered experiences within a patriarchal society (i.e., racism, sexism, sexual orientation) position her to care in a way that allows her to intimately connect with marginalized people (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). Specifically, when it comes to schooling, care seems to be an essential concept that requires more empirical understanding than theoretical understanding (Hughes, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999, p.26). It seems that Shirley's complex marginalization in society allows her to bring a unique subjectivity to the learning environment that is empirically sensitive and promotive to equally valuing all differences in her

class (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Shirley understands the feeling of being cast out and labeled as voiceless (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Hughes, 2002). Thus, it makes sense that a typical successful pedagogy of Shirley involves caring for all students by being intentionally inclusive toward all differences and giving space for their voice and choice in their learning (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Hughes, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).

In her story, Shirley shared about a 9th-grade class she taught that was given a district-wide bad reputation because of a disproportionately reported number of disciplinary issues. The literature reveals how the negative labels given to the students in this class were connected to many of the systemic disadvantages they faced (poverty, classism, racism, etcetera.), which further marginalized and negatively labeled them (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020). Nevertheless, Shirley revealed how she "mothered" these negative student labels by negotiating her compliance to enforce mandated school policies that conflicted with her students' learning needs, such as allowing them to eat in the classroom, not requiring them to walk in straight lines on the right side of the hall or giving them alternative forms of learning and assessments that were not always the traditional multiple-choice tests (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020).

She also talked about how she often sought ways to emancipate her students' learning experience and validate her students' identity and voice through primarily providing emotional space for students to talk to her, starting a book club to support the needs of LGBTQIA students, creating social, emotional outlets for her students through painting and gardening, and writing grants for resources and field trip opportunities for her students (Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). Based on observations, artifacts, and statements made in her story, it

seems that Shirley knows how to teach in a way that speaks to the needs of marginalized students like the ones referenced in Valenzuela's study (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Hughes, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Much of Valenzuela's study exposes how we do schooling is seen as disconnected from and uncaring by many of our historically marginalized students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Hughes, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Students do not feel like they matter in our patriarchal-oriented learning environments, as we stress numbers and tests over their most pressing needs-social and emotional support (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Hughes, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).

In addition to her mothering role with her students, Shirley mentioned how she also wears the "mother hat" with her colleagues. This often looks like her educating her White Teach for America colleagues about the overlapping systemic conditions that are plaguing the students, showing up at the school board to advocate for a colleague who was discriminated against because of his homosexual orientation, and forming a Teacher Action Committee to empower female teacher voices within a predominantly male-staffed school (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Safir & Dugan, 2021). Thus, Shirley's intersectional experiences with marginalization position her to empathetically care for all people no matter their background (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021).

**Chapter 4. Challenges in the work environment. Exposing and navigating constraints to student and teacher success at Black Belt High School**

Shirley revealed the following constraints to student success at Black Belt High School: emphasis on athletics over academics, emphasis on vocational studies over four-year studies, bias in dual-enrollment student selection, classism, community violence, lack of parent

participation and engagement, Teach for America teachers' lack of empathy toward students' systemic oppressions, student labels, lack of leadership consistency, lack of relationship building, nepotism, lack of certified teachers, mandated school policies, lack of adequate minority representation on the State Board, high faculty/staff turnover, lack of political and social justice awareness. All of these constraints to student success that she mentioned are direct and/or indirect manifestations of intersecting layers of systemic oppression, such as racism, prejudice, gender bias, classism, and disability that is often disproportionately experienced by Black students from low socio-economic status and a rural geographic location such as the Alabama Black Belt region (Collins, 1990; Cordova & Reynolds, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2023).

Shirley shared the following constraints to her success as a teacher and leader at Black Belt High School: struggles with work-life balance, having to always teach in survival mode, a toxic work environment, constantly feeling the need to censor herself, not feeling genuinely seen or heard by administrators, being a Black woman in a predominantly male school environment. Through her experiences navigating these constraints as a Black woman, Shirley's story reveals how multiple oppressions manifest in her life to make her "simultaneously invisible and hypervisible" (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022, p.23). Nevertheless, she is able to use this invisibility and hypervisibility as a "silent weapon" to navigate the systemic oppression of her students and colleagues and creatively make a way out of no way (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022).

**Chapter 5. Sources of resilience and hope. Her Christian faith, her community within the community, her unplugging, her embracing "it is what it is," and embracing her "colorful life"**

Shirley revealed that what keeps her going amidst the overlapping systemic oppressions she experiences at Black Belt High School are some outlets that help her to channel her individuality and personal freedom. The literature reports how the intersecting layers of systemic oppression that Black women face often marginalize and subjugate their identity, knowledge, and purpose in a way that forces them to discover outlets apart from mainstream society (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Kendall, 2020; Toliver, 2022). For her, those outlets are attending to her Christian faith, relying on a smaller community of Black friends who can relate to her struggles as a Black woman, and relinquishing control of what she has no control over by resisting perfectionism and embracing all parts of her life as "colorful" lenses that help her to cope and overcome the constraints that often targets her identity and her work as a teacher and a leader (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Kendall, 2020).

***Subquestion 1. How does a Black Female School Leader in an Alabama Black Belt region public school demonstrate agency?***

In Chapter 3—Striving for Advocacy, Empowerment, and Social Justice, Shirley's narrative revealed that she demonstrates agency by relying on wisdom from her idol John Lewis, by being willing to make "good trouble." This good trouble often means she has to negotiate her compliance to enforcing mandated school policies with a risk of reprimand and to seek resources outside of the school through grant writing and cultivate inclusive spaces within the school building where she, her students, and her colleagues can freely think, speak and be heard (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Freire, 1970; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Safir & Dugan, 2021). She references a specific story about going to the school board on behalf of a colleague who was being discriminated against because of his sexual

orientation and was later reprimanded by the administrators. She viewed this reprimand as trivial compared to the issue she chose to stand for (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Safir & Dugan, 2021; White, 1990). It seems that Shirley's complex positioning within the margins of society grants her courage to exercise agency to not only achieve her own needs but to fight for the rights of others (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Safir & Dugan, 2021; White, 1990). Shirley understands firsthand what it is like to be multiply oppressed and has learned from experience navigating this society that she must fight and resist conformity in order to agentically create better opportunities for herself and the people around her (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Freire, 1970; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Toliver, 2022). The intersectionality at work in her personal life story informs and guides her agency in navigating structural constraints to foster her students' agency (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Safir & Dugan, 2021; White, 1990).

***Subquestion 2. How does a Black Female School Leader engage in her environment?***

In Chapter 4—Challenges in the Work Environment and Chapter 5—Sources of Resilience and Hope, the participant's narrative revealed that she engages in her environment by acting as a "silent weapon" via censoring her true self in order to get the work done that she feels needs to be done for her students. This means she is intentional about censoring her true self in the face of the public and administrators because she does not feel that everyone would understand or would even try to thwart her efforts (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Safir & Dugan, 2021; White, 1990). So to silently keep her work going, she has formed and relies on a "community within the community" where she keeps a close circle of support to whom she can go for guidance and emotional

support (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Safir & Dugan, 2021; White, 1990). For her colleagues and students she engages in her environment by primarily playing "the mama" to many of her students and colleagues. This mama role relies on her to be whatever her students and colleagues need. Some examples of stories she references and provides documentation on include providing emotional support to a grieving student, speaking up for discrimination against a gay colleague, forming a book club to support LGBTQ-plus IA students in the building, writing a grant to support artwork and classroom gardening for social-emotional learning, and regularly giving up her planning period to help students with college applications, FAFSA, and emotional support.

***Subquestion 3. How does a Black Female School Leader Think about Her Environment?***

In Chapter 4—Challenges in the Work Environment, the participant's narrative revealed that she views her work environment as a factory where there is no genuine interest in the well-being of the people, but only in the work that can be produced to check off boxes in order to satisfy state report card requirements. She also referenced her environment as a "poster child for the school-to-prison pipeline." This factory and pipeline reference she speaks of reflects the effects of bureaucracy and patriarchy that plague our public schools today (Freire, 1970; Hummel, 1993; Vaughn, 2021). This factory model focuses on numbers over people and often robs students of learning experiences that foster their agency (Freire, 1970; Hummel, 1993; Vaughn, 2021). Thus, Shirley seems to view her environment "as is" limiting to her, her students, and her colleagues. The effects of patriarchal compliance force her to often feel the need to censor herself to comply with the school's rules (Freire, 1970; Hughes, 2002; Hummel, 1993; Toliver, 2022; Vaughn, 2021). She sees her environment as not conducive to her Black students' success in the real world because it does not cater to the personalized, social, and

emotional needs of its students or teachers. Thus, she feels the need to always have to find ways to work around the "factory" mode of the school environment to create responsive learning experiences for her students, which often looks like her teaching beyond the standardized curriculum, giving open-ended assignments that rely on more student voice and choice and writing grants to fund learning experiences apart from the curriculum (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Freire, 1970; Hughes, 2002; Hummel, 1993; Toliver, 2022; Vaughn, 2021).

### *Subquestion 4. How does a Black Female School Leader Construct Her Realities in Ways That Serve to Make a Way Out of No Way?*

Ultimately, Shirley's view of her environment, paired with her resistive actions to navigate and overcome constraints, reveals Shirley's ability to see herself through Deborah Gray White's (1999) idea of triple consciousness, as she can simultaneously see herself through a Black cultural identity, white supremacy, and patriarchy (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2023; Toliver, 2022). Thus, Shirley's construction of her reality is heavily influenced by her intersectional marginalization in society. She sees the world from various vantage points and functions in a way that allows her to survive and navigate them all. Throughout her story, Shirley shared some references about herself that seemed to conflict with each other as she described her placement and engagement in her work environment: as being "the Mama," as being a "silent weapon," as always "feeling the need to censor herself because she feels she is always being watched," as a "proud Black woman" and as being "rock and roll" when she has to be for her students and colleagues. Nevertheless, upon comprehensively examining the intersectionality of systemic oppression at work in her life, it seems that all of these references about herself could be equally true.

Shirley's complex marginalization in society allows her to create and approach her environments from a complex vantage point that allows her to navigate multiple realities simultaneously to make a way out of no way. Though it may often leave her feeling exhausted and mentally weighed down, Shirley's reality entails censoring herself to appease the patriarchy that makes her feel like she is both invisible and hypervisible while simultaneously being "the Mama" who is a "silent weapon" and a "proud Black woman" that is not afraid to negotiate compliance if it means supporting her students and colleagues. To manage the weight of navigating the multiplicity of her realities, Shirley relies on what she believes to be her sources of resilience and hope: her Christian faith, her community within the community, unplugging, and therapy- outlets that give her space to take care of herself apart from the weight of navigating her complicated view and experience in the world (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw,1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Toliver, 2022; White, 1999).

## Closing Summary

### *Key findings*

*S*hirley's story reveals the complexity of navigating the systemiatic oppressions reinforced by the bureaucracy of public schooling in the Alabama Black Belt region as a Black woman and student. Nevertheless, an intersectional lens allows us to more genuinely see the complexity of her world and glean from her approach to navigating structural constraints to foster Black student agency. Much of her story reveals that in order to foster agency, she first had to learn how to demonstrate agency beyond her childhood struggles of navigating the complexity of her world as a young, Black girl, which was facilitated by the culturally-responsive impact of her teachers in middle and high school in the Alabama Black Belt region.

From this understanding of agency, she now exercises efficacy to make a difference in the lives of her students and colleagues by doing whatever she feels is needed to give them space to have a voice and choice in what she describes as a constrictive learning environment. At Black Belt High School, she emphasizes social-emotional learning to help her students navigate the stifling effects of systemic oppression on their mental health, which helps her students to feel more connected to themselves and each other, thereby educating the whole child rather than just the academic side (Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021). To navigate the constrictive effects of systemic oppression on her students' voice and choice in their learning experience, she incorporates emancipatory pedagogical principles into her teaching by giving space for students to take the lead in what they learn and how they learn by providing emphasis on topics outside of the standardized curriculum (i.e., Black History), deconstructed choice boards, voicing activities and alternative forms of assessments, thereby granting them personalized mastery in their learning experience, which builds their agency (Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2021).

To navigate the economic disparities linked to systemic oppressions faced within her school and community, she writes grants to take her students on fields trips and to engage in unconventional activities to help her students get out of their comfort zone, experience cultures outside of their own and to find value in their true selves (i.e., book club for LGBTQIA students in the building) (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020). To navigate the patriarchal effects of having a predominantly male staff in the school building, she founded and currently facilitates a Teacher Action Committee as an outlet and collective voice space for the female teachers in her building (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020). To navigate the effects of

having to navigate the structural constraints of her world to survive and make a difference, she relies on her Christian faith and her community within the community (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020). All in all, Shirley's collective efforts in navigating structural constraints to foster Black student agency are a miraculous testament of her resilience and her commitment to empathetically empowering Black, female students in the Alabama Black Belt Region (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Freire, 1970; Kendall, 2020).

## Personal Transformation

### "Letting Go of the Template"

"May I use the restroom?" is what I politely raised my hand to ask my college math professor in a classroom of about 50 students on my first day of college classes. To my shameful surprise, she and the students gave me a very confused look and some students even chuckled, and I just sat there with my heart anxiously racing, waiting for her to respond, and she never did. Luckily, a young woman next to me finally whispered, "You don't have to ask, just go." This story speaks to my struggle with my enslavement to following the rules. In all of my K-12 Alabama Black Belt schooling experiences, I learned more about following rules than I learned anything else. I was conditioned to learn standards "objectively," often feeling like there was no room for critical thinking, for my own voice or for my own knowledge (Valenzuela, 1999). Most of the knowledge I was taught to apply to my own life emanated from a white, positivistic way of knowing. Ways outside of this way of knowing was not allowed or even cultivated (Valenzuela, 1999). Oftentimes, following the rules on what to think, how to think, what to be and how to be are how I learned to be "successful" in education. I graduated valedictorian of my class and received numerous awards for my mastery of the rules in education. I did all of my

work. I was quiet when the teacher talked. I always agreed with my teachers and those in authority over me. I did not share my opinion. And because of this, I was often labeled a teacher's pet. Yet here I am at the conclusion of a doctoral degree project and only beginning to genuinely see and hear myself and to realize my agency to create and implement my own knowledge.

Consequently, this research project has exposed me to myself. Specifically, the part of me that has been conditioned by my environment and culture to suppress my individuality and personality in order to uphold a universal standard that is not reflective of me (Davis, 2018; Kendall, 2020; Lorde, 1984; Valenzuala, 1999). All these years, I've been striving toward a standard that will never be attainable because it was not created for me. How do I know this? As I learn more about myself, I realize that I am currently at a crossroads when it comes to being the real me and being the "learned" me. My eyes have been opened to something that my heart nor mind cannot ignore. I cannot ignore how embedded the patriarchal system of capitalism is embedded within every aspect of my life-i.e.my caring, my social status, my time, my sexuality, my epistemology, my axiology, my ontology (Collins, 1990; Hughes,2002; Lorde, 1984). With this intentional resistance to ignoring, the Black feminist epistemological concepts of intersectionality become more mentally crystallized within my lived experiences, as they function as a corrective lens to my blinded perceptions about me and the world around me (Haynes et al., 2020; Kendall, 2020).

Taking on this intersectional narrative research project has been transformational and somewhat scary to navigate. Throughout my time completing this entire research process, I have found myself struggling between upholding the premise of intersectional research and staying within the guidelines of traditional Eurocentric research methods. What I have found is that they

often clash more than they complement. Being frustrated and confused with trying to be "right" while also trying to write the story has helped me to realize that this grappling is compulsory to my learning as an emerging researcher to understand how to disrupt the template for both my participant and me. It was the moment that I stopped clinging to "the template" that the intersectional narrative research methodology began to organically liberate my participant and me to embrace the value of our own voice and knowledge and to affirm both of our abilities to tell the unedited, unrestrained, unapologetic story.

## Implications

The findings of this study offer several practical implications for educators, policymakers, and individuals involved in the field of education, particularly in the Alabama Black Belt region. Some practical implications include the following:

- **Culturally Responsive Teaching & Critical Reflection:** Shirley's story underscores the importance of culturally responsive teaching in fostering agency among Black students. Educators should be trained in and encouraged to implement culturally relevant practices to connect with students and help them navigate the complexities of their lives (Hardin 2022; Vaughn, 2020). These culturally relevant practices should be facilitated by helping educators to critically reflect on themselves in connection with the lived experiences of their students (Pillow, 2015). The co-written story from this study (Colors of Resilience) could be a reflective tool to support these critical reflections, allowing educators to realize the connections and/or gaps between their own lived experiences and those of their students (Pillow, 2015).

- **Intersectional Lens in Education:** This study suggests the significance of adopting an intersectional lens in understanding the challenges faced by individuals, particularly Black women and students. Education professionals should be educated on and encouraged to consider intersectionality when designing policies, curriculum, and support systems (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989).

- **Emphasis on Social-Emotional Learning:** Recognizing the stifling effects of systemic oppression on mental health, there should be a greater emphasis on social-emotional learning. This involves incorporating strategies and activities that help students build emotional intelligence, resilience, and a sense of connectedness (Safir & Dugan, 2021).

- **Emancipatory Pedagogical Principles:** Shirley's approach involves giving students agency in their learning experience by allowing them to take the lead and incorporating alternative forms of assessment. This suggests a need for the incorporation of emancipatory pedagogical principles in education to empower students and foster personalized mastery (Freire, 1970; Kundu, 2020; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2020).

- **Addressing Economic Disparities:** The study highlights the importance of addressing economic disparities linked to systemic oppressions. Policymakers and educators should explore creative ways, such as grant writing, to provide students with opportunities beyond the classroom, enabling them to experience different cultures and broaden their perspectives (Safir & Dugan, 2021; Vaughn, 2020).

- **Support Networks for Teachers:** To navigate systematic oppression impact on teacher agency, the establishment of support networks for teachers, as demonstrated by Shirley's

Teacher Action Committee, can provide a space for collective voice and empowerment. Schools could encourage the creation of such support structures (Rice-Boothe, 2023; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015).

- **Community Engagement and Faith-Based Support:** The study emphasizes the role of community engagement and faith-based support in navigating structural constraints. Schools should consider fostering community partnerships and recognizing the importance of faith-based support systems in supporting educators and students (Kundu, 2020; Rice-Boothe, 2023; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015).

- **Inclusive Curricula:** Shirley's focus on topics outside of the standardized curriculum, such as Black History, suggests the need for more inclusive curricula that reflect the diversity of experiences and perspectives. Schools should strive to incorporate diverse voices and narratives into their teaching materials (Kundu, 2020; Rice-Boothe, 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015).

- **Social Justice Professional Development Opportunities**: Education professionals should be provided with ongoing professional development opportunities that focus on equity, inclusion, and strategies for navigating structural constraints. This can contribute to the development of a more empathetic and effective educational system (Hardin, 2022; Kundu, 2020; Rice-Boothe, 2023; Safir & Dugan, 2021; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015).

In summary, the practical implications from this study underscore the importance of adopting a holistic, culturally responsive, and intersectional approach to education, while also

emphasizing the need for social-emotional learning, community engagement, and support networks for both students and educators.

## Recommendations

### Practice

Shirley's story provides practical recommendations for teachers and leaders navigating the bureaucratic demands of education to foster their students' agency. First, this study warrants greater emphasis on culturally-responsive social-emotional learning in predominantly Black Title One schools in the Alabama Black Belt region that will be designed and delivered from the standpoint of intersectionality. Second, this study recommends incorporating principles of emancipatory pedagogy into the curriculum and instruction in predominantly Black Title One schools in the Alabama Black Belt region that will intentionally give teachers and students space to privilege their culture, their voice, and their choice in what and how learning takes place in the classroom.

Third, this study warrants providing teachers and leaders in predominantly Black Title One schools with grant writing support and professional development around the role of intersectionality in shaping the education experience for their Black students in the Alabama Black Belt region. Fourth, identify and support marginalized communities within predominantly Black schools (i.e., LGBTQIA). Fifth, apply an intersectional lens to revise mandated state policies that further marginalize Black students in the Alabama Black Belt region, leading to disproportionate reports of discipline issues, high school dropouts, and school-to-prison pipeline statistics. Lastly, public schools in the Alabama Black Belt region could consider starting a Teacher Action Committee to create space for all teachers to be heard and valued as a part of the schooling experience.

**Research**

Some research recommendations in light of this study include possibly extending the study by collecting intersectional narratives from Black students, parents, teachers, and leaders in the Alabama Black Belt region to develop an even more in-depth story of public education from a historically marginalized perspective. This data could then inform decisions regarding schooling policies and practices for this region alongside and apart from the traditional quantitative data often predominately used. Another recommendation is for school leaders to professionally develop and incorporate principles of transformative and social justice leadership styles that will inform how they think about and approach leading predominantly Black Title One schools in the Alabama Black Belt region.

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# APPENDICES

# APPENDIX A

Informed Consent

AUBURN UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS, LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

**(NOTE: DO NOT SIGN THIS DOCUMENT UNLESS AN IRB APPROVAL STAMP WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN APPLIED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)**

**INFORMED CONSENT**

**for a Research Study entitled**

**"How a Black, Female Leader Navigates Structural Constraints to Foster Black Student Agency in an Alabama Black Belt Public School"**

**You are invited to participate in a research study** to *share your stories and experiences as Black, female school leader supporting Black students.* The study is being conducted by MashikaTempero under the direction of Dr. Lisa Kensler in the Auburn University Department of Education. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a native and current Black, female public school Leader the Alabama Black Belt region and are age 19 or older.

**What will be involved if you participate?** If you decide to participate in this research study, your total time commitment will be approximately 30 hours. Of those 30 hours, eleven of those hours will require time away from your work to complete three interview sessions and to help with monitoring and validating the data collected, and the remaining 26 hours will focus on the following: observations of your normal work days (~18 hours over 3 weeks) and three open-ended surveys (~1 hour over 3 weeks).

Participant's initials_____

*(allow space for IRB approval stamp)*

4036 Haley Center, Auburn, AL 36849-5221; Telephone: 334-844-4460: Fax: 334-844-3072

www.auburn.edu

**Are there any risks or discomforts?** The risks associated with participating in this study are not beyond the risks you would experience in a normal day of life. To minimize these risks, we will ensure confidentiality, anonymity and grant you autonomy to share of your story and physical space as you feel most comfortable. You may also withdraw from this study at any time.

**Are there any benefits to yourself or others?** If you participate in this study, you can expect to potentially benefit others through the sharing of your knowledge as a guide to affirm and support other Black, female school leaders. We/I cannot promise you that you will receive any or all of the benefits described.

**Will you receive compensation for participating?** There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**Are there any costs?** If you decide to participate, you will not be charged any money. Auburn University has not provided for any payment if you are harmed as a result of participating in this study.

**Your privacy will be protected.** Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain anonymous (or confidential). Information obtained through your participation may be used to fulfill my dissertation defense, published in a professional journal and presented at a professional meeting.

*(allow space for IRB approval stamp)*

Participant's initials _____

**If you have questions about this study,** please ask them now or contact Mashika Tempero at 2513620126 or Dr. Lisa Kensler at lak0008@auburn.edu. A copy of this document will be given to you to keep.

**If you have questions about your rights as a research participant,** you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

**HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.**

_____ _____

Participant's signature Date Investigator obtaining consent Date

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Printed Name Printed Name

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| Version Date (date document created): April 3, 2023 | *(allow space for IRB approval stamp)* |

## APPENDIX B

Preliminary Meeting Checklist

- Read, Review and Sign Consent Form
- Check in to get personally acquainted with each other
- Address any personal concerns about the study: confidentiality, safety, voluntary participation

## APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

***Interview Protocol: How do Black, Female School Leaders Navigate Structural Constraints to Foster Student Agency in Alabama Black Belt Title One Public Schools***

**Time of Interview:**

**Date:**

**Interviewer:**

**Interviewee:**

**Location of Interview:**

**Description of Study:** The purpose of this intersectional narrative inquiry study is to understand how one Black, female school leader navigates structural constraints to foster student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school. For the purposes of this study, student agency will be defined in accordance with critical education sociologist Anindya Kundu's definition for student agency, which is "the potential to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints" (2020).

**Research Question:**
How does a Black, Female School Leader Navigate Structural Constraints to Foster Student Agency in an Alabama Black Belt Public School?

**Appendix C (continued)**

## Interview One Protocol

**Interview One Questions Focus:** Life history and Personal context

Tell me as much as possible about yourself in light of how you came to be a school leader that empowers and supports your students and other teachers at Black Belt High School. Start from the beginning and tell me how your life (all of your previous experiences) led you here to this moment. In other words, what is it about your life story and experiences that have shaped you to be the person you are to your students, colleagues and the school as a whole?

**Little q (Experience-near question) (Josselson, 2013)**

1. Where are you from?
2. Where did you attend elementary, middle and high school?
3. Describe the kind of high school you attended?
4. Describe the kind of school leaders you had growing up in the Black Belt.
5. I'd like to hear your story about how you came to be a school leader at X High School.
6. Please tell me about what it is like to lead at X high school.
7. Describe your favorite part of your job and explain why it is your favorite.
8. Tell me about a lesson you have observed or taught that was student-centered. What were the students doing? What was the teacher doing?
9. Tell me about what a typical class looks like for you.
    a. Probe- Tell me what a really bad class looks like to you.
    b. Probe- Tell me about the type of class that when you leave the building makes you feel like you don't want to come to work
    c. Probe- Tell me about the type of class that has you leaving the building feeling accomplished and like a great leader

10. Tell me about school policies or rules that you think really shapes what happens in your school.
    a. Insert Probing Questions here to get them paint the picture of their response: What does a typical school day look like?

11. Tell me about how you think you shape what happens in the classroom.
12. Tell me about how you think the surrounding community shapes what happens in your school.
13. What are your hopes for your students?

**Appendix C (continued)**

## Interview Two Protocol

**Interview Two Questions Focus:** Reconstruct Life Experiences

Concentrate on your present lived experience in the topic areas of school leadership, student empowerment, resilience, social justice, school policies and procedures, politics, race, gender.

**Little q (Experience-near question) (Josselson, 2013)**

1. Reconstruct a work day from the moment you wake up to the time you fall asleep.
2. Talk more in-depth about your relationships with students in your school.
3. Talk more in-depth about your relationships with other faculty in your school.
4. Talk more in-depth about how you think about your current school environment
5. Talk more in-depth about how you navigate and make choices in your current school environment (i.e.concerning everything: students, teaching, teacher interaction, administrator interactions, grant writing, field trips, parents, etc)
6. Talk more in-depth about you might perceive the role of your race, gender, class and/or sexuality in your current school environment.

**Appendix C (continued)**

## Interview Three-Five Protocol

**Interview Three Questions Focus:** Reflect on meaning of their experiences

Do you think that your status as an African American and/or as a woman impacts the way that you practice within the field of education?
How do you perceive your role to differ from the roles of your non-minority colleagues within the profession?
As an African American woman, do you feel any additional responsibility to help foster collaborative relationships between the family and schools?
What impact does your role within the school have on your professional development?
What were most of your teachers like at your schools?
How did you come to be a history teacher and leader that focuses on advocacy and agency?
How do you think the school can be a medium for social justice?
What does unplugging look like for you?
Could I get a sample picture of your 3-part list?
Describe what a mental health day looks like in your class.
SGA-How do you encourage voice and choice?
What strategies do you use to help students who come to you to talk?
Effect of power shift on you, your students and other teachers?
Explain how you go about building relationships with your students.
Identify common labels placed on your students.
Describe the classroom community you envision and strive towards.
Describe what you think an effective school leader does.
What do you think is the reason for high turnover?
What would it take for you to feel seen and heard in your work environment?
What do you believe is the right direction for your students?
In interview 2, you said "I also wished that we acknowledged and celebrated other communities that are in our school. But I also acknowledge that we're in the south and we're in the black belt. And that might be frowned upon." - Why do you think this is? What do you mean?
Tell me more about your mother's influence on your life
What about Mr. Pugh's teaching style did you want to emulate? Why?
In interview 1, you said "Mr. Pugh knew the type of students he served. He didnt make us feel less than." What do you mean by the "type of students" he served? Were you ever in position that made you feel less than during your time in school?
In what ways do you think poverty affected (affects) how people view you or your peers?
In interview 1, you said "Politics have its place." What did you mean by that?
Why do you think teachers have been adamant about leaving the school?
How do you make sure that young ladies understand their worth and the power of their voice?
Speak about your vision for community building.
You mentioned in interview 1 that you often felt like you have had to censor your true spirit to make other people comfortable. What did censoring look like?
What does it mean for you to do right by children?
Describe your own space/community within the community.

How do you think maintaining a school garden facilitates student empowerment?
Define student voice and choice. How do you promote it in your work as a teacher and leader?
Talk about effect of high turnover in the building.
In interview 1, you said "I must be mindful of what I say and how I act because somebody's always watching." Why is that? How is that?
Amidst all of the "stuff" that has happened in the school, how have you been intentional about empowering students?
You said you've had a very colorful life. Define what you mean by "colorful life."

## Appendix D

Observation Protocol

**Rationale for the Field:** To capture an informal analysis of how a Black, female school leader navigates structural constraints to foster student agency
**Gaining Access:** I will get physical access using the participant's consent via oral and written measures that richly outlines the details of the study and how the data will be used. I will get emotional access through primarily establishing a one-month rapport with the participant and ultimately create a safe space for us to function as co-researchers throughout the research process.
**Who will I observe:** Participant and all people and environments connected to her daily work tasks
**What will we observe:** The participant's social interactions with the learning environment (i.e. students, teachers, community members, relevant resources and assigned tasks)
**How will I conduct observation notes:** see organizer below (**Figure 7.7** Sample Observational protocol, Creswell & Poth, 2018).
**Observing through a Intersectionality Theory Lens:**

I will rely on Crenshaw's (1990) intersectionality theoretical framework as an analytical tool to examine the ways in which multiple oppressions (gender bias, racism, classism, etc) intersect and manifest in the participant's life (and other characters in her story) as she fosters student agency in an Alabama Black Belt public school. In addition, Kundu's (2020) definition for student agency ("the potential to better one's opportunities and life changes that manifest in deliberate effort to overcome structural constraints") guided the lens for finding connections to fostering student agency throughout the Shirley's story.

| **Observation Day: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15** | |
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| **Length of Activity: 90 minutes** | |
| **Descriptive Notes** | **Reflective Notes** |
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## Appendix E

Open-Ended Survey

| **Please share any thoughts you would like to add about the interview or observations made today. Feel free to express yourself using words, pictures or any way that best communicates your thoughts.** |
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## Appendix F

Summary Table- Overview of Findings

| **Story Title: "Colors of Resilience: A Journey Through Education, Advocacy, and Empowerment in the Alabama Black Belt Region"** | | | |
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| **Chapter Titles** | **Subtitles** | **Description** | **Intersectional Findings** |
| **1. Childhood Personal Challenges & Triumphs** | ● Childhood Shadows<br>● Seeking Identity & Security<br>● Embracing Expression | This chapter encompasses subchapters that highlight the participant's personal struggles, growth, and achievements from her childhood into middle school. It includes chapters such as "Childhood Shadows" (father's military PTSD and tense home environment), "Seeking Identity & Security" (the participant shares about experiencing an identity crisis and suffering a suicide attempt as a result of her parent's divorce), "Embracing Expression" (permanent move to Alabama, encountering poverty, middle school struggles, and finding a therapeutic escape in writing while in middle school). | **1.Race and Identity: Being a Black Girl in a Predominantly White School**<br>The participant identifies as a Black girl being born into a Black family with a Black mother from the Alabama Black Belt region and a father from Michigan. In Colorado, the participant experienced an identity crisis as she became aware of her racial difference from the majority of her peers. She navigated feelings of being different and faced challenges related to her racial representation and her sense of belonging.<br><br>"Speaking of growing up, I had a very, very, very, very, very colorful life. I am the product of two Black military parents. My mother and my father were both in the military. My mother is from the Alabama Black Belt region. She was born and raised in a small, rural town in the region. Um…and my father is from Michigan."<br><br>"And also during this time around the third grade, I was going through an identity crisis. I, at this point, realized, um, that I looked different from the |

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| | | | majority of my peers. Um, if my memory serves me correctly, um, we were one of maybe two or three predominantly African American families. What I mean by that is Black mother, Black father, Black children. And there were a lot of interracial couples, and there were a lot of Caucasian couples. But, I just recall, and I think majority of my elementary pictures is just it being me or me and another person of color. So I remember around third grade having what I like to call an identity crisis, realizing that I'm different and not being able put my finger on it. So at this point, I'm dealing with my own identity issues and then dealing with a tense household due to some untreated PTSD that my father was going through."<br><br>**2.Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Family Dynamics and Mental Health: Being a Black girl in need of emotional support in a tense home in enviroment**<br>The participant's childhood was impacted by her parents' military background, her father's PTSD resulting from multiple tours to Korea, and his struggles with alcoholism. These challenges contributed to a tense household, affecting the particpant emotionally. Her desire for love and attention from her parents was hindered by their own difficulties, leaving her feeling emotionally unsupported and ultimately attempting to commit suicide.<br><br>"During my time in Colorado is |

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| | | | when I recall truly dealing with my father and his PTSD starting to affect the household. By the time I was in fifth grade, I think my father had done about two or three tours to Korea and as with anybody, this began to take a toll on his mental health. And in my eyes, he was a functioning alcoholic. Um, and so, um, home was not, um, the best place. Um, it wasn't completely awful. Um, but I do just recall things always being very structured and things were, um, quite tense at times. Um, and that was hard because I was a child that wanted a lot more love and attention I think neither one of my parents were able to provide for me. Um, I am that kid that, um, is very emotional, wore hurt on her sleeve, and I'm still that way now. Um, and again, circumstances prevented my parents, unfortunately, from being able to give me what I felt I needed."<br><br>**3. Race, Ethinicity, Geographic Location Socioeconomic Status and Housing Instability: Being a Black girl experiencing poverty in the Alabama Black Belt region**<br>The particpant's family faces financial challenges, residing in a two-bedroom house with multiple family members while living in the Alabama Black Belt region. Although she may not have fully recognized her housing instability as homelessness, it reflects the struggles her family endured. Socio-economic status impacts |

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| | | | the opportunities and resources available to the participant, affecting her overall well-being.<br><br>“Coming to the Alabama Black Belt region and going through all the stuff that I was going through at home while also living in poverty on a small street that is often called “Crack City.” It was just a lot.”<br><br>“Oh, and keep in mind when I say we moved back to Alabama, it was very much in a two-bedroom house, two bedrooms with the little bed area. It was very much my aunt, my mother, myself, my little cousin and my sister. It was very much five of us in a two bedroom house. I didn’t know, and maybe I wasn’t supposed to know that according to the government standards that I was homeless, that I was in poverty.”<br><br>**4. Race, Gender and Emotional Expression: Being an emotional Black girl within an emotionally unstable family**<br>The participant identified as a girl and expresses her emotions openly, wearing her heart on her sleeve. However, she felt that her emotional nature was not entirely accepted within her family, making her feel like a burden at times. This highlights the intersection of gender norms and emotional expression, impacting her self-perception and interactions with others.<br><br>“I have always been deemed the emotional one in the family. And |

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| | | | so me being emotional is not a characteristic that most of my family members really like. I always felt more so like a burden to my family more than I was celebrated. And I think I just had so much going on again. But I just recall thinking if I make it out of this, I would never, if given the opportunity, to allow another child to feel the way that I feel in this moment, like…. I want to be for somebody else, what I felt like I needed in that moment."<br><br>**5. Race and Ethnicity**<br>The participant shared about how moving from a predominantly white school in Colorado to a preodominantly Black school in the Alabama Black Belt region made her feel as if she moved from being a minority to being a part of the majority. The racial and ethnic dynamics influence her sense of identity and could have also played a role in the support and relationships she was able to form with her teachers.<br><br>"And my mother, my sister and me moved to a place in the Alabama Black Belt region. And this is where I attended a school where I went from an environment where I was the minority, to where now I was the majority and everybody looked like me, but everybody didn't sound like me…"<br><br>"Um, but I do recall being in my, um, I think she was my reading/homeroom teacher. I |

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| | | | don't know how classes were at the time. Um, but her name was Ms. Hunter, and she was a Black teacher. One of the things that Ms. Hunter encouraged us to do every single day was to write. And so I remember I used to write, and I just used to write my little heart off. I don't know what the class was, but I used to love coming to school and going straight to Ms. Hunter's class and being able to write and to express myself and how I felt, because again, at this point I was coming off of a suicide attempt. My parents had separated at this point and my mother wasn't taking it well. Um, and I really couldn't, you know, go to her with, you know, those same emotions.<br><br>"Um, so just being able to write and express myself, um, it meant the world to me…Ms. Hunter just really pushed me, um, to get out of that, um, that depressed space." |
| **2.Educational Journey & Impactful Figures** | ● Navigating Black Belt High School<br>● College and Early Career<br>● Returning to My Roots as an Educator at my Alma Mater<br>○ My First Year of Teaching<br>○ Teaching Experiences While Working Under | This chapter revolves around the participant's educational experiences and influential individuals who shaped her path from her high school years into her early career start as a new teacher at her alma mater, Black Belt High School. Chapters such as "Navigating High School" | **1. Socioeconomic Status, Race, Ethinicity**<br>The participant discussed her family's financial struggles, experiencing poverty, and living in a two-bedroom house with several others. Such economic factors could have impacted her access to resources and opportunities, which could have ultimately affected her educational experience.<br><br>"Like this city has always been a city where there is a lot of poverty in it. I know when we |

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| | Different Many Principals<br>○ Teaching Under Mr. Green's Principalship | (influential figures like Mr. Pugh, Mr. & Mrs. Milly, and Mrs. Johnson), "Early Career and Beyond" (college experiences, involvement with National Park Service, and encounter with John Lewis), and "Returning to My Roots" (becoming a teacher at her alma mater Black Belt High, mentorship with Mr. Pugh, experiencing sexual harrassment and unfair treatment under certain principals). | relocated here after my parents divorced, it was several of us in a two-bedroom house and I didn't know, and maybe I wasn't supposed to know that according to the government standards that I was homeless, that I was in poverty. I didn't understand that."<br><br>"If I was hungry because I was too stressed the night before to get something to eat, Mr. Pugh was who I could go to and ask for a snack."<br><br>"I learned unfortunately, hmm, that politics unfortunately have its place. And because I was not connected in class and family names, I didn't need it or deserve it."<br><br>**2. Teaching Style, Race, Socioeconomic Status**<br>The participant spoke highly of her 10th grade history teacher Mr. Henry Pugh's teaching style, because of his impact on her love for Black history. Receiving culturally relevant instruction could have affirmed the participant's identity and supported her sense of belonging in a world that often made her feel like she was not valued, seen and heard (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1990; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020; Freire,1970).<br><br>"He just made teaching look so easy. He had a way of making history fun when nobody else liked to do it. And he did his best to tie in Black history into everything that he taught." |

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| | | | "..and maybe I wasn't supposed to know that according to the government standards that I was homeless, that I was in poverty. I didn't understand that. And even if I did understand that, it didn't matter because again, Mr. Pugh made me feel seen. Mr. Pugh helped me know who I was, and I was proud of it."<br><br>"We would go to him before we went to the counselors, and teachers would be in and out his room venting to him all the time. I remember Mr. Pugh used to always tell us, "this world is not going to be fair, but I don't want y'all to let society tell y'all that you're not good enough."<br><br>**3. Gender and Race**<br>The participant shared how she experienced sexual harrassment from a student her first year of teaching and how it was initially mishandled and forsaken as a trivial matter by a male administrator to the point that even she was willing to let it slide. This experience affirms how Black women are often disproportionately targeted with sexual assault and conditioned by society to accept and overlook it (Barlow, 2020).<br><br>"Um, and then also, um, another experience I dealt with my first year of teaching, without going into too much detail, I did have an issue with, um, sexual harassment my first year of teaching. Um, and it was not handled properly. And |

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| | | | unfortunately, it was something that did require me to go to AEA (Alabama Education Association) about. Well … I did not go to AEA about it. My work father, Mr. Pugh and some others went to AEA about it because I was just gonna leave the situation alone. Um, um, and with that, again, without going too much into detail about the situation, the young men in the class were questioned about what happened. All the young men took the side of the young man and nothing was done until admin got pushed by AEA." |
| **3.Striving for Advocacy, Empowerment & Social Justice** | ● Just Being "The Mama"<br>● Why I Teach<br>● What I Teach<br>● How I Teach<br>○ To Embrace Their True Selves<br>○ To Embrace Social Emotional Learning<br>○ To Use Their Voice and Choie to Enact Change Around Them<br>■ Space to be Heard and Valued<br>■ Space to be Student Leaders for the School<br>■ Space to Independently and Collaborativ | This chapter focuses on the participant's efforts to create positive change, empower students, and advocate for social justice. The chapter focuses on her efforts inside and outside of the classroom. | **1.Race, Ethnicity, Gender**<br>The participant who identifies as a woman of color suggests her overall title in the school is "The Mama." When mentioning this, she seems to be speaking to her role in empowering and supporting her students beyond the stereotypes and misfortunes placed on them by society. This indicates her awareness of the intersecting identities of her students and the need to address their unique challenges in order to support them.<br><br>"Just being "the mama," I think that's mainly how I show up. I believe this is what allows me to be first and foremost intentional about building personal relationships with my students and creating opportunities for them beyond the stereotypes and misfortunes of society placed on them."<br><br>"And I remember I spent the rest |

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| | ely Learn<br>■ Space to Take Ownership of Future College and Career Goals<br>● Beyond My Classroom<br>○ Supporting My Colleagues<br>■ Speaking Up<br>■ Technology Support<br>■ Emotional Support<br>■ Teacher Action Committee<br>○ Attending Culutrally Relevant Professional Development | | of that nine weeks, about two or three weeks, trying to unravel what I did by being intentional about building relationships, something that I should have done from day one. I admit I ain't teach nothing. I ain't teach no content, we ain't learn about no Napoleon, no revolution, American War, no World War. Instead, I readdressed my role and focused on empowering those students and making those students feel okay, making those students feel safe and helping those students see that they are beyond a label and that they are beyond the mistakes that they made. I realized the rules and procedures that the school wanted me to force with all students wasn't gonna work with them."<br><br>**2.Race and Socioeconomic Status**<br>The participant shared a story about one of her 9th-grade classes that faced challenges and incidents in the past, as they were labeled by everyone for their struggles with disciplinary issues and given a bad reputation among their peers. This suggests that these students may have been dealing with systemic disadvantages that furthr marginalized and negatively labeled them.<br><br>"Before the school year even started, just because I had heard so many things about this particular ninth grade class, I already felt miserable, frustrated and defeated about this incoming |

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| | | | class. I had heard this particular incoming 9th grade class had run off three teachers in the same month while they were in middle school. They also had an incident in middle school that resulted in them being in the same classroom for the remainder of the school year. So just knowing these things about this 9th grade class before they got to me caused me to put a wall up from the jump."<br><br>"Mike (student in the 9th grade class) responded and said, "You've had an attitude with us since the first day of school. You don't wanna be here. We don't wanna be here. What do you want from us? You asking us what do we want from you? What do you want from us? How do you expect us to perform? And you don't even like us. You don't even know us." And I'm not gonna lie, I brushed it off. And when they left that day, I remember crying in my room. I didn't go to afternoon duty. And I remember I cried because he was right. I had heard about them before they got there, and I had already judged them. I had already labeled them, and I didn't get to know them."<br><br>**3. Race, Ethnicity, and Mental Health**<br>The participant revealed her struggles with depression, anxiety and personal losses (experienced a miscarriage and death of an uncle in the same year). These struggles intersect with her identity as a Black |

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| | | | woman in a predominantly Black area of the Alabama Black Belt region, where the culture often conditions people to ignore their mental health needs. Yet, through various life-altering experiences, the participant came to realize the importance of supporting her and her students' mental health.<br><br>"Because in a weird way, I had suffered a miscarriage and the loss of an uncle and I was in a downward spiral and doing a lot of things in my personal life I'm not proud of. But baby, these children had me so wound up. I didn't have time to be depressed or anxious anymore. I had to figure out how I was gonna survive and get to and reach these kids."<br><br>"So, what I have come to embrace as foundational pedagogical practice to make this family piece a reality in my class is teaching the whole child. There was a time where I did not truly see or hear my students and there are several experiences from my past that have helped me to emphathize with my students even in how I teach. So along with teaching history content, I also strive to empower and push my students to embrace their true selves, to embrace social emotional learning and to use their voice and choice to enact change around them."<br><br>**4.Race, Ethnicity, Education and Empowerment**<br>Upon realizing her initial biases |

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| | | | and the need for building relationships with her students, the participant's story high-lights the importance of empathy, understanding, and culturally responsive teaching in education. Her shift in her approach towards supporting her students' social and emotional needs showcases the needed role of education in empowering Black students beyond the academic content.<br><br>"I didn't do those core things that you should do, which is build relationships. I broke one of my cardinal rules, one of the things that hurted me as a child. I didn't let those students be seen. I didn't let them be heard. I didn't get to know them. Some of them I realized I knew their last names and didn't know their first names. So I realized I was projecting a lot of myself onto them."<br><br>"And I remember I spent the rest of that nine weeks, about two or three weeks, trying to unravel what I did by being intentional about building relationships, something that I should have done from day one. I admit I ain't teach nothing. I ain't teach no content, we ain't learn about no Napoleon, no revolution, American War, no World War. Instead, I readdressed my role and focused on empowering those students and making those students feel okay, making those students feel safe and helping those students see that they are beyond a label and that they are |

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| | | | beyond the mistakes that they made. I realized the rules and procedures that the school wanted me to force with all students wasn't gonna work with them."<br><br>"So, what I have come to embrace as foundational pedagogical practice to make this family piece a reality in my class is teaching the whole child. There was a time where I did not truly see or hear my students and there are several experiences from my past that have helped me to emphathize with my students even in how I teach. So along with teaching history content, I also strive to empower and push my students to embrace their true selves, to embrace social emotional learning and to use their voice and choice to enact change around them."<br><br>"I realized the rules and procedures that the school wanted me to force with all students wasn't gonna work with them. For instance, if I knew these students already had two strikes before they came to me, if Mike or Jess or another student said a cuss word, and I knew anywhere else that would get them put out, I would address it in my own way. I wouldn't put them out because I knew the label that I and everybody else had on them. And I didn't want that to be one other thing that was on them."<br><br>**5.Socioeconomic Status, Race, Ethnicity, Religion: Being a** |

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| | | | **Christian woman from a low socioeconomic background in the Alabama Black Belt region** The participant shared that her history of childhood trauma and her commitment to her values as a Christian are what compels her to empower the Black and Brown children in Title One areas that she has been given the privilege to teach. This indicates the intersection of race, ethnicity, religion and socioeconomic status, as it highlights the challenges these students may face due to systemic inequalities and the need for educators who understand and can empathize with their experiences.<br><br>"I feel like it is my duty. It is my charge. It is my mission. It was written in the book for me to do right by these kids. And when I don't do right by them, I pay for it. Whenever I need to show up and be present for them and I can and I choose not to, I pay for it. It bothers me. I'll lose sleep over it. The aura in my room is off. I'm sorry. I cry about everything (laugh). But God would be so disappointed in me. I don't understand. We all have bad days. We all have them. Most of us have had traumatic incidents that happened to us throughout our lives. And that is what has driven us to come to these Title One areas cause we want to show these primarily Black and Brown children that it can get better. That "I made it." That "I may not know what's going on in your house, but trust, when I was your age, I had a lot going |

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| | | | on in mine."<br><br>"So when it comes to what I teach, I feel as though it is my job to expose these children to the law of the land as Black and Brown children. They must be equipped with the law. They must know their rights as citizens, and they must also know their rights as students in the school building. Because a lot of times I feel as though we treat these 14 to 18 year old young students, as if they do not have agency, as though they don't know how to talk as if they do not know how to make decisions."<br><br>**6. Race, Socioeconomic Status and Geographic Location: Differences in education experience between public school and private school**<br>The participant spoke of concerns about the inequities in education between different groups of students within very close geographic locations. The reference to "private schools" and "another county" implies disparities in resources, opportunities, and the quality of education. This exposes how the intersection of race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location can shape students' educational experiences and outcomes.<br><br>"So what are my benchmark standards within these benchmark standards? Which one do they need to know more information about? What is more |

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| | | | important for them to be equipped when they walk out in society? Because to say that they're gonna be viewed the same as their counterparts at the private schools or down the road in another county, that would be….that would be a lie."<br><br>**7. Social Mobility, Class, Ethnicity, and Opportunity: Limited Title One student access to opportunities and resources**<br>The participant revealed how she has to make decisions regarding the benchmark standards and figure out what is essential for her students to succeed in society. This shows an intersectional issue of social mobility and the potential barriers that students from marginalized backgrounds may face in accessing opportunities and resources necessary for their success beyond high school<br><br>"So when it comes to the standards that I decide to teach more in depth than others, I think of how it is going to affect them in the long run. If I have 17 standards, the reality of it is I can't address all of them in nine weeks. So what are my benchmark standards within these benchmark standards? Which one do they need to know more information about? What is more important for them to be equipped when they walk out in society?"<br><br>**8. Sexual Orientation, Race, Ethnicity, Class,** |

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| | | | **Socioeconomic Status, Cultural Relevance, Resourcefulness: An LGBTQ-IA Book Club**<br>The participant revealed her grant-writing efforts to start a book club to support LGBTQ-IA students in the school, a group she identifies as marginalized within a predominantly Black student body that collectively are labeled as having low-socioeconomic status. Such an effort shows how she takes an intersectional approach to work around the constraints of the financial and class circumstances of the students to create a learning environment that is inclusive and celebratory of diverse perspectives and contributions.<br><br>"Teaching students to embrace their true selves means first giving them the capacity to do so. This is where I strive to fill in the gaps for my students by seeking out resources to help make this happen. I believe a great example of this is displayed in my recent efforts to support our LGBTQ plus IA students in the school. So, I was recently awared a $10,000 grant from an organization that is focused on improving the lives of LGBTQ plus IA students. This grant will provide money for me to sponsor an LGBTQ plus IA student-led book club that will be called Living in Color and for an end of the year field experience trip for about 10 students. We will read, discuss and reflect on six books: one is about Black male voices, one is |

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| | | | about Black female voices, one is just about being proud of who you are in general, and the last three books are related to the gay rights movement."<br><br>"So in the midst of writing the grant, I really got into it. I was intentional about sharing ways on how I can positively impact a group of students who I know are marginalized in the building. There's nothing we do in the curriculum that highlights LGBTQ plus IA trailblazers."<br><br>"And so in the grant application, I talked about being in the south and being in a very conservative town. I also talked about how being in the Bible Belt made it even more of a conservative area. I was trying to figure out a way I could expose students to both some positive and negative sides of history. Again, at the end of the day, it's still history. And then still give them space to share their voice and an opportunity to share their emotions and their experiences in a comfortable space."<br><br>**9. Race, Ethinicity, Socioeconomic Status, Geographic Location, Student-Centered Learning, Social and Emotional Support, Leadership and Advocacy**<br>When sharing how she teaches, the participant revealed how she emphasizes social emotional learning and student-centered learning because she sees and has experienced firsthand how the intersecting social factors of |

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| | | | their background can take a toll on the mental health and well-being of Black students with a socioeconomic status in the Alabama Black Belt region. She therefore provides students with outlets beyond the standardized curriculum to learn, express themselves, to enact change with their own voices and ideas and to make informed decisions for their future. Some of these efforts include self-expression through art, maintaining a classroom garden, alternative open-ended assignments to freely learn and demonstrate their own learning, work as student leaders to advocate on behalf of their peers to the administrators and to take them on field trips that culturally engage and enrich them.<br><br>"In the midst of everything that has gone on this school year-student death and a natural disaster, I am intentional about empowering my students by making sure that they know that they are seen and heard and encouraging them to realize that it's okay to not be okay sometimes, but it is not okay to stay there and to remember the importance of taking care of themselves and not to rely on anybody or anything to make them feel better, like they're great, they're awesome and that they need to know that for themselves."<br><br>"When we were returned in person from virtual learning due to COVID, I was intentional |

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| | | | about facilitating a social emotional learning space that would give room for my students to act on opportunities outside of the standardized curriculum to have fun and exercise freedom in their school experience. So far the outlets that we have engaged in are gardening, art and Mental Health Mondays."<br><br>"Overall, I feel I empower student to use their voice and choice by giving space for them to be heard and valued, space to be student leaders for the school, space to independently and collaboratively learn and space to take ownership of their future college and career goals."<br><br>"I feel like I promote student voice and choice with my students when they come to me and I don't shut anything down. If it's something that I don't think is rational or is gonna happen, I may try to redirect the thought. But just providing that space and opportunity for my students to just be able to talk freely. And then helping them maneuver through how they're gonna react as as a result of whatever is going on."<br><br>"As an SGA sponsor, I am a firm believer that I am just a teacher representative and my job is for my students to find avenues to express how they want the school ran. I ensure that there are student leaders in each grade so that there is someone representing each grade level…If you were to come into our SGA |

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| | | | meetings, you'll find that it is mostly student-led. They create their own goals. They determine what they want the school year to look like for them and their peers. I simply just provide the vehicle for them to make their goals as successful as possible."<br><br>"… I give my students choices on how they want to learn and how they want to show me mastery. So if somebody's a writer, then they'll write. If somebody likes to design, like I've had students like create websites on just big unit topics. I just give them autonomy to choose how they want to present what they know or that they get something. So an assessment for one student might be that multiple choice assessment. Somebody else might be drawing something on poster board. I like to give them the autonomy to show me that they get it."<br><br>"I am also intentional about taking my students on field trips so that they can be exposed to people, cultures and places outside of their hometown. Because for many of them, they have never even left their hometown. It makes my heart melt to see my kids get so excited about something as simple as going to restaurant that they have never heard of before or doing something that they have never done. Just recently, I was able to secure grant money to take my students on a free trip to Atlanta to the Botanical Gardens. It was truly an amazing |

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| | | | experience for us all."<br><br>"A lot of times my planning period is spent talking one-to-one with students and providing them with the extra help they need that they are not able to get at home or within the school. This help is often in the form of career planning, college applications, FAFSA, connecting them with other adult mentors."<br><br>**10. Sexual Orientation, Gender, Race, Class, Ethinicity**<br>The participant also shared how she is also intentional about advocating for and supporting her colleagues. Through forming the Teacher Action Committee, she is also especially focused on supporting the women in the building because of there being a predominantly Black male staff in the building.<br><br>**"**Back in 2018, I became public enemy number one because I advocated for a colleague that was being discriminated against because of his sexual orientation. I became aware of some comments that were made about a particular teacher on his teacher evaluation forms. There were some lies that were told. I knew that admin at the time did not like him because he's gay. So, the teacher was gonna leave it alone, but I couldn't let it go because it just didn't sit well with me. Other teachers kept telling me to leave it alone. And I just, I just could not leave it alone. And so with that teacher's permission, we went to the |

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| | | | central office and had a conversation about his experience."<br><br>"When we returned back to the building, I started a Teacher Action Committee as a way to empower female the voices amongst a predominantly male staff. I intentionally asked female colleagues to join and to help advocate for change. I truly believe that women are the backbone of society. This school would fall apart without the women in the background working." |
| **4. Challenges in the Work Environment**<br><br>*"Constraints to Success at Black Belt High School"* | ● Constraints to Student Success at Black Belt High School<br>○ Emphasis on Athletics over Academics<br>○ Emphasis on Vocational Studies over Four-Year Studies<br>○ Bias in Dual-Enrollment Student Selection<br>○ Classism<br>○ Community Violence<br>○ Lack of Parent Participation & Engagement<br>○ Teach for America Teachers<br>○ Student Labels | This chapter focuses on the difficulties the participant and her students faces in her work environment and the impact on her well-being. | **1.Race, Ethinicity, Class, Socioeconomic Status and Social Mobility**<br>The participant revealed how an emphasis on sports over academics at Black Belt High School does a disservice to the students because of how it undermines the value of academic achievement and ultimately has led to unequal distribution of resources needed to help students work toward academic pursuits that could help them thrive beyond high school, such as updated history textbooks and mental health support.<br><br>"One theme from my time as a student and even now as an educator that I believe is hurting many of our students is the idea that "the ticket out of the hood is athletics." We're getting all of this extra money and hiring like 50 coaches to come and perform athletically. For whatever reason, |

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| | ○ Lack of Leadership Consistency<br>○ Lack of Relationship Building<br>○ Nepotism<br>○ Lack of Certified Teachers<br>○ Mandated School Policies<br>○ Lack of Adequate Minority Representation on the State Board<br>○ High Faculty/Staff Turnover<br>○ Lack of Political and Social Justice Awareness<br>● Constraints to My Success as a Black, Female Teacher and Leader at Black Belt High School<br>○ A Typical Workday for Me: Navigating Work-Life Balance Struggles<br>○ Teaching in Survival Mode<br>○ A Toxic Work Environment<br>○ Always Feeling the Need to Censor Myself | | for example at Black Belt High School, the ticket out is athletics. So we spend a lot of money in the athletics program, yet I'm sitting here with 10-year-old history textbooks with my old classmates signature in them. That's an issue. But the football team is about to get some new helmets. They about to get some new gear that they just got last year. We preach education, but we practice athletics above all because every person that has shown up here is a coach as of recently."<br><br>The participant also mentioned how there is an emphasis on vocational studies over 4-year studies. Such a focus could limit students' access to higher education opportunities. This limitation showcases an intersection that reveals how prioritizing vocational studies over four-year studies, the school could be inadvertently contributing to economic disparities and reinforcing class-based inequalities.<br><br>"Another trend that I see now that I saw then is that there seems to be this very big focus on vocational studies. We always say career and college ready, but I feel like sometimes we don't really look at the four year aspect of it, if that makes sense. We are so quick to put students in an internship and send them to the community college, as if the community college is the only place that can provide assistance to our students." |

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| | ○ Not Feeling Geuinely Seen or Heard By My Administrators<br>○ Being a Black Woman in a Predominantly Male School Environment | | **2. Race, Class, Socioeconomic Status**<br>The participant talked about there being bias in dual-enrollment student selection based on connections and privilege. Such an issue perpetuates classism within the education system and it denies less privilege students a chance to access college-level courses that could potentially improve their educational and economic outlook.<br><br>"And another theme I see happening from then and now is how students are selected for dual enrollment. It's supposed to be for these students who live below the poverty line, because they wouldn't have an opportunity to go to college any other time. But it seems that we put everybody's child in the dual enrollment program except for the children who need to be in there. So dual enrollment is often full of all the teachers' kids and doctors' kids and the people who are well connected. And even now, when it's time for students to sign up for dual enrollment and other things, the privileged kids are contacted first and then when they need to fill in the numbers at the end, then they will finally give other less privileged students an opportunity to sign up."<br><br>**3. Race, Class, Ethinicity, Geographic Location** |

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| | | | The participant mentioned how she feels the Alabama Board of Education does not make decisions with predominantly Black Title One schools in the Alabama Black Belt region in mind. She feels that this is mainly because there is not adequate Black representation on the board to empathetically make such decisions. This may also lead to inequitable access to resources and opportunities for underprivileged students.<br><br>"I don't believe it helps that we only have about one or two people representing the counties in the Black Belt region on a predominantly white state school board. And to add to this, we only have about only two minorities on that board that can speak to the African American experience. Nevertheless, all of their jobs as leaders is to make decisions for the betterment of all children. But it seems that no decisions are made with minority children at the forefront of those decisions. Honestly, it makes sense because we do not have many people on the board who can empathize with these children's experiences.<br>They don't know what it's like for these kids to struggle. So therefore the policies that they make are only about affecting the masses. So they're not thinking about us except for when it comes to how we affect how the state as a whole looks. But if how we operate does not affect the masses, they ain't thinking about us. They think |

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| | | | about us when they have to, when they have to do the failing school list, that's when they think about us and how they can help improve the delivery of instruction to make things "better."<br><br>**4.Race, Class, Ethnicity, Geographic Location**<br>The participant referenced lack of parent involvement as a disservice to the educational experience of the students. However, this noted lack of parent involvement potentially highlights an intersection of social categories (i.e. poverty, community violence, class, race, ethinicity) on the students' parents that could collectively prevent parents from participating in their child's educational journey.<br><br>"Like I don't even think I know if we have a PTA. I know we have one, but I hardly ever hear about it. If there was something I could change as a whole in the school systems, it would be parental involvement. Being intentional about truly involving parents outside of open house and outside of parents coming out to support their kids at senior night at the football game or at a Title One meeting. Because the reality of it is, we live in a cycle of poverty. Like some of these parents my age, their parents maybe didn't do more because of a lack of knowledge."<br><br>**5.Race, Class, Ethnicity, Geographic Location** |

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| | | | The participant mentioned how many of her Teach for America (TFA) teachers are non-minority and often come from privileged backgrounds that potentially hinders their empathy toward the systemic issues the students at Black Belt High School faces. Although the TFA teachers bring valuable skills and perspectives to the school, they often struggle in navigating the complexities of teaching in underprivileged areas.<br><br>"Some of them (TFA teachers) have found it hard to acknowledge that some of these kids just come to school for a meal. Some of the TFA teachers don't understand that, and they don't understand where that comes from. They don't understand that we have a lot of violence in the community. They don't understand that that shows up with students sleeping in class. They don't understand that that shows up with students acting out of frustration because of what is going on at home. But then on the flip side, you do have some that understand, but instead of being empathetic, they're sympathetic. They project a "I'm trying to save you by just teaching you the curriculum" mentality, as if education "as is" is the key, when in reality, teaching the state curriculum is not gonna solve the issue that many of our students don't have food at home. Teaching the history of the presidents is not gonna solve the issue that "my daddy is whooping my butt right |

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| | | | now." Being just focused on "teaching the standards" in a Title One school is just not a realistic approach to dealing with the systemic issues that are in this perished area, and it is clear that many of the TFA teachers just don't get it."<br><br>6. **Race, Socioeconomic Status and Educational Disparities**<br>The participant revealed how there were disparities in how teachers treated students, both in terms of support and disciplinary actions due to their socioeconomic background and family connections. This information reveals how Black students with a low socioeconomic status in an Alabama Black Belt public school are often potentially targeted with inequity and unfairness within the educational system.<br><br>"But it seems that we put everybody's child in the dual enrollment program except for the children who need to be in there. So dual enrollment is often full of all the teachers' kids and doctors' kids and the people who are well connected. And even now, when it's time for students to sign up for dual enrollment and other things, the privileged kids are contacted first and then when they need to fill in the numbers at the end, then they will finally give other less privileged students an opportunity to sign up." |

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| | | | **7. Geographic Location, Race, Class, Ethnicity, Educational Experience**<br>The participant revealed how frequent leadership changes and high faculty/staff turnover creates an unstable environment for both students and teachers. Such lack of consistency reflects an intersection of students' geographic location, race, class and ethinicity ultimately hindering them from building meaningful relationships with their educators, making it even more difficult to address the needs of the student population effectively. Black Belt High School is a Title One School in a rural area where access to economical factors and suitable living conditions are limited; this often prevents educators from coming and/or remaining at the school as well.<br><br>"And because of the inconsistency in faculty and staff employment at our school, I believe that there is also a lack of genuine relationship building with the students. One of the things that we should preach more about that we really don't is relationship building. It is hard for a kid or even me as a grown up to build a relationship with you knowing that you're gonna be gone the next year. So it's hard to build relationships when you know that person is leaving. So you're kind of like always on edge. So I think that also adds even more to the lack of consistency." |

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| | | | "So, there is no consistency…and what I mean by consistency is leadership. I mean, Mr. Green has been the principal here, this is year five and in my nine years of teaching her he is the longest serving principal I've had. And if he makes it to next year, he'll be Black Belt High's longest serving principal. And that ain't nothing to celebrate honestly. I mean it will be a big thing if he comes back. But the fact that in him making it to year six will be the longest tenure that somebody has is really sad. And then when I think about the context of my situation, even within my department, you know, this is year nine for me, and I've been in my department the longest. Up until just this year, I have been the only tenured teacher in my department. So there is no consistency."<br><br>**8. Race, Ethnicity, Class, Resource Access, Educational Experience, Geographical Location**<br>The participant mentioned how many of the mandated school policies conflicted with the academic and social and emotional learning needs. For instance, she referenced how the school's overemphasis on testing took away from students being able to agentically learn and be creative in the development of their knowledge. The conflicts related to mandated school policies highlights how Black students at predominantly Black Title One Schools in the |

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| | | | Alabama Black Belt region are not given freedom in their learning experience to exercise their own voice and choice due to the demands of mandated policies that must be followed in order to uphold state requirements for funding. Yet, the participant shares how she negotiates these policies to better support her students.<br><br>"When I take my kids to lunch, I don't force them to the right side of the hall in a straight line nor do I hover over them in the cafeteria while they are eating. I tell them what time we leave and what time we come back and everyone just move at liberty according to those timelines."<br><br>"In the classroom, especially for my students that are regularly suspended and sent to the alternative school, I try to be intentional about letting all of my students show up however they feel most comfortable being present as long as it doesn't harm or distract learning for their peers. Whether that's using profanity or standing up to do their work, laying down on the counter, like however they felt like being present, I embrace it because I know they can't be themselves when they leave outside my classroom. I also let them eat in class, because I don't play about my students being hungry and trying to learn."<br><br>"I can't help but think about how I am expected to care about providing these students with a |

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| | | | quality education while also having to create a safe space to do so. I am expected to have an engaging class, but then admin is pulling them out at least once or twice a week for testing. And I think this year we tried to recover from COVID, but we had three traumatic events and it felt like we were having to hit reset three times within the same year. And also just reading my student responses throughout this year about how they were just ready to graduate and leave the school, how they were stressed and how they were anxious and sad. After reading my students responses, I was just like, "I'm just gonna have to pivot." So in that moment, I realized that I couldn't properly serve my students' well-being and do all of those assessments. I just had to cut a loss for one. So yeah, assessment is not in my vocabulary this year."<br><br>"Teaching social studies is really scary for me right now. Well for one… they ain't changed our standards since 2010 and at this point I don't think they're gonna look at them until 2026-2027. Um, so being fearful of what I teach now because of the recent CRT ban (critical race theory) and what somebody got to say. But it has made me mindful of how I'm teaching and how it can be perceived by others. For instance, I'm not gonna lie sometimes when my classroom door opens I'm thinking, 'Lord Mackie gonna come up in here |

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| | | | and he's gonna be upset with me.'"<br><br>**9. Race and Gender**<br>The participant's identity as a Black woman is essential to understanding her experiences in a predominantly male school environment. As a Black woman, she talks about how she feels a sense of obligation to always include African American history in her teaching, even when the curriculum might not explicitly call for it. She also experiences the weight of being a department head and feels a responsibility to carry the weight of the department, specifically when it comes to paperwork and administrative tasks. The intersection of race and gender reveals how she may face expectations and biases related to gender roles, such as being perceived as the one to handle paperwork while male colleagues are expected to be disciplinarians.<br><br>"Especially being in the history department, I am always conscious of, okay, today I'm teaching about Napoleon, or today I'm teaching about George W. Bush, but I feel compelled and to always find a way to tie it to Black history. I kind of feel like that is the expectation, even if whatever I'm talking about, and they might come in the trash even if it deals with absolutely nothing in that point, dealing with African American history, I feel like I have failed my students if I do not find some |

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| | | | type of connection to tie it. So since I feel that sense of obligation being an African-American teaching history in a predominantly African-American city, I feel an obligation to always tie the content to Black History, no matter what state standard I am addressing."<br><br>"Then me being a woman in a predominantly male content, I feel obligated to excuse my French, teach my ass off because the men either all have been coaches who are lacking in what they do in the classroom or they just don't perform to my idea of a quality standard for our students. And that is okay. "But everybody doesn't necessarily need to feel obligated to go over and beyond. Like, I've even gotten to the point to where okay, work is from 7:30 to 2:50, maybe a little time before and after, that's fine. As a woman, I do feel obligated to carry the weight of the men in my department. Some of the men have been in this field longer than me, but I feel like I have to carry the weight of the department on my shoulders."<br><br>"And I almost feel like it's expected with me being the woman. I feel treated as though I am supposed to take care of the men in this department, but I shouldn't always have to take care of them. Why can't they just carry some of the weight? Because to me my role as the department head is not just a |

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| | | | namesake, but I do the same thing as them. We all come here. We are all earning the same check, but for whatever reason, they just don't put forth the effort that I would like. Even with, you know, one or two of them being from the community, I just don't understand."<br><br>"Part of it I think is that the men see it as, "that's the woman and she got it. She gonna handle the paperwork." It's an expectation that I'm gonna handle the paperwork and then maybe it's my fault because I play into that. But I think it is both sides, me as a woman and them as men, I think we both play into the gender role that the woman is here to teach and can take care of the paperwork and the man is gonna be the disciplinarian. My school community is very male-dominated. We have more male teachers than ever before."<br><br>**10. Race, Gender, Ethnicity, Work-Life Balance**<br>The participant discussed her challenges with having a healthy work-life balance and managing her stress and anxiety, as she revealed how she spends significant amounts of time and effort working beyond regular school hours to meet the demands of teaching multiple subjects and sponsoring multiple extracurricular school activities. On top this workload, she revealed how she experiences constant pressure to perform while simultaneously feeling a need to censor her true self in |

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| | | | what she identifies as a toxic environment because of a lack of community building. Such issues could be a result of intersections of being a Black woman in the Alabama Black Belt region where she is conditioned to neglect mental health and to conform to culture as those in authority would expect instead of expressing her true self. Ultimately, the participant seems to feel the need to conform to gender expectations and avoid being labeled as too emotional or weak. This self-censorship could get in the way of her expressing her true feelings or needs.<br><br>"Since 2018, I have been regularly going to a therapist once a month. The best thing that ever happened to me since I've been working at Black Belt High is when Covid happened and the copays for a mental health visit went from $50 to $15. So now I can go 24 times a year instead of 12, and I've gone faithfully. And at one point I was thinking about going out for mental health FFMLA for four weeks. So, I'm not ashamed to admit I was not in a good head space before now. I had a panic attack in September 2019, Labor Day weekend to be exact and had to stay overnight at the hospital. And I know I did have to take off one day from work. So prior to 2019, not even prior to… it's, it's always been toxic. My work environment has always been toxic. Unfortunately, being a department head and being over SGA and other committees in the |

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| | | | school, I have had my share of subgroup experiences. And in some cases, when you don't react in the way that certain people want you to react, then now you become a part of the problem. At times being here has taken the joy out of teaching. As grown people, we preach to students to not let things bother you. Words are just words, but words are hurtful. Since 2019, I have gotten to the point where I have been able to form somewhat of a wall, maybe not a brick wall, but I've formed a wall to where I don't give my 100 percent like I used to, and I have been less stressed out."<br><br>"I often find myself censoring my true spirit to make people comfortable. Censoring is me being quiet, going into my shell. My zodiac sign is one that makes me go into my shell, especially when I'm on the defense. And that's what I do when I don't feel comfortable expressing my feelings out of fear of judgment or reprimand. Censoring is me dying inside. Censoring is me bottling everything up. And me being this happy-go-lucky, good trouble warrior, I feel like that is the essence of who I am. I am peace, love, and rock and roll if needed. But I have become "a silent weapon". And what I mean by that is, it is only when needed. Censoring is just not me being myself and me turning into someone that I know I'm not. Like, I feel that even my colleagues have seen how my demeanor has changed. I'm not |

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| | | | vocal, I don't say anything unless I absolutely have to because I always feel like someone is always watching."<br><br>"But I think people are always watching me because they expect me to do good. And when I don't do good, it's a problem. And I also feel like there are people that are praying on my downfall. Because whenever I have those moments."<br><br>**11. Geographical Location, Race, Ethnicity, Class, Socioeconmic Status**<br>The participant revealed that a major constraint to her work as a teacher and leader is feeling like she is always teaching in survival mode. Throughout her 9 year tenure at Black Belt High School, the participant mentioned how she and her students have experienced some traumatizing events, such as witnessing death of a student, experiencing a gun shooting in the school, and losing many of her students over the years to gun and gang violence. Experiencing these traumatic events intersect with her own personal experiences as a Black woman and her students's experiences as Black students growing up in low socioeconomic areas. Yet, the participant seems to embrace this trauma as a natural part of her work and this embrace reveals how trauma in predominantly Black, Title One Schools in the Alabama Black Belt region could be a normalized thing and oftens |

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| | | | blinds educators to largers issues and barriers to supporting their students.<br><br>"For me personally, I always feel like I am teaching in survival mode, because I never know what's going on or what could be about to happen. And because there has been so much trauma in the building. Even just within the past six months, there has been so much trauma linked to gun violence and student drug abuse and because of that we are already heightened. Like I wake up everyday wondering, "Is something gonna pop off today?" Everyday I arrive to work with a plan and the awareness that this plan could easily get thwarted by unexpected events such as school lockdowns, bomb threats, internet outage, fights, etc. Just not knowing what's gonna happen is so mentally exhausting. Am I gonna get an email at 7:30 that says I have a program that I need to take my kids to? Is the internet gonna be out? Was there a fight? No. Was there a shooting last night? And if the shooting happened last night, were the students that I teach in it or affected by it? Because the reality of it is, unfortunately nine times outta 10 when something happens in the community, the students were either involved or aware of what happened."<br><br>"And there are even times when I think about leaving Black Belt High School. But it's what I know. It's what I've always |

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| | | | known. And at times I can't bear the thought of like starting over somewhere else. I just can't imagine it. I, I can't imagine it honestly. I have an ongoing job search now, and I have listed about eight schools besides Black Belt High School that I'll be willing to go to. But when it is all said and done, it's like this is my home, this is family and I don't wanna feel like I'm leaving my family, as toxic as it is. Like this is the family that I chose, and I don't, regardless of how bad it is, I don't wanna feel like I've abandoned my colleagues. I don't wanna feel like I've abandoned my students." |
| **5.Relying on Sources of My Resilience & Hope** | • My Christian Faith<br>• My Community within the Community<br>• Unplugging<br>• Embracing "It Is What It Is"<br>• Embracing "My Colorful Life" | This chapter focuses on the sources the participant relies in order to remain resilient and hopeful in her work as a teacher and leader in the school building. | **1.Religion, Ethnicity, Race, Gender, Disability, Personal Experiences, Coping Mechanisms**<br>The participant revealed how in the midst of dealing with mental health concerns and other life altering personal experiences all while navigating constraints at Black Belt High School, she has found resilience and hope in attending to her Christian faith, going to therapy, engaging with her "community within the community,"and unplugging from work once a week. These sources of resilience and hope provide her personal outlets to the systemic oppressions she personally experiences and navigates through for her students.<br><br>**"**A position I didn't want to be in and perhaps I was going through so much hell because that's a |

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| | | | role God wanted me to be in, and I was running from it. Now I think the disconnect I was feeling was me running from Him. He put me at that school for a reason. When things get rough, He is the only thing I need. That is why now I can truly say "it is what it is" and mean it."<br><br>"So I am blessed to have different colleagues that I can go to for different things. There's places I can go, cause we all know how I am about food. If I need a little snack, I got people I can go to for that. If I need some spiritual advice or if I need to vent and know that I'm not gonna get somebody that's gonna have me running off the rails. I have people that I can call and consult for that. I have made friends in this space."<br><br>"Another part of my community within the community are my sorority sisters from Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) and from the National Sorority of Phi Delta Kappa (NSPDK). Both of these sororities provide me with special connections I can rely on to get things that I need to benefit myself and students through networking…Being a strong Christian woman that is doing everything they can to impact positively the lives of these children and being around women who know the struggle of being on this computer at 12 o'clock at night, knowing that you need to go to sleep or spend time with a family member, like |

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| | | | they understand and they'll pray with me. They'll give me suggestions; they'll give me help; they'll give me advice. The NSPDK sorority provides me with a safe space to say "I love my students and I love the Lord, and we all are together gonna figure out how can we make this space better for them." Also, my involvement in these two sororities often makes me feel safe in how I move because of the networking and the relationship that I have built with my sorority members."<br><br>"Unplugging to me is not doing anything work related…Unplugging is me coming home, going into my prayer closet, aka my bathroom cuz my bathroom is where I pray and I meditate if nowhere else. And I try to leave my worries of the day in the restroom. I pray about it, talk about it to myself, and I just try to leave it there where it's at. And in my free time I like to talk to friends and family and watch a little trashy tv. I love me a good 90-Day Fiance. But unplugging is doing anything non-work related only because I put so much of myself into my work that I'm realizing that I am a teacher. Like that is my identity, but I'm so much more than that. So I'm trying to work on, making sure that I have safe boundaries so I'm not overworking myself."<br><br>**2. Race, Ethnicity, Class, Disability, History, Childhood Trauma** |

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| | | | When describing her life story, the participant revealed how she has lived a very "colorful life." Upon expounding on her colorful life, she talked about how her upbringing, identity issues, and other personal life experiences as a Black girl in a single parent home with a low socioeconomic status and now adult woman have influenced her resilience and empathy toward her students. Thus, her colorful life, filled with personal hardships, have shaped her understanding of students who may be facing similar difficulties and has influenced her desire to be a positive presence in her students' lives.<br><br>"What I mean by colorful life is I feel like I have one of those lives that could be in a lifetime movie. I have always been the teacher's pet. I was a textbook good child. But little did my teachers know, I had a lot of shit going on at home. Dealing with parents that were too young to have children, one of them being an alcoholic and then my mother eventually having a nervous breakdown after my parents separated. Having to start all over. Living in a two bedroom house with all of those people, moving from school to school in the midst of my parents' marital issues and my father's PTSD. And then having my own identity issues. Coming to the Alabama Black Belt region and going through all the stuff that I was going through at home while also living in poverty on a small street that is |

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| | | | often called “Crack City.” It was just a lot. But that is also why I don’t always trust the kids’ smiles because sometimes when a kid smiles, there’s so much pain behind it, and I get that. So no matter what, I just won’t want my kids to know that I see them, that they’re not forgotten about. And that it may not be a good day today, but it is gonna be a good day tomorrow. And for whatever reason it is not a good day tomorrow, we’re going to have a good day the next day. Bad days are going to come and good days are gonna come. But as long as those days come, we can fight to see another day.” |

*Note:* This table was created to highlight the overall findings of the study.