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Do You Hear Us? Amplifying Alternative Pathways for High School Pushouts Through Youth Participatory Action Research

Abstract

The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) metaphor encapsulates and describes a set of legislative policies and educational practices that systematically funnel African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students from the classroom into the juvenile and criminal justice system at disparate rates. An emerging solution to address high school pushout and the STPP has been to develop Alternative Education Campuses (AECs). However, there is a current gap in the research that amplifies the counter narratives of students currently enrolled at an AEC, through their own words, using Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Studies conducted with students who have been labeled “high-risk” are especially lacking. Using a YPAR methodology, the goal of this study was to add to a growing body of literature on the STPP and AECs by contributing findings, analysis, and recommendations co-designed and constructed with voices from within the STPP. By using YPAR methods, the youth co-researchers (YCRs) collectively designed the research and maintained agency throughout each stage of the process. In total, two focus groups, eight interviews, and a photovoice project were completed. In this study, the YCRs and I demonstrated that African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students who have been labeled as “high risk” hold an innate ability to conduct educational research, critically analyze findings, and offer informed recommendations for bridging the opportunity gap and creating a more equitable education system through improving the programming at AECs. I also offer recommendations for decolonizing AECs and explore implications and future research.

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Do You Hear Us? Amplifying Alternative Pathways for High School Pushouts through
Youth Participatory Action Research

A Dissertation

Presented to

To the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

by

Rob A. Duren

May 2020

Advisor: Lolita A. Tabron, Ph.D.

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Title: DO YOU HEAR US? AMPLIFYING ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS FOR HIGH SCHOOL PUSHOUTS THROUGH YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Advisor: Lolita A. Tabron, Ph.D.

Degree Date: June 2020

Abstract

The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) metaphor encapsulates and describes a set of legislative policies and educational practices that systematically funnel African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students from the classroom into the juvenile and criminal justice system at disparate rates. An emerging solution to address high school pushout and the STPP has been to develop Alternative Education Campuses (AECs). However, there is a current gap in the research that amplifies the counter narratives of students currently enrolled at an AEC, through their own words, using Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Studies conducted with students who have been labeled “high-risk” are especially lacking. Using a YPAR methodology, the goal of this study was to add to a growing body of literature on the STPP and AECs by contributing findings, analysis, and recommendations co-designed and constructed *with* voices from within the STPP. By using YPAR methods, the youth co-researchers (YCRs) collectively designed the research and maintained agency throughout each stage of the process. In total, two focus groups, eight interviews, and a photovoice project were completed. In this study, the YCRs and I demonstrated that African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students who have been labeled as “high risk” hold an innate ability to conduct educational research, critically analyze findings, and offer informed recommendations for bridging the opportunity gap and creating a more equitable education system through

improving the programming at AECs. I also offer recommendations for decolonizing AECs and explore implications and future research.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all of the youth who have been silenced, punished, and pushed out. It is dedicated to the dropouts. The marginalized. The incarcerated. The discounted. The undervalued and the devalued. Although the system was designed for your failure, may you succeed. When you succeed, may you be heard. When you are heard, may your voices spark a revolution to disrupt and dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline.

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To my chair. Dr Tabron, you are one of the most inspirational academics and social justice warriors that I have crossed paths with. Your commitment to racial equity is unparalleled. Thank you for your support, critical feedback, and the countless hours you spent working through revisions. Many say a good dissertation is a done dissertation. It was my hope that with your guidance, this doctoral research project would greatly exceed such limited expectations. Together, we did it. I could not be prouder of the work presented in this study and for that, thank you.

To my committee. Thank you, Dr. Raines, for your support throughout this process and the expertise and passion you bring to this work. I can still remember the day you presented to my cohort about the school-to-prison pipeline, and I am still picking up my jaw. You were and continue to be an inspiration. Dr. Hesbol, I have always thought of you as my social justice mom. You have been a guiding beacon throughout my entire graduate experience at the University of Denver. Your continued support in my growth as a researcher and practitioner has been priceless. Thank you for all that you have done and continue to do for your students.

To my mom. Thank for never missing a single little league game, concert, or theatrical production. Thank for you standing with me as I was pushed out of high school, received a bachelor's degree, and then a master's degree. Thank you for never giving up on me and for always believing in me and my potential. I am sorry that I fell in love with Colorado, but I definitely would not have made it to and through a doctoral program without your love and support.

To my siblings. I may have been the first in our family to become “Dr. Duren”, but I hope I am not the last. Jessica, Tiffany, and Candice-- thank you for being... authentic and for keeping me grounded while I reached for the stars. Randy and Marleen, thank you for believing in my potential beyond a future of manual labor and partying. It has been fourteen years since I began my journey in higher education and I am still grateful that you encouraged me to enroll (and drove me whenever I wrecked my car...) to Chandler Gilbert Community College.

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To the Urban Mountain Academy community. Thank you for taking me in as one of your own. I learned an incredible amount from my experiences working with and for you this year. Without the trust and support of the school administration, the Social Justice Panthers and I would not have been able to create a counter space to begin laying the groundwork for a youth-led revolution.

To my youth co-researchers. You courageously took the mantle and began a fight for change so that others would not suffer inequities and indignities at the hands of our public education system. You planted social justice seeds and despite COVID-19, I have no doubt that those seeds will grow, spread, and blossom into a more equitable and just

education system. Please never stop infiltrating, disrupting, questioning, believing in yourself, and re-imagining what communities and our schools can and should be.

NOMENCLATURE

STPP	School-to-prison pipeline
YCR	Youth co-researcher
YP	Youth participant
Latinx	Gender neutral term for those who self-identify as Latina/o

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background to the Problem

The School to Prison Pipeline (STPP)

The STPP has been extensively explored by many educators, policymakers, and community members. Although a theoretical framework unique to the STPP does not exist, the STPP metaphor encapsulates and describes a set of legislative policies and education practices that systematically funnel African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students from the classroom into the juvenile and criminal justice system at disparate rates (Skiba et al., 2011; Wald & Losen, 2007).

Although I use the STPP metaphor, it is important to note that there are several other variations of the phrase (Laura, 2014) and some scholars argue against using the phrase at all (McGrew, 2016). Several of the more common similar metaphors are the *schoolhouse to jailhouse track*, the *cradle to prison pipeline*, and the *school-prison nexus* (Laura, 2014). The schoolhouse to jailhouse track emphasizes endogenous factors that contribute to the STPP, such as policies and practices implemented by teachers, principals and district leaders, that push students out of school and into jail. The cradle to prison pipeline metaphor uplifts exogenous socio-economic factors, such as family, community and national priorities, that are pulling youth out of school and pushing them into prison. The school-prison nexus pushes us to confront the prison industrial complex (Alexander, 2011) and the implications it has on schoolchildren, especially under-resourced African American, Indigenous, and Latinx schoolchildren (Laura, 2014).

Scholars such as Ken McGrew (2016) have argued that “pipeline thinking” is ahistorical, undertheorized, and narrowly focused on policy, and that using the STPP metaphor is leading us

“to mislead ourselves and our audiences” (p. 364) because the STPP does not exist. McGrew (2016) argues that the STPP oversimplifies a complex issue and has become so dominant in literature that it influences thinking and has often become a stand-in for theory. However, although usage of the STPP metaphor has become increasingly popular among scholars, practitioners, and policy makers, in both my personal and professional experiences it still comes as quite a shock how often people are not familiar with the metaphor and how quickly the notion is dismissed by those who are familiar. The intended audience of this research project is policy makers, scholars, and practitioners. However, the intended audience is also the friends, family, and community members of the voices this project seeks to uplift and represent. Therefore, I use the STPP metaphor not despite its popularity, but because of it. Until the STPP is completely dismantled, it is imperative that academics not get lost in a debate over semantics. Lastly, as Laura (2014) eloquently posits, “name it what you will—so long as it is named” (p. 34).

Mass Incarceration

On the prison end of the STPP nexus lies what many practitioners, activists, scholars, and policy makers have coined as the era of mass incarceration (Alexander, 2011; Skiba et al., 2011; Wald & Losen, 2007). In 2018, there were 2.2 million people under criminal supervision in the United States, a staggering 500 percent increase over the past 40 years (The Sentencing Project, 2018). Figure 1.1 highlights this dramatic increase. In what some view as a backlash to the Civil Rights Movement, many activists and scholars (Alexander, 2011; Newell, 2013) cite Richard Nixon’s 1968 U.S. Presidential campaign’s “tough on crime” platform as the foundation of the modern era of mass incarceration. Although President Nixon may have been the first to breathe air into the words “war on drugs,” Ronald Reagan was the first President to bring a literal war on drugs to full fruition (Alexander, 2011). Further exacerbating the war on drugs, former Vice

President and current Democratic Presidential candidate, Joe Biden’s 1994 Crime Bill, signed into law by President Bill Clinton, paved the way for “three strikes” laws, “mandatory minimum” sentencing, and “zero tolerance” policies (Newell, 2013). Moreover, implicit bias, socioeconomic inequities, and sentencing policies have contributed to racial disparities at every level of the juvenile and criminal justice system. According to the Pew Research Center (2017), African Americans accounted for 12 percent of the adult population in the United States, but 33 percent of the prison population and the Latinx population accounted for 16 percent of the adult population and 23 percent of the prison population. Although Whites accounted for 64 percent of the adult population, they accounted for only 30 percent of the prison population (Gramlich, 2019).

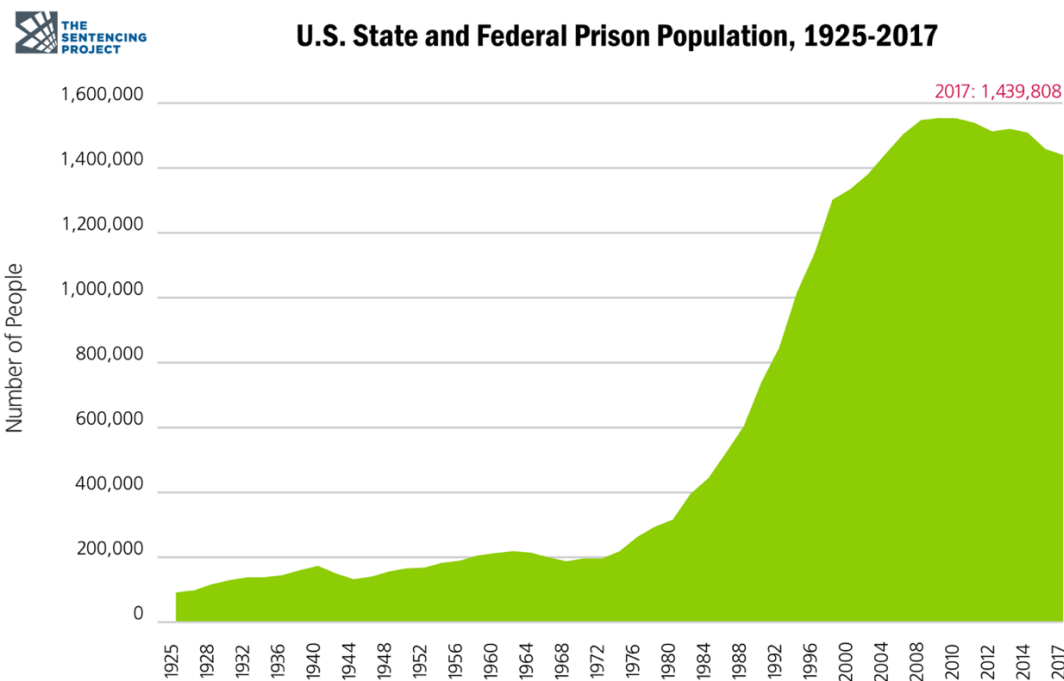


Figure 1.1. U.S. State and Federal Prison Population growth from 1925 to 2017. From “Criminal Justice Facts,” by The Sentencing Project, n.d. (<https://www.sentencingproject.org/criminal-justice-facts/>).

Zero Efficacy of Zero Tolerance

In the wake of the legislative criminal justice reforms in the 1990s and under the guise of making schools safer, local school districts across the country began to adopt a no-nonsense approach to school discipline and began implementing zero-tolerance policies for a plethora of offenses ranging from gang activity to skateboarding (Skiba, 2000). By the late 1990s, 94 percent of schools in the country had zero tolerance policies in place for weapons, 87 percent for alcohol, and 79 percent for violence or tobacco (Heaviside, 1998). Although serious infractions may have been the initial primary target of zero tolerance policies, both national level (Heaviside, 1998) and district level (Skiba, 2014) data demonstrate that the most frequent discipline issues are for minor events such as attendance, compliance, and tardiness. Furthermore, there is a considerable research base that has produced consistent results over the past 35 years demonstrating that the use of zero tolerance policies has led to a racial overrepresentation of African American and Latinx students being suspended, expelled, and referred to the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Browne, 2003; Skiba, 2014; Wald & Losen, 2007). The literature on zero tolerance policies and school discipline reform consistently links exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion, with the overrepresentation of historically marginalized student groups (Gregory & Skiba, 2019; Ritter, 2018; Skiba et al., 2014). Specifically, research on discipline reform has demonstrated that African American students, Native American students, Latinx students, special education students, and LGBTQ students all remain overrepresented in national suspension rates (Gregory & Skiba, 2019). Thus, zero tolerance policies and practices have established a direct link between African American and Latinx students being silenced, punished, and pushed out of schools and into the criminal justice system.

High School Pushout

The dominant narrative surrounding students who drop out of high school often places the onus of responsibility on the students themselves and other macro-societal factors (Reddy & Sinha, 2010). For decades, high school dropouts have been labeled as the “helpless, hopeless, and depressed” (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983, p. 265). However, research demonstrates that often times students do not drop out of high school, they are pushed out (Tuck, 2012). As Tuck (2012) posits, students who leave high school before completion often feel, “compelled to leave school by people or factors inside school, such as disrespectful treatment from teachers and other personnel, violence among students, arbitrary school rules, and the insurmountable presence of high stakes testing” (p. 1). As Figure 1.2 highlights, research shows that a disproportionate rate of students who are pushed out of high school are African American, Indigenous, and Latinx (NCES, 2018). Additionally, Figure 1.2 also highlights the drastic increase of institutionalized students (wards of the State or living in adult or juvenile correctional facilities) who do not complete high school. In recent years, there has been some progress made in addressing high school completion rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), the national dropout rate decreased from 10.9 percent in 2000 to 5.9 percent in 2015. In Colorado, the dropout rate decreased from 2.5 percent during the 2014-2015 school year to 2.3 percent during the 2016-17 school year (Colorado Department of Education, 2018).

Notwithstanding, thousands of students, especially African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students, are still silenced, punished, and pushed out of high school every day (CDE, 2018; NCES, 2018; Skiba et al., 2011). In Colorado, high school pushouts are identified as “Code 40” in school district monitoring systems (CDE, 2018). When students are reported as Code 40s in the district this study took place, they are then added to a list received by a local

non-profit, Colorado Youth for a Change (CYC) (Colorado Youth for a Change, n.d.). Each year, CYC employs three specialists to reach out to the over 2,000 students who are placed on the Code 40 list (Personal Communication, 2019). When high school pushouts are lucky enough to be one of the two-thousand dropouts that are connected with one of CYC’s specialists, they are often referred to one of the district’s alternative schools or programs. Unfortunately, some students may not feel connected to the alternative school and may get pushed out a second time.

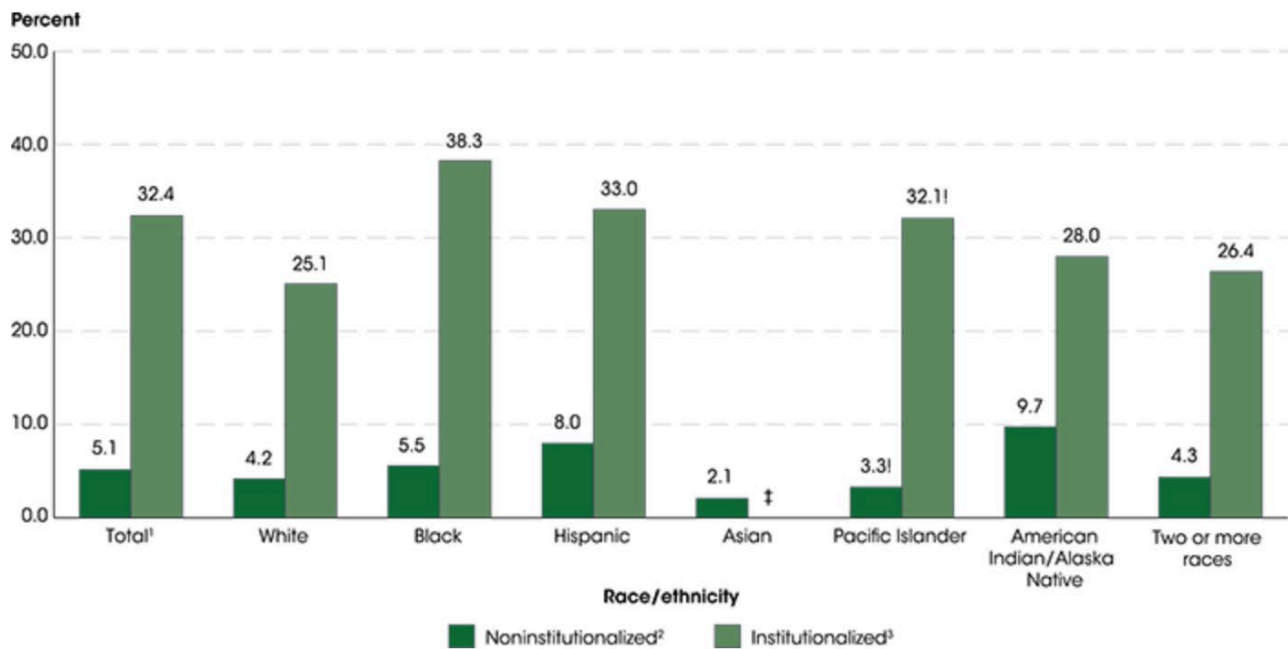


Figure 1.2. Percent of high school dropouts by race/ethnicity and institutionalized/noninstitutionalized. From “Status Dropout Rates,” by National Center for Education Statistics, 2018 (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coj.asp)

The cost of pushout. High school pushout comes at a great cost for both the individual and the entire community (Belfield & Levin, 2007). When students do not complete high school, they are more likely to be unemployed or earn less when they are employed (Rumberger, 2011). They are more likely to be recipients of welfare, live with an increased risk of a myriad of mental health issues, join gangs, become involved in criminal enterprise, or be incarcerated (Rumberger,

2011; Swanson, 2009). As Figure 1.3 highlights (Swanson, 2009), students without a high school diploma account for 13 percent of the national population but less than 6 percent of income earned, while people with an advanced degree account for 11 percent of the population but 22 percent of income earned. Moreover, research has demonstrated that when students are able to earn a high school diploma, they are able to cut their chances of living in poverty in half (Swanson, 2009). When students are able to avert the STPP and complete high school, they have a greater chance of being employed, earning more when they are employed, and living a much healthier and fulfilling life (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Rumberger, 2007; Swanson, 2009).

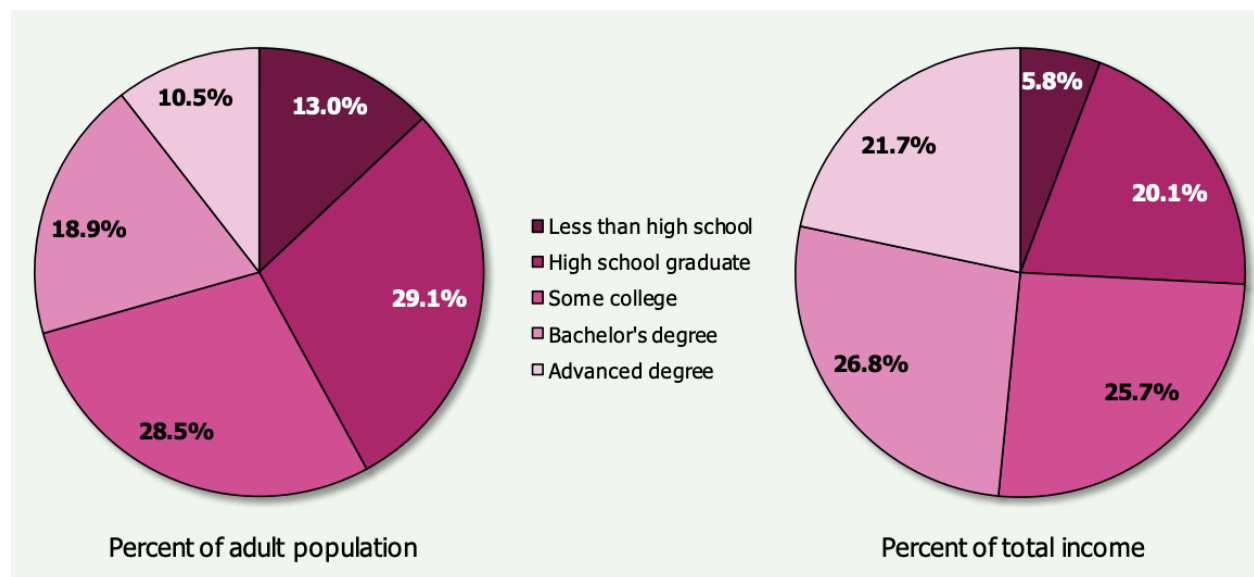


Figure 1.3 Shares of economic success by education level. From “Cities in Crisis: Closing the Graduation Gap: Educational and Economic Conditions in America's Largest Cities, by C.B. Swanson, Editorial Projects in Education.

Colorado Context

Over the past two decades, significant progress has been made in addressing completion rates across all ethnic groups nationally (NCES, 2018) and in Colorado as well (CDE, 2018). Building on a commitment to increase high school completion in Colorado, in 2009 the State

General Assembly authorized Revised Statute 22-14-101 and the Colorado Department of Education launched The Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement (DPSR; CDE, 2018) with the intention to reduce the dropout rate, and to increase the graduation rate and career credential attainment. According to their website, the DPSR Unit includes five programs that support communities, education agencies, and schools: (1) 21st Century Community Learning Centers, (2) Expelled and At-Risk Student Services Grants, (3) Foster Care Education, (4) McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Program, and (5) the Student Re-engagement Grant Program. The work of the DPSR Unit is commendable and the results have been impressive. However, the progress has not been realized equitably. Colorado high school completion rates remain one of the lowest in the nation at 79 percent (NCES, 2018). Additionally, dropout rates in Colorado vary significantly by race (4.3 percent for Native Americans, 0.9 percent for Asians, 3.1 percent for Black or African Americans, 3.5 percent for Latinx, and 1.4 percent for Whites; CDE, 2018).

An Emerging Alternative

An emerging solution to address high school pushout has been to develop Alternative Education Campuses (AECs). Although a common definition of alternative education or alternative schools has yet to emerge, a review of the literature reveals that alternative education is generally defined as an education that offers non-traditional programming for students who were not successful in traditional school settings. In Colorado, schools that receive AEC status receive a differentiated school performance review, which proponents argue allows them to provide additional support services, differentiate curriculum, and spend more time building relationships with their students in order to develop rapport and increase engagement. Developing, implementing, and maintaining effective alternative schools can make a significant

difference for both students and society as a whole. The literature on alternative schools suggests that students who attend an AEC are more likely to avert the school-to-prison pipeline (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2012) and are more likely to complete high school (Morrissette, 2011). Furthermore, students who attended and/or graduated from AECs have attributed being enrolled at an AEC for their retention, graduation, and their success (Morrissette, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Problem and Purpose Statement

American poet and activist Maya Angelou (1993) stated that “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again” (p. 1). The experiences and voices of marginalized students are often silenced, discounted, and devalued; yet, they offer invaluable insight into what is and is not working in both mainstream education and AECs. Thus, the purpose of this study was to underscore the importance of youth voice and in particular, amplify the voices of students to change the education system, offer recommendations in bridging the opportunity gap, and to create a more equitable and just educational system for every student. Although the historical legacy of institutional racism in education is painful and cannot be unlived, if we collaboratively explore the root cause of educational inequities and collectively take action, the pain need not be lived again. Through a Student Leadership Program at Urban Mountain Academy (a pseudonym), this study used youth participatory action research (YPAR; Cammarota & Fine, 2011) as a methodological vehicle to place student voice and agency in the vanguard of educational leadership.

Informed by the work of critical education theorists (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), critical race education theorists (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn & Dixon, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000), and critical youth studies (Austin & Willard, 1998; Quijada & Cahill, 2013; Vadeboncour

& Stevens, 2005), this study sought to counter the silencing of students from historically marginalized communities who had been stereotyped and denied access to equitable educational spaces. Educational spaces often exclusively privilege the knowledge and practices of the dominant, White, affluent, male culture (Morrell, 2008). This study was fundamentally rooted in an epistemology that holds that meaningful change, such as creating more equitable learning spaces and bridging the opportunity gap, must stem from the experiences and recommendations from the students who have been marginalized. Using Solórzano's (2002) Critical Race Methodology and Freire's (1970) concepts of problem-posing education and social action (praxis; Freire, 1993), this study was developed with the resting assumption that foregrounding the voices of marginalized students, as well as their perceptions of the education system, will lead to more authentic data and genuine findings. The overarching goal of the research was to work with—as opposed to on—marginalized students, involving them as co-researchers and authorities of their own educational experiences. Thus, YPAR was selected as the most appropriate methodological tool to position students as partners and co-analysts in the research process, as well as to amplify their voices in determining the implications of the research on their lived experiences.

Research Question

The research question in this project provided an inquiry into the experiences of students who were currently enrolled at an alternative school and participating in a Student Leadership Program.

The research question was:

RQ: What can educational stakeholders and policy actors learn from students enrolled in an alternative school about how to disrupt the STPP through the improvement of school policy and programming in an AEC?

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory

Maxwell (2005) describes a theoretical framework as “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research” (p. 33). This research project was both grounded in and built upon Critical Race Theory (CRT). The initial foundation for CRT was laid by Derrick Bell in two pivotal articles in the 1970s (Bell, 1976, 1980; Milner 2007). Bell (1995) proclaimed that, “revolutionizing a culture begins with the radical assessment of it” (p. 893). Building on Bell’s call for the radical assessment of culture, the Critical Legal Studies movement was developed in the 1970s by progressive legal scholars that attempted to develop a legal system that accounts for racism in American law, seeks the elimination of racism in American society, as well as all forms of subordination based on gender, class, sexual orientation, language, and national origin (Crenshaw, 2011; Ledesma et al., 2015; Matsuda, 1991; Solorzano, 2002; Tate, 1997). Delgado (2001) defines five key tenets of CRT: (1) race and racism are endemic and ordinary; (2) the idea of an interest convergence or material determinism (racism advances the interests of both the elite and working class whites, so large segments of society have little reason to eradicate it); (3) the social construction of race and differential racialization (and the notion that whites have actually been the primary recipients of civil rights legislation); (4) the notion of intersectionality and anti-essentialism (everyone has overlapping, sometimes conflicting, identities and allegiances); and (5) the voice of color thesis (the idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling).

CRT served as an epistemological and methodological tool that assisted in the analysis of the experiences of historically marginalized populations in the public education system. In this research project, I framed the views of the YCRs and youth participants (YPs) with CRT in order to examine the ways in which their perceptions of the public education system contributed (or did not contribute) to their understandings and experiences of race and racism, as well as reflecting on the larger socio-political racial structures that informed their thinking (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Although myriad analytical tools have been developed out of CRT, I drew specifically upon Critical Race Methodology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), the idea that racism is ordinary in U.S. society (Delgado, 2001), the idea of counternarratives (Ladson-Billings, 1998), and by exposing the notion of an interest convergence by maintaining a commitment to social justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Critique of Critical Race Theory. There are some mainstream legal scholars, such as Richard Posner, that dismiss CRT as the “lunatic core” of “radical legal egalitarianism” (Crenshaw, 2011, p.1310). Additionally, some social scientists offer caution and critique what they perceive to be CRT’s hyper-emphasis on race (Buenavista, 2013; Darder & Torres, 2004). For example, Darder and Torres (2004) rail against CRT’s use of race as “the central category of analysis” (p. 97) at the cost of what should be a “substantive critique of capitalism” (p. 99) and maintain that race has been under-theorized. What Darder and Torres miss in their critique, however, is that when employed systematically CRT can be the means by which we are more fully able to theorize race (Ledesma et al., 2015). Despite the scrutiny and early attacks, over 20 years of CRT (Crenshaw, 2011) have demonstrated its resonance and staying power.

Critical Race Theory in education. For many decades, the educational research field lacked the conceptual and analytical tools to fully engage or appreciate meaningful discussions

on race and needed CRT to evolve and become more multidisciplinary (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner, 2007). CRT in education therefore draws upon and extends a robust base of critical theory in law, sociology, history, and ethnic studies (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Stovall, 2006; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). In 1995, Ladson-Billings and Tate pioneered the introduction of CRT to education and began theorizing race and using it as an analytical tool to better understand inequities in the education system. The authors contend that CRT in legal studies is analogous to CRT in education with three propositions: (1) race continues to be a significant factor influencing inequities in the US education system, (2) US society is based on property rights and people of color are considered property, while simultaneously whiteness has emerged as property ownership (Harris, 1993); and (3) the intersection of property and race provides a useful analytical tool to better understand inequities in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48). CRT in education is a framework that can be used to examine, theorize, and challenge the ways racism tacitly and explicitly impacts educational practices and discourses (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). This study adhered to these propositions, specifically by analyzing inequities in the education system through amplifying the counter stories of Students of Color most affected by the inequities.

Critical Youth Studies

In addition to engaging youth as co-researchers through a CRT lens, this research project employed a CYS framework through the use of youth participatory action research (YPAR). There are many adult-centered institutions (school, work, legal) that determine when youth are able to drive, vote, consume alcohol, or gain employment. Such socially constructed institutions

claim to educate youth, protect them from reality, and presume youth to be incomplete and irrational human beings (Quijada Cerecer & Cahill, 2013). They elucidate:

critical youth studies works to address institutional and individual conditions operating across race, class, gender, and sexuality by questioning why some youth are marked as deviant, sexually promiscuous, and violent individuals who need discipline and punishment, but other young people are seen as innocent and pure and in need of protection. (p. 217)

CYS scholars break from a traditional, unidirectional life stage paradigm through critiquing broadly accepted life-stage milestones and the divide between childhood and adulthood (Austin & Willard, 1998; Quijada & Cahill, 2013; Sibley, 1995). Furthermore, CYS scholars question the labeling of students as deviant or innocent and critique the normative practices that are designed to control the lives of youth (Quijada & Cahill, 2013). However, pushing beyond standard representations of CYS, more recent critical youth scholarship explores youth agency, activism, and democratic participation (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright & James, 2002) through youth participatory action research (YPAR). In this regard, YPAR pushes beyond CYS in that it seeks to disrupt and transform systemic and institutional inequities to promote social justice (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). By employing a CYS framework in this study, I sought to ensure that I shifted my paradigm from dominant views of youth development and toward the application of citizenship as a transitional social category that centers youth participation in educational leadership and policy studies.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

The key tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Youth Studies (CYS) frameworks provided the theoretical foundation and lens through which this study explored the

school and the community that youth participants are a part of. By approaching the research through the lens of CRT I ensured that I viewed racism as something ordinary in society, as opposed to aberrant, and that I maintained a focus on the counternarratives that emerged from the voices of marginalized students. CYS ensured that I shifted my paradigm from dominant views of youth development and toward the application of citizenship as a transitional social category that centers youth participation in educational and leadership policy studies.

Within the interaction of CRT and CYS, a methodologic framework emerged—youth participatory action research (YPAR). Through the epistemological framework of YPAR that privileges bottom-up analysis and action, this study seeks to involve those most affected by the research as co-constructors of knowledge, as well as challenging inequities in the education system as they are understood by the students subjected to them. YPAR provides a radical departure from traditional qualitative research by shifting how the research is conducted, who is conducting it, and who benefits from it. By no longer subsuming youth as passive participants of their education, controlled by adults and institutional structures, YPAR provides a revolutionary space for youth to become more civically engaged and invested in their communities (Ginwright et al., 2006).

Limitations

This study explored the perceptions of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students enrolled at an AEC. Specifically, this study explored students' routes of resilience and the decision-making process that led them on transformative trajectories. Although the study explored issues of access and educational opportunities, participation was limited to students currently enrolled at an AEC. Several assumptions underlined this study:

- a. Participants will be enrolled at an AEC.

- b. Participants will self-report in semi-structured interviews and course discussions.
- c. Participants will respond honestly, in good faith, and in a timely manner.
- d. Participants will understand the research questions.

Additionally, the youth co-researchers (YCRs) were currently enrolled in a Student Leadership Program at an urban AEC in the Rocky Mountain West. Thus, the perceptions and practices of the students in this study may not be applicable to other geographic areas. Further limitations and research constraints will be explored in Chapter Four.

Delimitations

This research project took place during the 2019-2020 school year at an AEC in the Rocky Mountain West. The project was conducted approximately eight months, from October 2019 through May 2020. I used snowball sampling to engage students as YCRs, as well as to recruit additional youth participants in the study. I used my relationship with the school staff and school administrators to identify youth based on aptitude, a desire to be leaders of change in their communities, and willingness to participate in the study.

Definitions of Key Terminology

In this section, I define key terminology that is most relevant to this study. The following terms will be utilized throughout all subsequent chapters. All of the following terms provide invaluable insight into the context and people at the heart of this study: African American and Latinx students who enrolled at an AEC.

Social Justice

Following the work of Carlisle, Jackson, and George (2006), I define social justice in education as, “the conscious and reflexive blend of content and process intended to enhance equity across multiple social identity groups” (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability;

p. 57). The five principles of social justice in education include: (1) inclusion and equity, (2) high expectations, (3) reciprocal community relationships, (4) a system-wide approach, and (5) direct social justice education and intervention (2006). Additionally, I recognize social justice as both a process and a goal. The process should be democratic and participatory, and the goal is full and equal participation by all groups in our society—creating a system that is both self-determining and interdependent.

Institutional Racism

James Banks (1993) defines racism as a social construct that was developed to differentiate between social groups and to establish dominance and superiority of one group over another. Gillborn (2009) pushes further and posits that institutional racism speaks to a set of practices, policies, and procedures that, “encode a deep privileging of white students and, in particular, the legitimization, defense, and extension of Black, [Latinx, American Indian, Asian and Pacific Islander] inequity” (p. 62). Furthermore, institutional racism is perpetuated through a system of power and privilege which exacerbates the privilege of White people and the oppression of people of color (Gillborn, 2009).

Dominant Narratives and Counternarratives

Dominant cultural narratives can be defined as “overlearned stories communicated through mass media or other large social and cultural institutions and networks (Rappaport, 2000, p. 3). They are systems of representation that employ subtle mechanisms of oppression that shape personal beliefs and social norms, while also legitimizing myths that perpetuate unequal intergroup relations (Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Normalized through the authority of the storyteller and repetition, dominant narratives often appear to be objective and apolitical, when in reality they may be neither. Counternarratives, on the other

hand, are the stories and lived experiences of people who exist on the margins of society (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) contend that counter-storytelling as a tool has the power to challenge dominant narratives and push forward the struggle for social and racial justice. Counternarratives place the voices and knowledge of marginalized groups at the center of the research, suggesting that it is precisely their knowledge, experience, and ways of knowing that will lead to more socially just and equitable education systems (Allard & Ferris, 2015).

Marginalized Communities

Marginalized communities are groups of people who have historically and currently been denied access or involvement with mainstream economic, political, social, or cultural activities. I recognize that this term has the potential to perpetuate deficit thinking (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2001; Marx, 2002) and the “othering” (Said, 1979) of communities. Thus, I felt it was paramount to describe what I mean by it. In this paper, I am specifically speaking about students who identify or have been identified as a person of color, under-resourced, an immigrant or refugee, or English language learner.

High-Risk Youth

The research project follows the Colorado Department of Education’s classification for high-risk youth (CDE, 2018). For a school to receive an Alternative Education Campus (AEC) designation on CDE’s School Performance Framework (SPF), 90% of the students enrolled must meet on or more of the following 15 conditions:

- a. Juvenile delinquent.
- b. Dropped out of school.
- c. Expelled from school.

- d. History of personal drug or alcohol abuse.
- e. History of personal street gang involvement.
- f. History of child abuse or neglect/foster care.
- g. Has a parent or guardian in prison.
- h. Has an IEP.
- i. Family history of domestic violence.
- j. Repeated school suspensions.
- k. Pregnant or parenting.
- l. Migrant child.
- m. Homeless child.
- n. History of serious psychiatric or behavior disorder.
- o. Over-age/under credited.

Opportunity Gap

The “opportunity gap” is closely related to what many identify as an “achievement gap.” The “achievement gap” is a notion that is often used to explain racial disparities that exist in standardized academic outcomes (Rowley & Wright, 2011). However, this research project operates from an asset-based resting assumption that an achievement gap is a deficit-based misnomer in that it disregards historical context and exogenous forces at play in academic outcomes. The notion of an “opportunity gap” places the onus of responsibility for academic disparities on inequitable economic and education systems that fail to provide equitable resources for every student to succeed. Thus, this research project utilizes the concept of an opportunity gap by focusing on educational inputs—the unequal and inequitable distribution of resources.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Literature

In this study, I explored the experiences and perceptions of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students currently enrolled at an Alternative Education Campus (AEC). This YPAR project adds to a growing body of research regarding racial disparities in education, as well as the potential and possibilities that lie in providing space for students to be leaders in addressing issues that affect them directly. Specifically, this project sought to move beyond current deficit thinking paradigms to explore the lives and experiences of students who identify as African American, Indigenous, and Latinx. Additionally, through this study I offer an ethnographic examination of not only the lived experiences of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students, but also the use of YPAR as a model for transformative leadership. By including youth as co-researchers and creators of knowledge, this research project placed the potential for creating change in the hands of students directly.

Contribution to Practice in the Field

As a methodological tool, YPAR carries promising significance in the field of educational policy and leadership research. YPAR calls for a paradigm shift from a traditional qualitative approach of youth being researched *on* toward a research approach where youth are actively involved in the process and, “have a voice in determining the implications of the research for appropriate educational policies and practices” (Groundwater-Smith & Downes, 1999, p. 9). Students are often silenced, treated as passive recipients in the educational process, and remain unheard in the educational policymaking process (Fowler, 2013). Seeking to understand more about the educational experiences of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students currently enrolled at an AEC through student voices directly has the potential to lead

educational stakeholders and policy makers toward solutions that will develop a more equitable and just education system. Specifically, through engaging in a YPAR project, African American, Indigenous, and Latinx youth conducted a research project that led to the sharing of specific recommendations in improving practice in alternative education programming, as well as contributed to a growing body of research that highlights the potential and possibilities youth hold in informing district policy.

Chapter Conclusion

This study explored the routes of reliance, resistance, and transformative trajectories among African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students currently enrolled at an AEC in the Rocky Mountain West. Additionally, this study sought to underscore the importance of youth voice and, in particular, amplify the voices of students to improve the education system, offer recommendations in bridging the opportunity gap, and to create a more equitable and just educational system for every student. Through a Student Leadership Program at Urban Mountain Academy, this study used youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a methodological vehicle to place student voice and agency in the vanguard of educational leadership. The findings and recommendations of this study served multiple stakeholders such as district administrators, school administrators, educational researchers, and social justice advocates.

Four more chapters follow. Chapter Two is a review of the extant literature on the STPP. Specifically, it explores the intersection of the STPP, high school pushout, and student voice. Chapter Two concludes by highlighting a gap in the research that exists in amplifying the narratives of the students currently participating in alternative high school pathways, through their own words, using a Youth Participatory Action Research methodology. Chapter Three discusses the research design, methodology, procedures, and specific methods that were utilized

in this study. The findings of the YPAR project will be provided in Chapter Four, which will be followed by an interpretation of the findings and specific recommendations in Chapter Five.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

--James Baldwin

In the previous chapter, I introduced the system that African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students must navigate in order to rise and become successful in their postsecondary aspirations and uplifted the literature related to the theoretical framework employed within this study. As highlighted in Chapter One, the purpose of this research project is to amplify the voices of Students of Color, specifically African American, Indigenous, and Latinx youth, through participatory action research to inform strategic planning and policy surrounding school programming and the opportunity gap. In this chapter, I seek to answer the following question: what can we learn from the literature about how to learn from and understand, in their own words, the educational experiences of African Americans, Indigenous, and Latinx students that are often silenced or pushed out?

Scope of the Review

This literature review is born out of a multi-year investigation of the school to prison pipeline (STPP). Utilizing the STPP as a foundation and launching point to conduct a systematic review of relevant literature (Machi & McEvoy, 2016), both back-searching and forward-searching were utilized (Card, 2015). This literature review is an interdisciplinary review of literature that drew from a body of scholarly works, policy reports, books, and other open-source materials. Internet searches were conducted through Google Scholar and Compass, the University of Denver's search engine. Through Compass and Google Scholar, ERIC, SAGE Journals, and JSTOR were all accessed.

In an effort to better understand the STPP from a community and policy-based perspective, I reviewed policy reports published by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) was also accessed to identify relevant disproportionality data as they relate to peer-reviewed journals. To narrow search results to the post-No Child Left Behind Act (Act, N.C.L.B., 2002) era of educational research, filters were set to 2003. However, seminal literature dating prior to 2003 was included. Additionally, due to a gap in relevant research at times, the most recent studies (also dating prior to 2003) were included. Since this study was interested in learning more about the educational experiences of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students at an alternative school, studies that did not pertain directly to the students, regardless of methodology or sample size, were excluded. Search terms included: school to prison pipeline, school discipline, critical race theory, critical youth studies, high school dropout and high school pushout, student voice, and youth participatory action research (YPAR).

This chapter is a deeper exploration of related research studies. The chapter begins with a broad overview of the school to prison pipeline (STPP). Although there are myriad issues that have been identified in the research literature that speak to causes as well as potential solutions in regard to the STPP, this chapter is a selective review of research that pertains directly to youth who have been pushed out of traditional school settings. Thus, the second section of this review provides a background on extant literature available on high school pushout. This chapter concludes with an exploration of literature related to student voice and youth-led participatory action research as a methodological tool and vehicle to amplify student agency and voice.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

Defining the School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) is a metaphor that describes a cluster of school practices and legislative policies that disproportionately affect communities of color (Wald & Losen, 2007). According to the American Civil Liberties Union (2019), the STPP is a disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect, and would benefit from additional educational and counseling services. Instead, they are isolated, punished, and pushed out. (Retrieved from <https://www.aclu.org/issues/racial-justice/race-and-inequality-education/school-prison-pipeline>, 2020)

Many school discipline practices (Skiba et al, 2014), federal and state policies (Newell, 2013), and standardized testing (Kirschner, 2004; Larson, 2000) perpetuate and protect these policies and practices.

History of the School-to-Prison Pipeline

The education system in the United States (U.S.) was designed to establish and maintain racial inequities. Since the inception of public education, stratification of resources has been intentional, and inequities have often times been drawn along racial lines (Skiba et al., 2011). In a nation that maintains the largest gap between economic classes of any industrialized country in the world (Smeeding, 2001), all too frequently it is under-resourced Students of Color who are provided fewer resources, lack access to experienced teachers, culturally relevant curriculum, and advanced level coursework (Wald & Losen, 2007). Moreover, increasingly punitive school discipline measures, such as zero tolerance policies, have walked in lockstep with mass

incarceration, exacerbating racial disparities in exclusionary discipline practices and in our nation's prison population (Alexander, 2011; Browne, 2003; Skiba, 2000).

Federal Implications

Although education policy is largely established at the state level and implemented through district and school practices, federal legislation has often trickled down into local classrooms, court rooms, and jail cells (Caldwell & Caldwell, 2011). In what some view as a backlash to the Civil Rights Movement, Richard Nixon ran a U.S. presidential campaign in 1968 on a platform of being what he labeled as “tough on crime” (Alexander, 2011; Newell, 2013). In addition to being tough on crime, Nixon also called for a “war on drugs” (Newell, 2013). In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan brought Nixon's verbal commitment into full fruition and implemented a literal war on drugs. As the U.S. prison population began to steadily climb, urban Communities of Color were the most adversely effected population (Alexander, 2011; Newell, 2013). In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton—in a battle against what he and Hillary Clinton called *super predators*—called for the passage of three-strikes laws and mandatory minimum sentencing (Caldwell & Caldwell, 2011). In 1990, the U.S. Congress ratified the Gun Free Schools Act, which amended Federal criminal code across the nation and led to the creation of “zero tolerance” policies (Martinez, 2009; Skiba, 2000). In 1994, the U.S. Congress ratified the Safe Schools Act, awarding districts across the nation grant funding to hire school resource officers. The war on drugs, three strike laws and mandatory minimums, as well as zero tolerance policies and the practice of placing police in schools, have funneled generations of communities from classrooms to jail cells and codified the STPP (Skiba, 2000).

Zero Tolerance

After the Clinton Administration ratified the Gun Free Schools Act in 1994, which mandated that a student be expelled for one year and referred to the criminal justice system for possession of a weapon (Skiba, 2000), local school districts across the country began to adopt a no-nonsense approach to school discipline and began implementing zero-tolerance policies for a plethora of offenses ranging from gang activity to skateboarding (2000). By the late 1990s, 94% of schools in the country had zero tolerance policies in place for weapons, 87% for alcohol, and 79% for violence or tobacco (Heaviside et al., 1998). Although serious infractions may have been the initial primary target of zero tolerance policies, both national level (Heaviside et al., 1998) and district level (Skiba, 2014) data demonstrate that the most frequent discipline issues are for minor events such as attendance, compliance, and tardiness. Furthermore, there is a considerable research base that has produced consistent results over the past 35 years demonstrating that the use of zero tolerance policies has led to a racial overrepresentation of African American and Latinx students being suspended, expelled, and referred to the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Browne, 2003; Skiba, 2014; Wald & Losen, 2007). Moreover, when research has controlled for students' socioeconomic status, disproportionality cannot be explained by any degree of poverty (Wallace et al., 2008). In the absence of any evidence-based rationale accounting for widespread discipline disproportionality, the conclusion that African American and Latinx students are being removed from the classroom and pushed out of school at disproportionate rates becomes unavoidable.

Exclusionary discipline. The literature on zero tolerance policies and school discipline reform consistently links exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspension and expulsion, with the overrepresentation of historically marginalized student groups (Gregory & Skiba, 2019;

Ritter, 2018; Skiba et al., 2014). Specifically, research on discipline reform has demonstrated that African American students, Native American students, Latinx students, special education students, and LGBTQ students all remain overrepresented in national suspension rates (Gregory & Skiba, 2019). However, over the past decade alarm raised by families, community advocates, and scholars led states and districts across the country to engage in significant discipline reform efforts. For example, 17 states have recently passed legislation to curb the usage of exclusionary discipline. Some states have disbanded the use of ambiguous misconduct labels such as “willful defiance” (California Department of Education, 2015). Some states have mandated that school discipline data be disaggregated and included in improvement planning to reduce racial disparities (State of Illinois, 2014), and other states have increased their use of restorative practices (Restorative Justice Colorado, 2015). Unfortunately, despite the reform efforts and recent reductions in the use of exclusionary discipline practices, the disparate rates across student groups has persisted (Gregory & Skiba, 2019). In fact, the literature on school discipline and discipline reform continues to document discipline disproportionality across student groups (Skiba et al., 2014). Moreover, research on discipline disproportionality continues to link the use of exclusionary discipline practices with myriad negative outcomes, including a decrease in academic achievement, high school dropout, and involvement with the criminal justice system (Ritter, 2018).

Mass incarceration. The dramatic increase in zero tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline practices that occurred throughout the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century was mirrored by an increasingly punitive penal system. There is significant evidence that African American and Latinx students are subject to exclusionary discipline at rates much higher than their White peers (Office of Civil Rights, 2014; Skiba et al., 2011). On the other end of the

STPP, the Sentencing Project (2013) found that although juvenile arrests decreased 43 percent between 2003 and 2013, racial disparities had increased by 15 percent. Empirical studies suggest that racial disproportionality in exclusionary discipline cannot be explained by a difference in delinquent behavior and is strongly associated with similar racial disparities found in referrals to juvenile courts (Birchmeier, Nicholson-Crotty, & Valentine, 2009). Following a similar pattern to the juvenile justice system, the adult prison population decreased 10 percent between 2007 and 2017 (Zeng, 2019), but significant racial disparities persist (The Sentencing Project, 2019). There are currently over two million adults being held in prisons and jails in the U.S., a 500 percent increase in the past 40 years (Alexander, 2011; NAACP, 2018; Sentencing Project, 2019). In 2018, the U.S. accounted for 5 percent of the world's population but accounted for nearly 25 percent of the world's prison population (NAACP, 2018). Furthermore, although Latinx and African American communities account for approximately 32 percent of the U.S. population, they account for 56 percent of all incarcerated people (2018). As Wald and Losen (2007) assert, "the racial disparities within the two systems are so similar—and so glaring—that it becomes impossible not to connect them" (p. 11).

Theoretical Influences

Scholars trace the first usage of the STPP metaphor to an education conference held at Northeastern University in 2003 (Crawley & Hirschfield, 2018). In the decades since, the phrase has grown in popularity and has become part of the common vernacular among scholars, practitioners, and politicians. In 2011, the Obama administration developed the Supportive School Discipline Initiative, adopting the STPP metaphor and becoming the first administration to use the phrase. Despite the growing utility of the phrase, a common critique of the STPP metaphor is that it lacks theoretical development (Crawley & Hirschfield, 2018; McGrew, 2016).

Through an examination of the literature, it does not appear that there are any studies that offer a theory that is unique to the STPP. However, theoretical traditions from sociology, legal studies, and criminology all offer insight to the construction and perpetuation of the STPP (Crawley & Hirschfield, 2018). This literature review seeks to provide further understanding and context of the STPP by uplifting the epistemological origins of the phrase.

Critical Race Theory

Although the STPP lacks explicit theoretical development, it does borrow ideologically from Critical Race Theory (CRT). As noted in Chapter One, CRT is a legal studies theory that was developed in the 1970s among activists and scholars who lamented the modest, liberal reforms the Civil Rights Movement produced, many of which had limited implications for Communities of Color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Examining the STPP within a CRT perspective, African American and Latinx students are not consciously targeted by harsh discipline policies and referred to the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Instead, legislative policies and informal school disciplinary practices direct disproportionate punitive scrutiny toward behaviors that African American and Latinx students may be more likely to commit, or at least be perceived as committing (Skiba et al., 2002). For example, many studies have found that African American and Latinx students are more likely to be disciplined and/or suspended for minor infractions such as talking loudly or disrespect (Skiba et al., 2002; Wright et al., 2014). Vague institutional features of school discipline practices such as insubordination and disrespect allow for African American and Latinx students to be disproportionately pushed out of the classroom and into the disciplinary process. Moreover, CRT assists in explaining how ostensibly race-neutral policies and practices have had racially disparate consequences. CRT scholars argue that while liberal reforms supposedly promote the welfare of Communities of Color, the reforms

simultaneously codify restrictive definitions of achievement, failure, and causation (Crenshaw, 1988). Punitive, deficit-based school discipline practices highlight the mechanics in which many Students of Color, in the pursuit of narrowly defined academic excellence, fall short of the prescribed cultural norms and are silenced, punished, and pushed out.

Critical Race Theory in education. Over the past three decades, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has become an increasingly popular framework for many educational scholars who seek to critically examine the education system (Ledesma & Calderon, 2014). Scholarly work that links CRT to praxis in education provides further context for the STPP metaphor. In their seminal application of CRT to education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) unpack how the education system perpetuates systemic inequalities, specifically through the junction of property rights and race. Framing the STPP within the context of property rights highlights a premise that education belongs to some students while students who do not conveniently align with White cultural norms and practices are deemed undeserving and are sanctioned for their non-White ways of knowing (Crawley & Hirschfield; 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Furthermore, Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) notion of property rights in education also includes the right to exclude, a key contributing factor of the STPP.

The punitive shift in school discipline toward zero-tolerance, expounded upon later in this chapter, was carried out through seemingly race-neutral initiatives (i.e. school safety). However, many of the vague targeted behaviors identified in school discipline reform initiatives, such as disrespect and insubordination, are implicitly associated with race. The current school discipline system that silences, punishes, and pushes out Students of Color at disparate rates often ignores exogenous influences on student behavior, such as family and economic circumstances. The permanence of racism, a critique of liberalism, and viewing education

through the lens of property rights, helps to contextualize the racially disparate outcomes examined in the STPP literature.

The New Jim Crow. Based on a racist caricature of African Americans in minstrel shows, “Jim Crow” refers to a century of *de jure* segregation and *de facto* oppression that was rampant throughout the United States following the Civil War (Alexander, 2011). Alexander (2011) argues that pre-Civil War chattel slavery evolved into post-Civil War Jim Crow laws, which ultimately evolved into the New Jim Crow (NJC). The NJC utilizes the prison industrial complex to maintain a racial caste system, which Alexander defines as, “a racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom” (p. 12). African Americans and their allies made great strides in disrupting and dismantling Jim Crow during the Civil Rights Movement. As further expanded upon later in this chapter, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, a mass removal of African Americans from society through Nixon and Reagan’s “War on Drugs” began and continues to this day (2011). Moreover, Alexander (2011) unveils society’s colorblind mask and highlights that,

the racial bias in the drug war is a major reason that 1 in every 14 black men was behind bars in 2006, compared with 1 in 106 white men. For young black men, the statistics are even worse. One in 9 black men between the ages of twenty and thirty-five was behind bars in 2006, far more were under some kind of penal control—such as probation or parole. (p. 100)

Although her argument is centered on mass incarceration, she contends that the education system contributes to the NJC through an inequitable distribution of educational resources coupled with police surveillance of Communities of Color. The concept of a NJC provides further context of

the STPP by drawing parallels between Students of Color and Prisoners of Color (Alexander, 2011; Madrigal-Garcia & Acevedo-Gil, 2016).

The New Juan Crow. By 2024, Latinx students are projected to represent 29 percent of all students in K-12 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). However, the inequitable distribution of resources in K-12 schools has led to low educational outcomes for Latinx students (Madrigal-Garcia & Acevedo-Gil, 2016). Although great strides have been made in raising the educational outcomes for Latinx students, the Latinx graduation rate remains 9 points behind their White peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Informed by Alexander's (2011) New Jim Crow concept, Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil (2016) examined the intersection of the inequitable distribution of resources with zero-tolerance policies and the implications for Latinx students' postsecondary pathways. Integrating critical race theory in education, school culture, and the concept of panopticon (keeping students under surveillance at all times to maintain power and control), Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil (2016) utilized qualitative methods to examine school structures, climate, and individual agency to better understand how each has shaped the educational experiences and trajectories of Latinx students. Grounded in their data, Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil (2016) established the New Juan Crow in Education (NJCE) concept. The NJCE is defined as:

a web of power and relegation that is manifested as a school climate of inadequate school resources, academic underachievement, zero tolerance, and daily interactions placing Latina/o students in a subordinate position that hinders high school completion and postsecondary pathways. (p. 160)

Their analysis of the data revealed four primary findings:

(a) administrator's deficit mindsets informed school culture and academic expectations;

- (b) the NJCE is composed of an inequitable distribution of resources and a culture of control;
- (c) the NJCE hinders postsecondary preparation for Latinx students, and;
- (d) although participants in the study experienced the NJCE, they still engaged in resistance to disrupt the deficit-schooling context.

Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil (2016) provide three recommendations for policy and practice to upend the STPP and the NJCE. First, the authors recommend administrators end in-school policing. Second, the authors recommend administrators and teachers tap into the community cultural wealth of students to foster a caring culture, rather than a culture of control. Lastly, the authors recommend that schools develop counter-spaces to foster students' aspirations, resistance, and college-going identities. Furthermore, Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil (2016) highlight the potential and possibilities counter-spaces can serve for students to reflect, analyze, and critique the New Juan Crow in Education.

Disrupting the STPP

Scholarly research and policy reports focus heavily on posing discipline disproportionality as the primary cause of the school-to-prison nexus, as well as identifying alternative discipline practices as a primary solution (McIntosh et al., 2014; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). However, there remains a gap largely unexplored in the STPP literature of students' fundamental right to be literate (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). In order to broach this gap, I explored students "right to learn" (Darling-Hammon, 2006) as well as the notion of "literacy as a civil right" (Greene, 2008) and how these concepts highlight additional concerns regarding access and equity, as well as how they hold the potential to undermine the STPP (Baum, Ma, &

Payea, 2010). Specifically, in an effort to begin redefining and redirecting the STPP, both “educational debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and critical literacy (Morell, 2008) were explored.

Education Debt. There are many buzzwords and catchphrases in education literature. One of the most common is “the achievement gap” (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In Ladson-Billings’ Presidential Address (2006) to the American Education Research Association (AERA), she noted that the phrase produces 11 million citations on Google. As of September 2019, Google now produces 121 million results for “achievement gap” (Google Search, 2019). Ladson-Billings (2006) calls into question the hyper-focus on the achievement gap to understand and address inequities in our country’s education system. Ladson-Billings (2006) does not deny that a gap in achievement exists, rather, she argues the case for context. Specifically, she argues for a paradigm shift toward what she coins “education debt” (p. 5). There are four debts that when combined create an education debt for communities of color, including: an historical debt (created through de facto segregation and de jure apartheid); an economic debt (created through generations of funding disparities between White suburban school districts and Urban districts of color); a socio-political debt (created through communities of color being excluded from the civic process); and a moral debt (created through slavery, 100 years of Jim Crow laws, and generations of oppression) (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that we must move from measuring the gap to tallying the debt. Citing a limitation in her ability to fully represent the magnitude of education debt, Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that we must imagine new ways to illustrate the effect poor education, housing, health care, and government services has had on dividing our society. Specifically, Ladson-Billings (2006) posits that the counternarrative already exists and that we only need to listen because they,

speak from the barrios of Los Angeles and the ghettos of New York. They speak from the reservations of New Mexico and the Chinatown of San Francisco. They speak from levee breaks of New Orleans where they remind us, as educational researchers, that we do not merely have an achievement gap—we have an education debt. (p. 10)

Ladson-Billings' (2006) notion of an education debt speaks to students right to learn (Darling & Hammond, 2006) as a civil rights issue (Greene, 2008), as well as Morell's (2008) research on critical literacy.

Disrupting the STPP through pedagogy. Critical literacy can be defined as both a methodological approach to research as well as a pedagogical approach to teaching that holds a critical view of dominant languages and actively calls for researchers and teachers to embrace culturally relevant methods and resources, especially when working with historically marginalized student populations (Morell, 2008). Morrell (2008) posits that critical literacy “is necessary not only for the critical navigation of hegemonic discourses; it is also essential to the redefining of the self and the transformation of oppressive social structures and relations of production” (p. 5). Dominant literacies, such as standardized testing and college entrance exams, impose a single standard on all students. In his research on critical literacy, Morrell (2008) highlights the benefits students and the community at large receive when historically marginalized students are able to conquer dominant literacies and hegemonic ways of knowing. Specifically, Morrell points out that students who are able to conquer dominant literacies, such as the language and learning styles necessary to be successful in Advanced Placement courses, increase their chances of attending college and having better paying jobs, as well as being civically engaged participants (Baum, Ma, & Payae, 2013). Moreover, when parents are able to conquer dominant literacies, they are more equipped to advocate for and tutor their children—

further increasing the likelihood of academic and economic success (Laureau, 2000). However, Morrell also questions the cultural cost that historically marginalized students must pay to conquer dominant literacies in order to avert the STPP, and points to literature (Fine, 1991) that demonstrates how under-resourced students are often unable to adopt the language and learning styles of the dominant culture, and are therefore pushed-out of high school and into the pipeline. When the gap in culturally relevant learning opportunities is compounded with other systemic inequities outlined in this literature review, the need to adopt a critical literacy approach to disrupting the STPP becomes increasingly evident.

One example that articulates the theory of critical literacy as social praxis is youth participatory action research (YPAR; explored further at the conclusion of this chapter) (Morell, 2008). In an effort to highlight the power of a critical literacy approach to disrupting the STPP, Morell (2008) uplifts the work of historically marginalized high school students engaged in a participatory action research project as an act of resistance to dominant literacies, as well as to promote social justice. The students in the study chose civic curricula as a research focus and visited schools, neighborhoods, and community organizations in search of curricula. Utilizing the data that they collected, the students were able to inform teaching practices, lobby school district and state officials, and to inform further educational research (2008). Morrell's example highlights the power historically marginalized students hold in moving from passive participants in the STPP to active agents in not only the transformation of education processes, but in disrupting the STPP as well. Dominant literacies often discount and hold a deficit view of the cultures and lived experiences of historically marginalized communities and impose an ethnocentric, single standard on all. Critical literacy, however, "entails a process of naming and

renaming the world, seeing its patterns, designs, and complexities, and developing the capacity to redesign and reshape it” (Luke, 2012, p. 9)

High School Dropout

Students who are often silenced, punished, and pushed out of school are labeled as the “helpless, hopeless, and depressed” (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983, p. 265). There is a considerable amount of literature that seeks to identify risk factors of high school dropout (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2012) in an effort to transform the helpless, hopeless, and depressed into the helpful, hopeful, and happy by improving students’ experiences while in school and increasing graduation rates. For many decades, much of the research literature on high school dropouts has contributed to deficit mindsets (Zhao, 2016) and a dominant language (Morrell, 2008) view of high school dropouts. However, there is a counter body of research literature that examines the larger exogenous forces at play in the lives of youth pushed out of high school in order to contextualize their experiences and to amplify their voices through the use of counternarratives (Camarota & Fine, 2010). In this section, I will review pertinent dropout literature, analysis conducted by national nonprofits, and education statistic databases.

Identifying the Risk

As the nation’s dropout rates continue to decline, there remains a multitude of educational stakeholders who cry foul and claim that there is a crisis (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). To shed light on whether or not there is a national dropout crisis, Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) conducted a comprehensive examination of high school dropouts in the United States. The authors surveyed research on national dropout statistics (mostly provided by the National Center for Education Statistics) and alternative programs designed to engage students and prevent them from dropping out. Tyler and Lofstrom’s (2009) primary focus in examining second chance

programs was focused on General Education Development (GED) programs. They concluded that the nation's dropout figures demonstrate that as a whole, we have neither progressed nor digressed in the past forty years. Notwithstanding these figures, Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) provided clear data on the opportunity gap between different ethnic groups of students and expose that African American and Latinx students are less likely to finish high school than their White peers. This study highlighted that there is not a central well agreed upon identification of students at risk of dropping out and that data suggests that although identifying risk factors is important, it is also relatively inefficient in predicting who will dropout. Furthermore, the survey of research provided demonstrated that regardless of risk factors or school programming, the evidence suggests that relationships are often the most powerful tool to eradicate high school dropout (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

The reasons students choose to leave high school are myriad. Research has established that students who choose to leave school before completion are both pulled and pushed out (Cresnoe, 2004; Fine, 1991; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Pulled-out factors include economic and family concerns or responsibilities (Crosnoe, 2004), while pushed-out factors include issues such as disciplinary policies or other factors internal to the school (Fine, 1991). In a study that was the first of its kind, Stearns and Glennie (2006) examined reasons why students leave school across grade level, ethnic groups, and gender groups. Through an examination of North Carolina's dropout rate data, Stearns and Glennie found that ninth grade held the highest dropout rates across all groups examined. However, their study also found that, "students of different gender and ethnic groups are affected by different push and pull factors at various ages and to varying extents" (p. 54-55). This study adds to Tyler and Loftstrom's (2009) conclusion that identifying risk factors is relatively inefficient in predicting or preventing high school dropout, as well as

highlighting the implications cultural differences play in why students choose to leave school (Stearns & Glennie, 2006).

Building on the work of Stearns and Glennie (2006), in a hope to better understand the reasons students leave school, Bradley and Renzulli (2011) conducted a quantitative study that examined longitudinal data from surveys administered with tenth graders nationwide. They (2011) specifically sought to better understand the impact individual factors, including socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity, have on students' reasons for leaving school. Their study found that there is a correlation between race/ethnicity, gender, and students being pushed or pulled out of school. Most compellingly, the study found that socioeconomic status determined the difference in why Black students were pushed and pulled out of school at higher rates than White students (2011). They also determined that, overall, Latinx students were most likely to be pulled out. Both Stearns and Glennie's (2006) and Bradley and Ranzulli's (2011) research on identifying who is at risk of dropping out provide contextualized nuance to the experience of leaving high school, as well as highlighting that the intersectionality of push out and pull out factors needs to be explored further. However, although the disaggregated data uplifts the fact that Students of Color are identified as "high risk" more often than their White peers, these findings fail to uncover how or if schools and districts are responding to and meeting the needs of these students (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009).

Exploring decades of research that has investigated how to identify students who may be at risk of dropping out of high school, Bowers, Spratt, and Taff (2012) examined 110 dropout indicators across 36 studies. To do so, they examined literature over the past 30 years using Relative Operating Characteristic (ROC) analysis to examine which indicators are most accurate. Ultimately, the authors determined that low and failing grades was the most accurate indicator.

However, the greatest limitation of the examination of longitudinal data by Bowers et al. (2012) is that of their 110 high school dropout indicators selected, zero indicators were racial, ethnic, or cultural in nature. However, the study did expose that only 50-60 percent of students were accurately identified (Bowers, Spratt, & Taff., 2012). Furthermore, although Bowers et al. (2013) provide recommendations in avoiding and preventing misidentification, their findings still contribute to the qualitative conclusions of Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), Stearns and Glennie (2009), and Bradley and Renzulli (2011), in that there is not a central, agreed upon identification of students at risk of dropping out, and that further research that explores the contextualized nuance of the experience of leaving high school is necessary.

Dropout Counternarratives

Revealing the counternarrative. Research highlights that prior to leaving school, historically marginalized students often feel silenced, exiled, and pushed out (Fine, 1991). In an ethnographic study, Michelle Fine (1991) revealed how Students of Color at an urban high school were silenced through school practices, exiled, and ultimately pushed out of school. Fine (1991) interviewed forty youths who had been pushed out of high school to better understand the implications leaving school had on their lives. Fine (1991) found that the students who had recently left school had maintained a level of critique toward social institutions and were still optimistic about the potential their futures held, as opposed to older dropouts who reported more self-blame and were less optimistic about their futures. Fine (1991) posits that “In a society with few mechanisms for mobilizing, sustaining, and sharpening social critique...the dropout is ultimately alone, and silenced” (Fine, 1991, p. 126). However, through exposing the silencing of high school dropouts, Fine’s (1991) work also revealed a juxtaposing profile between students who chose to leave high school and those who chose to stay. Among students who left school,

Fine (1991) found that most were academically average, not conforming, and they were the most willing to resist a teacher who they viewed as unjust. Among students who chose to stay in school, Fine (1991) found that most were academically average, depressed, and reluctant to advocate for themselves. Fine's (1991) findings provide insight into the potential that conducting student voice research among students who are identified as at-risk holds in uncovering a counternarrative and providing possible solutions about how schools can be more culturally relevant and eradicate school pushout.

A missed opportunity. For two decades following Fine's (1991) seminal research on high school pushouts, qualitative research uplifting the counternarrative of students who left high school was sparse. Bridging this gap in research, Brown and Rodriguez (2009) spent a year studying two Latinx students who had been identified as at-risk of dropping out. Similar to Fine (1991), Brown and Rodriguez (2009) found that school practices contribute to why students choose to leave high school. Specifically, Brown and Rodriguez (2009) identified, "low academic expectations and a menial curriculum, lack of caring, gendered and racialized stereotypes, and overburdened staff" (p. 239) as the primary factors the students had become disengaged and considered leaving school. Both students felt that they were being pushed out as a result of their unwillingness to conform to conditions they viewed as dehumanizing. Moreover, Brown and Rodriguez (2009) realized that when the students in the study did dropout of high school, "school life went on as if these two people never existed" (p. 240). This study highlights how African American and Latinx students leaving high school before completion has become normalized, as well as how school practices often lead students to feeling pushed out. Furthermore, their study also illuminated the growing need to include the counternarratives of those at-risk of dropping out.

An emerging counternarrative. The voices of students who have left school are still often absent from investigations researching the phenomenon of high school dropout. In a more recent study, Feldman, Smith, and Waxman (2017) investigated high school dropout from the perspective of the students themselves. Through the Washington Student Oral Histories project, a university-community collaboration, the study sought to counter the misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding “dropout.” Utilizing focus groups and structured interviews, the study uplifts the voices of six youth who have left school (Feldman, Smith, & Waxman, 2017). These researchers (2017) found that the students reported that a sense of belonging contributed the most to school engagement, while culturally irrelevant instructional practices led to academic struggles and, eventually, the students dropping out. What is missing from the study, however, is a critical examination the role institutional racism plays in the development and implementation of culturally irrelevant instruction, which has led to a disproportionate rate of Students of Color being pushed out of high school. Furthermore, although the design of the research provided space for the students to share their educational experiences and factors that led to their decision to leave school, it also tacitly discounted the students’ ability to co-lead the research that sought to uplift their personal experiences and perceptions of the educational system.

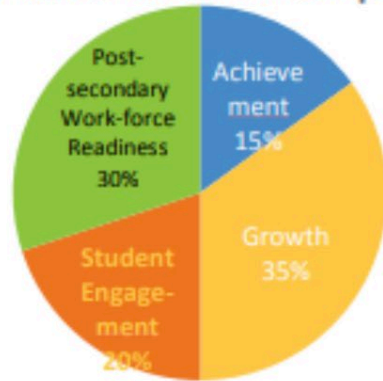
Toward an Alternative

Although a common definition of alternative education or alternative schools has yet to emerge, a review of the literature reveals that alternative education is generally defined as an education that offers non-traditional programming for students who were not successful in traditional school settings. In Colorado, alternative schools are labeled Alternative Education Campuses (AECs) (Colorado Department of Education, 2019). According to the Colorado Department of Education (2019), “AECs have specialized missions, nontraditional methods of

instruction delivery, serve students with severe limitations, and have student populations that are comprised of at least 90 percent high risk students.” In order for students to be identified as high risk, they must meet one or more of the following 15 conditions:

- a. Juvenile delinquent.
- b. Dropped out of school.
- c. Expelled from school.
- d. History of personal drug or alcohol abuse.
- e. History of personal street gang involvement.
- f. History of child abuse or neglect/foster care.
- g. Has a parent or guardian in prison.
- h. Has an IEP.
- i. Family history of domestic violence.
- j. Repeated school suspensions.
- k. Pregnant or parenting.
- l. Migrant child.
- m. Homeless child.
- n. History of serious psychiatric or behavior disorder.
- o. Over-age/under credited.

Alternative Education Campuses



Traditional High Schools

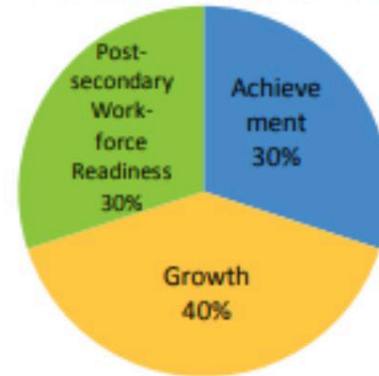


Figure 2.1. School performance measures in Colorado (Retrieved from <https://www.cde.state.co.us/accountability/stateaccountabilityaecs>)

As highlighted in Figure 2.1, under the Education Accountability Act of 2009 (SB 09-163), schools that receive AEC status receive a differentiated performance review (Colorado Department of Education, 2019). In addition to the weightings being slightly different for Academic Achievement, Academic Growth, and Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness, AECs have an additional mandated measure of Student Engagement. While opponents of AECs may argue that the differentiated performance assessment lowers academic expectations too much, proponents of AECs argue that the differentiated performance assessment is responsive to the needs of the student population that AECs serve. By amending the weighting for State accountability purposes, AECs are able to focus more on providing additional support services, differentiating curriculum, and spending more time building relationships with their students in order to develop rapport and increase engagement.

Alternative Services

Similar to the work of Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), Atkins and Bartuska (2010) conducted a study on youth with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) in Oregon in an effort to describe the characteristics of students with EBD, the characteristics of alternative programs that

serve them, and to provide recommendations to families considering alternative education. The authors collected qualitative data through interviews and observations at three research sites, focused solely on students with EBD, and ensured validity of the observations through saturation of the data. Findings demonstrated there were several components at each site that appeared to be useful to the students. In particular, each site had programs that addressed drug and alcohol use and abuse, provided unique systems for offering curricular and instructional options, and had a clear relationship between the school's programming and the juvenile justice system. The authors concluded that for some families, because of the personalized and special services many alternative schools provide, for students with an EBD—alternative education is a much better fit.

Alternative Teaching

A review of the literature on alternative schools revealed that research on the demography of alternative schoolteachers is scant, especially in regard to race. However, a result of alternative schools being granted differentiated accountability measures that are responsive to the needs of their students, alternative school literature has revealed that alternative schoolteachers are provide more space to be innovative in meeting the needs of their students. For example, Bascia and Maton (2016) explored how alternative education teachers are able to be innovative and maintain cultural responsiveness within the confines, bureaucracy, and prescriptions of public education in Toronto, Canada. To do so, they conducted an exploratory study that focused on the work of five teachers, all currently working at different alternative schools. The researchers found that due to the alternative schools' loose coupling with traditional structures and less bureaucratic oversight, teachers were able to design their own curriculum and be more responsive to their students' needs. Similar to other aforementioned studies, the findings

suggest that less oversight, personalized curriculum, and small class sizes are key, overarching features of most, if not all, successful alternative schools in Toronto.

Alternative Voices

In an effort to provide readers with an understanding of the need for alternative educational settings in rural environments, Johnston, Cooch, and Pollard (2004) use student voice to highlight the key components and characteristics of Bear Lodge (BL) Alternative School in northwest Wyoming. In addition to empowering student voices, the authors demonstrated how BL achieved personalized academic achievement and sets standards for behavior. Student satisfaction survey findings highlighted the importance and benefits of individual learning plans, benefits of the discipline protocol, camaraderie among peers, and strong relationships with mentors/teachers. Although the author's research is limited in scope, by using student voice they also embodied the assertion that young people can create knowledge and are not just passive recipients.

Students point the way. With the purpose of incorporating student voice into Expected School-Wide Learning Results in Orange County, California, Darling and Price (2004) analyzed over nine hundred questionnaires completed by seniors graduating from one of 105 Alternative, Community, and Correctional Education Schools and Services (ACCESS) Schools over a three-year period. Utilizing a mixed methods approach in addition to the questionnaires, they conducted focus groups in an effort to give students a voice and inform school policy. After coding and triangulating the data, three themes emerged: engagement, maximizing learning, and transition. The researchers developed a list of student recommendations and ACCESS administrators incorporated the evaluations into their respective Expected School-Wide Learning Results. Unlike other similar research, the authors provided an historical overview of the

emerging adoption, importance, and implementation of student voice during the school evaluation process. Like other similar research, the authors found that the overarching strengths of AECs were individualized academic and career plans, as well as the strong personal relationships staff and students are able to build as a result of smaller class sizes.

In an effort to provide students a platform to share their experiences and to prompt interest and future research into a unique brand of education, Morrissette (2011) explored perceptions of students who participated in alternative high school settings in Brandon, Canada. To do so, Morrissette conducted a phenomenological study and viewed her twenty interviewees as co-researchers. When thematically coding the study, four themes emerged from the interview: ambiance, a sense of belonging, pedagogical skill (teacher-student relationships), program flexibility, and self-awareness. Through the conversations with the students it became clear that each gained much more through their experience in an alternative setting than just a high school diploma. Similar to other studies on alternative education, Morrissette found that key tenets of successful alternative schools in Brandon included innovative curriculum, strong mentor relationships, and autonomy and flexibility with school programming.

With an aim to provide insight into why a traditional educational paradigm does not always work for everyone, De La Ossa (2005) conducted a student-voice centered study at eight alternative high schools in Puget Sound, Washington. Using an Appreciative Inquiry approach (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), De La Ossa conducted focus groups to investigate student perceptions of school reform. In an attempt to reach a larger audience, data gathered through participant observation and focus groups was translated into a video documentary titled, *Hear My Voice* (2005). The overarching goal of the documentary was to empower the students despite their “at-risk” identification in hope that their voices would change people’s perceptions of

alternative schools. As other studies have demonstrated, findings suggest that students are capable of providing valuable feedback and informing school programming and policy.

Developing, implementing, and maintaining effective alternative schools can make a significant difference for both students and society as a whole. The literature on alternative schools suggests that students who attend an AEC are more likely to avert the school-to-prison pipeline (Bowers et al., 2012) and are more likely to complete high school (Morrissette, 2011). Furthermore, students who attended and/or graduated from AECs have identified the AEC attributes outlined in this chapter for their retention, graduation, and success (Morrissette, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Student Voice Research

Being heard. Student voice research can be categorized as, “a field of study that attempts to capture the voices, ideas, or perspectives of students for the purposes of (a) school change, (b) student or group empowerment, (c) to teach and learn the school curriculum” (Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, & Artiles, p. 456). In a review that synthesizes two decades of student voice research, Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, and Artiles (2017) sought to better understand the extent that student voices in K-12 settings have been studied, as well as identify common conceptual and methodological characteristics employed. Utilizing these categories, they conducted a systemic review and analysis of peer-reviewed, student voice literature from 1990-2010. Overall, they found 49 studies that fit their research parameters. Findings conclude that student voice research has been rapidly expanding spaces and the potential for the voices of historically marginalized students to serve in the vanguard of creating school change and developing more equitable learning spaces (Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, & Artiles, 2017).

Findings from Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, and Artiles (2017) systemic review presents student voice research as a rising promise in the field of education to disrupt traditional hegemonic student spaces by centering historically marginalized youth voices, while also unintentionally demonstrating that as student voice research becomes more prominent, there is a clear and present gap. Specifically, the review found that there has been a significant upward trend in student voice research in recent years, with the majority of articles written between 1990 and 2010 being published between 2006 and 2010. Of the studies, 59 percent focused on school change, 63 percent focused on empowerment, and 20 percent focused on curriculum. Only 63 percent had explicit theoretical frameworks. Of those that did, 30 percent were critical, 19 percent were sociocultural, and 10 percent used a combination. An overwhelming 86 percent used qualitative methodologies and 6 percent were quantitative (Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, & Artiles, 2017). However, a gap in the research literature begins to emerge when it is revealed that although 70 percent of the studies they reviewed were conducted with Students of Color, only 7 percent were participatory in design, and only 5 of the studies included the students as researchers. Although the authors note that in the years since publication many recent student voice studies have learned from critique and have expanded their focus to include power imbalances, efforts to impact school leadership, and the politics of student voice, they did not highlight the gap in including historically marginalized student populations as participants in the research process.

Collaborating with adults. Many leaders in the field of education that seek to serve as advocates for students often use standardized testing as a way to measure gaps in achievement (Mansfield, 2014). Furthermore, students are often the subjects of research and policy, rather than participants in shaping policy. Seeking to bridge this gap in research by highlighting the

value of including student voices in educational leadership and research practices, Mansfield (2014) conducted ethnographic research with young women at a single-sex magnet school in Texas. Uplifting the findings of two years of an ongoing study, Mansfield sought to fill an important gap in research practices and transformative learning spaces by including student voices. When findings were shared with adults in the building, “they were surprised to learn of the experiences of the girls at their home campuses. Since school administration had not been aware of the maltreatment, they had not been in a position to intervene” (Mansfield, 2014, p. 425). By amplifying the voices of historically marginalized student populations, Mansfield (2014) pulled back the curtain to reveal the power that student voice holds in creating academic excellence and equity in transformative learning spaces. Mansfield’s research adds to a growing body of literature that demonstrates how advocacy is often limited and falls short of creating meaningful change when students are not allowed to speak for themselves.

Building capacity for student leadership. In an era of high stakes standardized testing where school administrators and teachers are increasingly pressured to measure students’ academic achievement, many scholars and practitioners have begun to openly question if we are doing so at the cost of also providing students the necessary tools to be actively engaged participants in a democratic society (Kirshner, 2004; Larson, 2000). The work of Mitra and Gross (2009) on student voice examines the connection between types of initiatives and the context in which student voice initiatives are pursued. To accomplish this, the study utilized Turbulence Theory (Gross, 2004) and conducted a multi-country case study analysis. Modeled after flight instruction, Turbulence Theory recognizes turbulence at four levels of disturbance: (1) light (smooth sailing), (2) moderate (you hit a few bumps but flight can continue as scheduled), (3) severe (you did not crash, but the airbags have dropped), and (4) extreme

(thankfully your seat also serves as a floatation device) (Gross, 2004; Mitra & Gross, 2009). Gross (2004) applies these levels of flight disturbance to levels of disturbance that occur as a result of schools seeking to implement and sustain changes in curriculum (level 1), instruction (level 2), and assessment (level 3) (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Mitra and Gross' (2009) research adds to a growing body of literature that calls for the disruption of traditional student roles by transforming learning spaces by placing student voice in the vanguard of educational research. The application of Turbulence Theory to student voice research provides insight into the context and outcomes of student voice initiatives. Specifically, it uplifts the notion that the greater the systemic inequity the students seek to research and change, the more turbulence and push back they should anticipate (2009).

Central to Gross and Mitra's application of Turbulence Theory in their case study analysis of student voice, is Mitra's (2006) Pyramid of Student Voice. The first level of student voice engagement is 'being heard,' which seeks the perspectives of students on issues involving the school and is often accomplished through adult-facilitated interviews or focus groups. The second level, 'collaborating with adults,' which is the level that most student voice research is conducted, describes research where students work with the adults to create change in their school, including data collection and implementation. In the final level, 'building capacity for leadership,' which is the least common level that most student voice research is conducted, students collaborate with adults but also serve as points of resistance and criticism by questioning systemic inequities and injustices found in schools (Mitra, 2009, p. 523-524). At this final level, research has demonstrated that by providing the opportunity for students to become active critics and participants in the school decision-making process, they are able to further shape their lives, the lives of their peers, and in so doing increase attachment to the students'

school community and improve academic outcomes (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Ultimately, Mitra and Gross found that the case studies that reached the highest level on the pyramid are also the case studies that saw the greatest decrease in turbulence in the school community and in the personal lives of the students involved. The work of Mitra and Gross (2009) is paramount to this research project in that it not only uplifts the power and potential of including students in the research process, but also demonstrates the potential that building capacity for leadership among students holds in improving their lives, the lives of their peers, and the greater community.

Youth Participatory Action Research

Transformative Paradigms

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is both an epistemology and critical research methodology that is centered on youth voice and uplifts youth agency by placing youth in the vanguard of educational research as experts of their own education and lived experiences. YPAR is comprised of three principles: “the collected investigation of a problem; the reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem; and the desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem” (Cammarota & Fine, 2010, p. 157). Many scholars argue that long before Western paradigms became globally dominant ways of knowing, indigenous communities throughout Latin America, the South Pacific, and Africa had been practicing what is now known as participatory action research (PAR) (Fine, 2008). In the wake of colonization, many communities who experienced oppression or marginalization embraced PAR methods throughout the 20th century as a tool to resist hegemonic narratives (Fine, 2008). Fine (2008) argues that PAR is a “radical epistemological challenge to the traditions of social science, most critically on where the topic of knowledge resides” (p. 215). PAR explicitly aims to disrupt traditional power structures, seeking methods to transform the ways in which

historically marginalized communities have been subjugated to the position of object rather than subject (Fine, 2008).

Building on the arguments made by advocates of student voice (Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, & Artiles, 2017; Mansfield, 2014; Mitra & Gloss, 2009), radical epistemologies (Fine, 2008), critical youth studies (Cammarota & Fine, 2010), and Freire's (1993) pedagogical philosophy of praxis, YPAR has begun to emerge as a revolutionizing methodology (Cammarota & Fine, 2010). YPAR is defined as a critical scientific inquiry that "provides young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify these problems" (Cammarota & Fine, 2010, p. 2). Cammarota & Fine (2010) posit that youth engaged in YPAR differ from other variations of critical youth studies in that they are engaged in a research design that is a form of transformational resistance that seeks to disrupt and transform systems—systematic and institutional—to promote social justice. Furthermore, YPAR provides a revolutionary potential for historically marginalized students, as well as students who have been identified as being "high risk." Highlighting a host of collected YPAR case studies, Cammarota and Fine (2010) assert that in regard to students identified as high risk, "the standard school system was failing them; they were doing poorly in their classes and were planning to drop out. However, the YPAR project in which they participated inspires new meanings of education" (p. 10). By engaging in revolutionary projects, students are able to not only transform their own lives, but the world that we all inhabit as well.

Students of Color as Educational Leaders

Although youth participatory action research (YPAR) offers promise in building capacity for leadership, a gap in the research literature exists. However, in recent years, many scholars have been homing in on the untapped potential of YPAR. Utilizing a critical historical activity

theoretical framework (CHAT) (Vygotsky, 1978), Bertrand (2018) explores the possibilities Students of Color hold in repositioning themselves as leaders through the conditions YPAR methodologies create. Over a five-month period, Bertrand (2018) conducted a YPAR study with Students of Color in Arizona, meeting with students once a week, for a total of 18 meetings. Throughout the project students learned about Community Cultural Wealth and explored fictional stories that uplifted the intersecting identities of race, ethnicity, immigration, and social class. Through facilitated discussion, the YPAR program selected bullying as related to race and LGBTQIA identities as a focal point for their research. Students then conducted interviews and disseminated surveys with adults and students, capturing the process through video so that they could present their findings to teachers and administrators at the end of the year (Bertrand, 2018). Bertrand points out that in the student's presentation to the faculty,

the students called for teachers and administrators to make concrete changes at the school, including providing training for teachers and students and hiring a counselor so that students would have a safe space to talk about bullying. Thus, even if faculty had considered YPAR to be simply a curricular program, during the presentation the youth made clear their intention for the research findings to lead to changes in the school. (p. 375)

Furthermore, Bertrand's 2018 study revealed how "students within the YPAR program (re)positioned themselves as leaders through the production and presentation of intersectional research about bullying as related to both racism and homophobia" (p. 387). Bertrand's 2018 study not only adds to a growing body of literature on the possibilities that the conditions YPAR creates for Students of Color to be leaders in educational research, it also revealed contradictory sentiments among adults. Although Bertrand (2018) found that most adults in the school

expressed vocal support of the student's research, she also discovered that they often discounted the student's knowledge or ability to contribute to school decision-making processes in any meaningful way. Bertrand's 2018 study served as both a road map for this research project as well as provided a cautionary tale in how the youth co-researchers would be perceived by school adults. In essence, the messaging was clear: brace for pushback.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I sought to answer the following question: what can we learn from the literature about how to learn from and understand, in their own words, the educational experiences of African American, Latinx, and Indigenous students that are often silenced or pushed out? Although the school-to-prison pipeline, high school dropout, and student voice have all been explored extensively, there is still a gap in the research when it comes to amplifying the narratives of the students currently participating in alternative high school pathways, through their own words, using a Youth Participatory Action Research methodology. YPAR studies conducted with students who have been labeled as "high risk" are especially lacking. This study seeks to fill this gap in research by using a conceptual framework that merges Critical Youth Studies and Critical Race Theory. The purpose of this research project is to amplify the voices of Students of Color, specifically African American and Latinx youth, through participatory action research to inform strategic planning and policy surrounding school programming and the opportunity gap.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

There are risks and costs to a program of action. But they are far less than the long-range risks and costs of comfortable inaction.

— John F. Kennedy

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to amplify the voices of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students currently enrolled at an alternative school by engaging them in a process of inquiry and action that allowed them to share their experiences, develop counter narratives to dominant, deficit-based views, and share the new knowledge they created as educational leaders and decision makers. This was accomplished using a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methodology.

Restatement of the Research Questions

This research project provided an inquiry into the experiences of students who were currently enrolled at an alternative school and participating in a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project.

The research question was:

RQ1: What can educational stakeholders learn from students enrolled in an alternative school about how to disrupt the STPP through the improvement of school policy and programming in an AEC?

Researcher positionality

Insider

The first time I was put on a positive behavior plan I was in the first grade. Nearly every subsequent year I was suspended at least once. Toward the end of eighth grade I was expelled

from school. During my time as an expelled student, I took two city buses across town to attend a small expulsion school. In a city that was mostly White, I was the only White student in my class. When I returned to traditional high school, I only made it six weeks before I was removed from school again and subsequently returned to the expulsion school. Ultimately, I had crossed a threshold and decided to drop out of high school and receive my General Education Diploma (GED). As teenage parents, my Mom and Dad had also decided to drop out of high school and received GEDs. Thus, my own first-hand experiences with public education provided me a front row seat to the inequities that persist in our country's education system. Although I did not know it at the time, I was in the pipeline. However, even though I am a former high school dropout and first-generation college student, I recognize that I am still an outsider in many ways. My experiences of rising from high school dropout to doctoral candidate may resonate with the trials and tribulations many African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students face in the educational system, but it is also imperative that I acknowledge the inherent privilege of being a White, heterosexual, male, now middle class, doctoral student.

Outsider

Both my career and academic successes have played a strong role in the development of my identity. However, I also recognize that my ability to persist despite the odds is inextricably linked to inherent privileges that I have received as a White male. Although the YCRs and I all have first-hand experience in navigating the school-to-prison pipeline, there are elements of their lived experiences that I cannot attest for or speak to. Furthermore, during this research project I was an employee of the school district in which the study was conducted. Although I was not a teacher or administrator at the research site, there was still an unequal level of power and privilege at play throughout the project. As a White male outsider in a position of power, I was

fully aware of the potential risk my role as researcher and course facilitator had in devolving into colonizer. Historically, research has often maintained an emic positionality; dehumanizing research participants as subjects, while also benefiting the researcher and research at the expense of historically marginalized communities (Kubik, 1996). In an effort to mitigate the potential of any harm coming from this study, specific steps were taken to reflect on my own inherent power and privilege, and by taking action *with* the youth co-researchers.

Navigating power and privilege. Negotiating the terms of my own power and privilege as well as the dynamics of working with YCRs was an ongoing process throughout this study. To navigate the dynamics of power and privilege, I engaged in a process of continuous reflection through writing in a field log. Stemming from the work of cultural anthropologists (Davies, 2002; Glesne, 2016), this process is known to many researchers as reflexivity. Broadly defined, reflexivity means, “turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference” (Davies, 2002, p. 4). More specifically, reflexivity is a “critical reflection on how the researcher, research participants, setting, and research procedures interact and influence each other” (Glesne, 2016, p. 145).

Building on these definitions, this study embraced “reflexivities of discomfort” (Pillow, 2009, p. 188). Specifically, I did not use reflexivity as a way to build trustworthiness of our methods and findings. Rather, throughout the reflection process, we named emerging limitations and uncomfortable tensions that arose during the research process as a result of unequal power and privilege between the YCRs, research participants, and me. Rather than romanticize the power sharing in YPAR, this study engaged in a process of open dialogue that encouraged naming and discussing any emerging discomfort that arose as a result of conducting research with individuals who are positioned unequally in society, as well as the research itself (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009, p. 3). Specifically, prior to engaging in the research project we spent roughly

four weeks (20 program sessions) building community through class activities, field trips, and collaboratively establishing research norms, agreements, and expectations. Conversely, there are ways in which I was also able to capitalize on my power and privilege that benefited this study. For example, my position provided access to resources, as well as the space for the YCRs to present their findings and recommendations to a larger audience.

Navigating the waters of power and privilege is complex and requires constant reflexivity. It was a privilege to engage in a research process with these rising scholars and it was imperative that throughout the process I use my power to maintain transparency: calling out how the dynamics and discomfort of power and privilege will impact the research methods, findings, and recommendations.

Research Design

This qualitative research project was designed to allow African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students enrolled at an Alternative Education Campus (AEC) to have the opportunity to explore their environment and highlight their experiences. The youth involved in this research project all opted into the project to receive elective honors credit and had the opportunity to opt out at any time during the project for any reason. Youth who opted-in conducted a mini-research project investigating a problem of practice relevant to their school's programming. Together, we co-analyzed the findings and the YCRs presented their findings to school administration and other stakeholders with the goal of improving programming at their school. Additionally, this research project was designed so that I may have the opportunity to observe and reflect with students throughout the process. In order to conduct a youth participatory action research project (YPAR), a Student Leadership Team and Student Leadership Class was developed, and we began building relationships and organizing during November 2019. A core group of four

students became the Youth Co-Research Team; co-leading in the design, data collection, and analysis of the YPAR project. By staying true to the key tenets of YPAR, I was able to create a space that allowed the YCRs to lead in the collection and sharing of student narratives, the new knowledge co-created, the analysis of data, and the sharing of recommendations with a wider educational community. Additionally, using a critical ethnographic approach, I observed the students conducting YPAR over a six-month period, exploring both their written and verbal interactions in depth.

Research Methodology

Informed by Critical Race Methodology (Solorzano & Losso, 2002), critical education theorists (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), and Critical Youth Studies (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), this study sought to counter the silencing of students in alternative education spaces and to amplify their voices through a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project (Cammarota & Fine, 2010). Specifically, this study focused on the educational experiences of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students and their perceptions of alternative school programming. Based on the counternarratives generated by students who are currently enrolled at an AEC, this study offers insight and recommendations for increasing equity in AEC programming.

Research Methods

In this research project, the selected methods attempted to illuminate the power structures in the current education system that both benefit and oppress certain communities, as well as attempted to disrupt traditional research practices that benefit dominant groups in society, while excluding voices of the marginalized. In this section I will outline how the research was guided by qualitative research methods. I will also discuss and justify how and why this study utilized

qualitative methods nested within YPAR methodologies to both amplify and authentically represent student voices.

Qualitative research methods. As Creswell (2013) posits, although the process of conducting quantitative and qualitative data may be similar in some regards, qualitative research methods differ in that they rely on text and image data and have unique steps in the data analysis phase of scholarly inquiry. Specifically, qualitative research seeks to capture people's experiences and perceptions in ways that quantitative data cannot. Qualitative research does not seek to generalize findings based on a multitude of data collected. Instead, qualitative research utilizes "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) to seek a better understanding of people's nuanced perspectives from a particular time and place. Although initially developed by philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949), thick description was popularized in qualitative research by Clifford Geertz. Geertz (1973) defines thick description by contrasting it with thin description: a thin description of people or events provides only surface level observations, whereas a thick description also adds context. Thus, this study focused not only on observing students enrolled in an AEC, but also the context of their lives.

Rationale for qualitative research methods. In an effort to present a thick description of the educational experiences of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students enrolled at an AEC, as well as their perceptions of the educational system, qualitative methods were selected. There is a current deficit of research on the experiences of Students of Color—especially African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students—written from their perspectives. In light of this, it was imperative to gather data on their lived experiences in ways that were meaningful, in-depth, and captured the essence of their educational experiences in their own words. Specifically, I employed qualitative research methodologies, including: the collection and

analysis of field notes, reflections, semi-structured interviews, and photovoice. All of these qualitative research methodologies will be elaborated on later in this chapter.

Furthermore, a qualitative methodological approach was selected due to the focus of the research questions on a specific population. This research project was centered on youth who were currently enrolled in an AEC. Thus, this was not a generalizable study. Rather than present the students as statistics, this study sought to share their counternarratives of the education system and to amplify their lived experiences in their own words. In the past, qualitative methods have been utilized, “to pathologize, exoticize, objectify, and name as deficient communities of color and other marginalized populations in the U.S. and beyond, and at best, to take and gain through research, but not give back” (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. xvi). However, by embracing a YPAR methodological approach to research, this study sought to decolonize and humanize research methodologies.

Rationale for Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). YPAR methods call for the intensive participation of youth co-researchers throughout the entire process of data collection, analysis, and the reporting of results. Qualitative research methods have historically employed an etic approach to research and view of culture. An etic approach is data gathering by cultural outsiders that also yields questions posed by outsiders (Kubik, 1996). The overarching issue of employing an etic perspective in research is that far too often, as Solórzano and Yosso (2009) assert, the experiences of marginalized communities are often interpreted and explained by dominant paradigms and cultures. The resulting etic perspective in research poses the risk of being misleading, inaccurate, and deficit-based. YPAR is an approach to research praxis that is rooted in social justice, occurs in explicitly politicized contexts, and is designed to enhance the

development of youth co-researchers in service of progressive social change (Cammarota & Fine, 2010).

Stovall (2013) argues that in YPAR, researchers must get ‘close’ to the work (p. 292). In order to address the research question(s), the data collection and analysis processes were collaboratively designed with youth co-researchers (YCRs). Although I facilitated the research process, YCRs decided “what was significant, how it was significant, and how it should be discussed” (Pizarro, 1999, p. 56). By using YPAR methods, the YCRs collectively designed the research and maintained agency throughout each stage of the process. As we collaboratively interpreted the findings, the YCRs held authority over the narratives that were explored and shared in the research. Since the primary purpose of this study was to amplify the voices of students enrolled at an AEC by engaging them in the research process, developing counter narratives, and to share the new knowledge they create as educational leaders and decision makers, it was determined that the youth this study sought to advocate for should be the same youth that lead the data collection and analysis.

Although detractors may refute the involvement of youth participation in the research process as undermining research validity, I argue the contrary and believe that the involvement of youth as co-constructors of knowledge throughout the research process strengthens the trustworthiness and validity of the study’s findings. The youth co-researchers and I did not operate with the intention of escaping our biases or subjectivities through the selection of our research methods. Rather, we named them and embraced them. As a White, male outsider, I approach research with a particular lens, which impacted how I analyzed and interpreted the data. However, the YCRs were enrolled in the same school community the research was conducted and share in some of the life experiences and backgrounds as the students who

participated in the student-led interviews. By employing an emic, or insider, approach to the methods of investigation, this study placed the perspectives and interpretations of youth at the vanguard. Thus, by engaging youth as co-researchers in the qualitative data collection and analysis process, both the study and the trustworthiness of the findings were strengthened. In the next section I will describe the YCRs and participants in this study.

Setting

Multiple Pathways

The Multiple Pathways program was created in 2009 in an effort to reduce the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate (Personal Communication, 2019). After the initial proposal, three Alternative Education Campuses (AECs) were opened to better meet the needs of students who did not fit into a traditional high school setting. Since 2009, the school district's Multiple Pathways program has grown into more than a dozen AECs and programs across the district that are all designed for student re-engagement and dropout prevention. As a result, great strides have been made in decreasing the high school dropout rate. However, the school district's dropout rate remains at 4.1 percent, nearly double the state average (CDE, 2019).

Since the inception of the Multiple Pathways program, many of the schools have lost sight of the original mission and vision. Specifically, the original Pathways schools implemented an interview process for students who were interested in attending. The original intent of the interview process was not to deny students entry. Rather, the interview process was used as a tool to get to know students and to allow them to feel that they had received the privilege of being accepted (Personal Communication, 2019). However, the interview process has now become a tool that has been used by school administrators to deny enrollment to students that they do not think will fit into the current school culture. Several times throughout this research

project, the principal of UMA had expressed that students who are “culture killers” are often denied enrollment. AECs were developed throughout the U.S. as a safe space for “culture killers” to receive an equitable education. Denying students enrollment not only raises questions about current academic achievement and discipline data, but also raises concerns about the overall mission and efficacy of Pathway schools.

Urban Mountain Academy

This research project took place at an urban middle and high school in the Rocky Mountain West, which I call Urban Mountain Academy (UMA; a pseudonym). According to Colorado Department of Education (CDE; 2018), during the 2017-2018 school year the enrollment of UMA included 62 middle school students and 163 high school students. Overall, there were four Asian students, four Black students, 13 White Students, 202 Latinx Students, one student who identified as two or more races, and one Native American student. 114 of the students identified as female and 111 of the students identified as male. For the past three years, UMA has received a “green” rating, per the State Department of Education performance review, which is the highest academic rating a school can receive in Colorado. Similar to other public schools in the area, UMA has a full-time restorative justice coordinator and from 2017 to 2018 the number of suspensions fell from 16 to 4.

UMA is located in an under-resourced, primarily Latinx and Vietnamese working-class neighborhood. Within a few blocks of the school, several abandoned strip malls with boarded up windows line the street, surrounded by apartment buildings and single-family homes. UMA’s current principal, who was recently promoted from assistant principal to principal, is seeking to improve the school culture and maintain the student academic achievement levels that had been accomplished by the previous principal. As part of that effort, he signed onto the school district’s

“Opportunity Gap Cohort,” which made the development of a student leadership team and this project possible. UMA has limited elective course options for students but does offer enrichment and academic tutoring courses. Additionally, students who are enrolled at UMA have access to concurrent enrollment courses and vocational certification programs offered through the school district.

Student Leadership Team

The specific setting for this research project was a Student Leadership Program which was implemented as an Honor Levels Student Leadership class at Urban Mountain Academy (UMA). In my role as Program Specialist with the school district’s Opportunity Gap cohort initiative, I was able to leverage my position in the development of the program. For six months, students met every day during second period. Throughout the duration of the program, students explored their cultural identity and history, as well as developed an understanding of implicit biases, stereotyping, and structural and institutionalized oppression affecting African American Indigenous, and Latinx students. The program was experiential in nature and in addition to studying issues relevant to their lives, the YCRs went on field trips to the Colorado State Capitol, local colleges and universities, a news station, and a youth-led political rally. Moreover, YCRs received academic, social, and emotional support to enhance their college and career readiness. The program offered a transformative learning space that centered youth voice and agency through the development of a stronger sense of community and by collaboratively navigating educational spaces.

Participants and Selection of Research Team

Through my school support position at UMA and the opportunity gap programs within the district, I gained access to the research site and was able to develop the Student Leadership

Program with full support from school and district administrators. I was a district employee embedded full-time at the school developing a dropout reengagement program prior to the development of the research project. Using a snowball sampling technique (Handcock et al., 2011), I initially requested lists of potential co-researchers from teachers, other school staff, and students. The initial recommendations were based on students' observed leadership aptitude, engagement in class, and their interest in being involved in an action research project.

18 African American, Indigenous, and Latinx youth were identified as potential co-researchers. Due to transportation limitations for experiential learning opportunities, the list was then reduced to ten students. In an effort to ensure gender equality among the co-researcher team, an equal number of youths who identify as male and female were selected. Prior to the course beginning, two students were pulled from the course because they had failed a course the previous term and the recovery option occurred during the same period. Once the course began, an additional four students opted out. Out of the four youths ultimately selected, two identified as male, two identified as female, two identified as Latinx, one identified as African American, and one identified as Native American. They ranged in age from 15 to 18. All of the youth in the Student Leadership Program were active participants throughout the research design, implementation, analysis of the findings, and presentation of the results. The YCRs conducted semi-structured interviews and selected their own participants, therefore bringing the total number of participants to eight. Each participant also signed an informed consent form and was provided the opportunity to opt out at any time, for any reason. Out of the four youth participants, one identified as Japanese/Latinx, one identified as White, one identified as Native American, and one identified as Latinx. Three identified as male, one identified as female, and they ranged in age from 16 to 19.

The team named the research group “Social Justice Panthers.” The research team described choosing “Social Justice Panthers” as their name because they felt it described their identity at UMA. Once the program began, we collaboratively developed ground rules and formed consensus on course expectations. Table 1 highlights our agreements, norms, ground rules, and outlines our expectations for course participation. Table 2 and Table 3 summarize the YCR’s demographics and observed characteristics. Table 4 and Table 5 summarize the YP’s demographics and observed characteristics.

Table 3.1

Agreements/Norms/Ground Rules and Consensus on Meeting Participation

Agreements/Norms/Ground Rules	Consensus on Course Participation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One Mic • Be empathetic • Be accountable to the team- if you say you will do something, do it! • Be respectful • Step up, step back • What happens in YPAR, stays in YPAR • Practice self-love 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be on time • Be prepared • Be engaged • Make up any missed work

Table 3.2

Summary of Youth Co-Researchers’ Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Aspirations
Maximus Excalibur	18	<i>M</i>	<i>African American</i>	Maximus would like to be the first person in his family to graduate high school and then go on to college to play softball and study theatre.

Zoe G.	16	F	<i>Native American</i>	Zoe is completing high school early. She plans on taking concurrent enrollment courses during her senior year and then taking advantage of the ASCENT program during a fifth year.
Jasmine Martinez	16	F	<i>Latinx</i>	After high school, Jasmine hopes to study nursing or become a dental hygienist.
Antonio	15	M	<i>Latinx</i>	Antonio is a sophomore in high school. He is still undecided about college but has started to think about someday becoming lawyer.

Table 3.3

Summary of Youth Co-Researchers Observed Characteristics

Maximus Excalibur	<p>Maximus is one of the most resilient students that I have ever met. He has bounced from state to state and school to school. A year before this project, his mom moved out of state and he was living with friends. During the project, he experienced homelessness and was living at a shelter for teens. He had a lot of anger issues which would lead to fits of rage expressed toward students, teachers, and administrators. Maximus was born Maxine. During his sophomore year in high school, he transitioned from female to male, which seemed to help with some of the anger issues. He still presented as female, so he still faced a lot of mislabeling. During the duration of this study, he wore a bracket which would cause a lot of physical pain. Despite all of the curve balls life has thrown at him, he presses forward dreaming of attending college, studying theatre, playing softball, and some day getting a top surgery. Maximus is boisterous and outgoing, and I could always count on him to share his opinion.</p>
Zoe G.	<p>Zoe is an extremely dedicated and loving student. Zoe truly loves all students regardless of their race, ethnicity, ability, or sexual orientation. She is mixed race and identifies as “everything.” Her last name is a common Latin American name. Because of her self-identification and last name, it was several weeks into the Leadership Program before I learned that she was the one percent Native American student population at UMA. Zoe’s love for everyone was second only to her love for animals. Her ADHD often caused her thoughts to race, but she has the memory of elephant and was always able to focus when the time came. Her artistic side benefited the group in the creation of our community event flier and in the direction of our Photovoice project. She was one of the most dependable youth co-researchers on the team, often getting to class before me. The only time she missed was when she went on a fieldtrip to Washington, D.C.</p>

Jasmine Martinez	Jasmine is extremely introverted on the surface. However, as I got to know her more, I learned that when she is not at school, she maintains two active VLOGs. One of Jasmine’s greatest struggles was getting to class on time. Throughout the entire duration of the project, she was never on time. However, she also almost never missed class and followed through on all of her commitments. When she did miss school, it was always for something trivial like, “she had a hair appointment.” Throughout Jasmine’s entire educational experience, she never learned about her cultural heritage. Nonetheless, she is very family oriented and loves all things Latinx. As we explored Chicano studies, it was clear she had an unrelenting thirst to know more. She was a strong proponent of our policy proposal for all schools to offer an ethnic studies course.
Antonio	Antonio was my first friend at UMA. He was always polite and respectful, but also very reserved and quiet. On one of my first days at the school, I sat down with him while he was quietly eating lunch. Although he was quiet, I could see the leadership potential in him, and it was on that day that he became my first co-researcher recruit. From the first day I met him, and increasingly so throughout the duration of the project, it was clear that Antonio did not belong in an alternative school. Indeed, I learned later that the only reason he was at UMA was that he lived close and when he moved from out of state, his cousin who also attends UMA, recommended it. It was often difficult to push Antonio out of his comfort zone and to share an opinion. Throughout the duration of the project, though, he grew both academically and socially. As the youngest youth co-researcher on the team, I am thrilled that he will be able to lead as the pilot project grows into a formal leadership program.

Table 3.4

Summary of Youth Participants’ Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Aspirations
Lizzy	18	Female	White	Lizzy wants to graduate high school and take care of her daughter.
Futoshi	18	Male	Japanese/Mexican	Mr. Purple wants to be an artist or insurance agent.
Novio	19	Male	Latinx	Novio wants to graduate high school and then go to college to study business.
Jerry G.	15	Male	Native American	He’s still working on identifying what he

				wants to do next in life.
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Table 3.5

Summary of Youth Participant Observed Characteristics. Drafted by Youth Co-Researchers.

Lizzy	Lizzy is goofy and super outgoing. Her spunky attitude is matched by her spunky hair. She had a baby at a young age, but she tries her best to keep up academically. She lives with her older brother and went through some pretty serious trauma this year that involved the cops coming to school and really pissed off her brother. During lunch, she often leaves school so she can get in a quick cigarette. Even though she has been through so much, she still shows up every day with a smile on her face.
Futoshi	Futoshi is comical and extroverted. At school he is always amusing. Even though he takes his education (and basketball) seriously, he is also relaxed. When he is relaxed, he is straight chilling. He is a great artist, but he is also practical. The insurance agent dream might seem like a weird choice, but it is what his mom does, and it seems like something that he would be into.
Novio	Novio is quiet and introverted. However, once you get to know him a little more you realize how honest and funny he is. At school, he is collaborative and his dedication to relationships is inspiring. He spent some time living in the mountains, where he was able to get ahead in a lot of his high school requirements. Because of that, he only had to come to UA for two periods this year—but rarely ever missed.
Jerry G.	Jerry is one of the most brutally honest students at the school. It often gets him into tricky situations (and in arguments with his siblings). In addition to his honesty, he is also smart, witty, and funny. Even though he is still working on identifying his dream in life, he remains committed to his education.

Procedures

In this section, I will elucidate how the YCRs influenced the research procedures.

However, it is important to note that although the voices of the YCRs influenced the research

questions, analysis, and recommendations, research boundaries were established. Boundaries were included to ensure that the purpose of the study remained unchanged, that the semi-structured interview questions did not deviate from the purpose of the study, and that the research remained qualitative in nature with field notes, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, photovoice, and reflections serving as the primary research instruments. Mirra et al. (2016) posit that adults establishing boundaries within YPAR does not take away the agency of the youth participants. Further elaborating on this position, they state, “setting young people off on a research project without access to the resources, knowledge, and relationships that adults can provide can do a disservice to YPAR by denying students the necessary tools to reap the full benefits (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 39). By establishing boundaries with the YCRs, I was able to provide students with the necessary resources and support to develop their skills as leaders and researchers, as well as the ability to complete the YPAR and the opportunity to take action on our findings.

Research Phases

Informed by the work of Andrade & Morrell (2008) and the Youth Activism Project (2018), this YPAR project was separated into nine phases, as outlined in Figure 3.1. Although the project is presented as a linear process here, it is important to note that our process for collecting, analyzing, and summarizing the data was more iterative in nature.

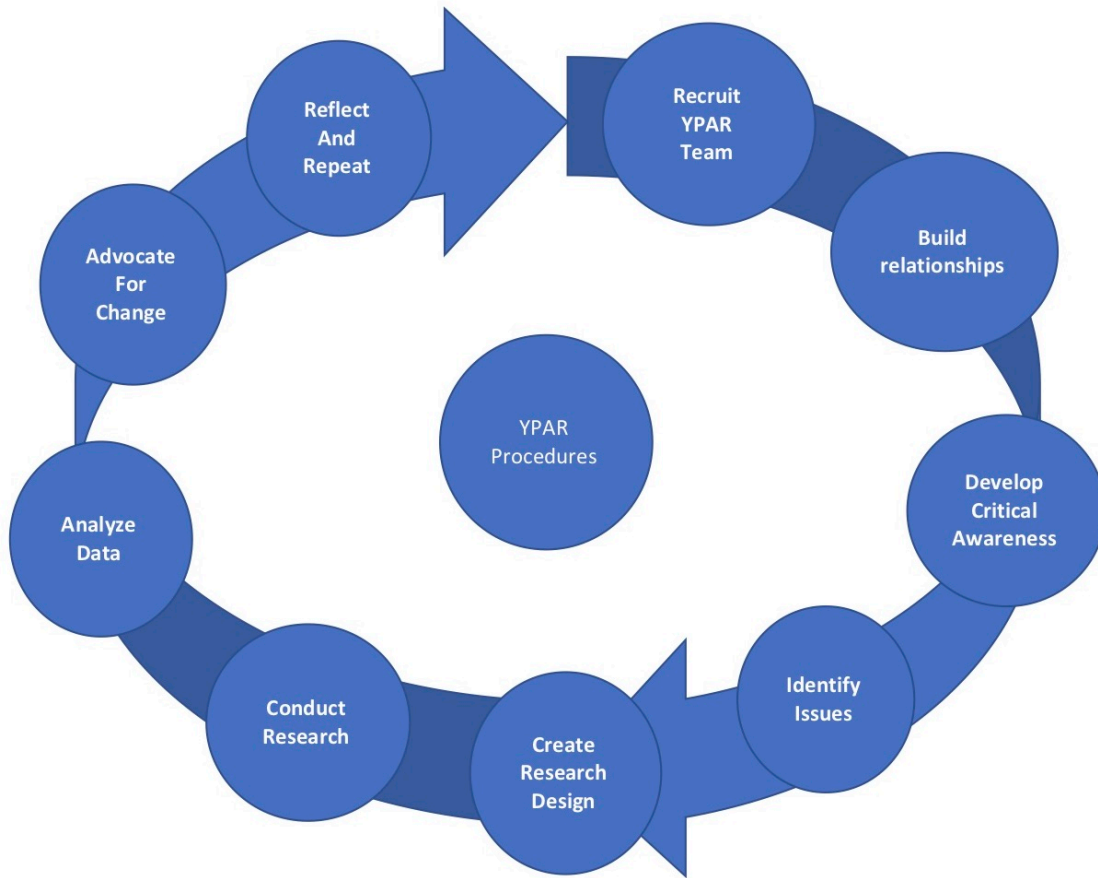


Figure 3.1. YPAR Procedures. Informed by the work of Andrade and Morrell (2008) and adapted from the Youth Activism Project (2018), this figure outlines the nine phases of the research project

During phase one, using a snowball sampling technique, I recruited YCRs into the YPAR program. I first spoke with teachers, school support, and administrators to inquire about who they thought would be strong candidates to assist in piloting a Student Leadership program. YCRs were selected based on their aptitude and willingness to participate in the research project. During phase two, the YCRs and I developed community among each other through team building exercises and experiential learning opportunities, as well as learning about the scope and goals of the research project. Throughout the third phase of the YPAR project, we developed a collective critical awareness through studying issues surrounding the school-to-prison pipeline

(STPP) and alternative education in Colorado. While exploring issues relevant to the STPP and alternative education, the YCRs began to narrow their focus in order to determine which issue they wanted to explore further. During phase four, the YCRs selected school engagement and culturally relevant education as our focus area and we developed a guiding research question. Throughout phase five, YCRs studied qualitative research methods and designed their research project. I had predetermined that we would conduct semi-structured interviews and the YCRs selected Photovoice as an additional method. During phase six, the YCRs conducted their YPAR project. Member checking and triangulation occurred throughout the project, but a more formal and focused analyses of the data occurred during phase seven.

All interviews conducted were transcribed, reviewed several times, coded, and put into themes. The data themes were collected into a Google sheet and a Google form was used for all of the YPAR data so that the YCRs could access the information at any time and make any necessary adjustments or revisions. During phase eight, YCRs explored ways to share their findings and we began to organize a community event to advocate for change. Although individual and group reflection occurred throughout the entire project, upon completion of the YPAR process, YCRs completed a more formal reflection process as they considered next steps for future student led research teams at UMA.

Data Collection

In this section, I delve deeper into the data collection that was conducted by the YCRs and myself. Similar to a call to action uplifted in Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), one of the key tenets of YPAR is to conduct educational research with the primary goal of creating social change (Duncan & Morrell, 2008). Additionally, it is also imperative to analyze the effect the YPAR project had on the YCRs (Camarota & Fine, 2008). In order to accomplish

both of these goals outlined in YPAR, I conducted focus groups with the YCRs participating in the Student Leadership Program before, during, and after the project to better understand their educational experiences. The YCRs and I also maintained journals throughout the project to document our reflections and gather field notes. After the YPAR project, I triangulated the data I gathered through the journals with the information I gleaned through the interviews, as well as information gathered through ongoing observations and reflections from our class meetings, in order to be able to better describe our experiences and answer the primary research question.

Instruments and measures. The primary qualitative data collection instruments included: focus groups, observations, field notes, written reflections, semi-structured interviews, and photovoice. The triangulation of the instruments added to the validity that the instruments truly measured what we intended them to and strengthened our findings. Thick description, rich data, long-term involvement, and respondent validation were strategies employed by this study to increase the credibility of our findings and the interpretations of the research (Maxwell, 2013). The YCRs and YPs brought a wealth of knowledge and experience about the school community in which the study took place. Trustworthiness in the findings was developed through a long-term commitment with the community. Additionally, through developing a thick description via observation and by gathering rich data, we were able to explore the counternarratives of the participants more meaningfully, capturing the breadth of their story nested within a particular time and place. Lastly, the selected instruments and measurements placed the experiences of youth at the center of the research. By placing student voices at the center of the research design, the youth were able to speak power and truth to their experiences that legitimized their knowledge (Smith, 2012; Solorzano & Yosso, 2009) and role as educational leaders. Through

member checking and respondent validation, we were confident that we did not distort, misinterpret, or unintentionally silence any of the voices involved in this study.

Interviews and Photovoice. The student leadership class and I chose to conduct interviews, complete a photovoice project, and maintain journals as their primary methods for data collection. Prior to interviewing other students in the school, the YCRs interviewed each other in order to better develop their interviewing skills. All additional youth participants (YPs) signed an informed consent letter and had the ability to opt out at any time for any reason. After conducting their initial round of semi-structured interviews, the students completed a photovoice project. By employing photovoice as a method, students were able to move beyond reflecting on the strengths and concerns of the school community and move toward action in an attempt to affect change (Wong & Burris, 1994). Specifically, the YCRs selected one of our emerging themes—stereotypes—as a focal point for their photovoice project. The YCRs gathered photos of their peers holding a chalkboard with a stereotype they had been labeled. The photos were set to a music video. Halfway through the song, each student was displayed again but with their dream displayed on the chalkboard instead. The goal of the photovoice project was to raise awareness about stereotyping and labeling that is experienced by students enrolled at an alternative school. The video was shared at the school and at the community event.

During the interviews, the YCRs explored the youth participants' general experiences in school as well as their perceptions of AEC programming. After each interview, we debriefed in class to discuss what went well, any feedback from the YCRs or YPs, and what we would like to do differently during the next round. During our debriefs we also conducted an initial analysis of the data and explored emerging patterns and themes. An integral piece of our data analysis included returning to interview participants to clarify their responses, ask potential follow up

questions, and member check our initial themes and findings. We also provided the opportunity for participants to discuss what they felt were the more significant pieces of their interview and what recommendations they would make for future changes to AEC programming. Each interview was recorded, uploaded onto an encrypted USB device, outsourced for transcription, and will be deleted a year after the conclusion of this research project.

YPAR Analysis

Throughout each phase of the data collection, the YCRs and I collaboratively analyzed the data. Specifically, we organized the data, summarized our findings, grouped our data into themes, and began interpreting the data (Creswell, 2013). As aforementioned, transcription was outsourced but we reviewed and discussed the content collaboratively. Three rounds of coding were completed. During the first round, I coded on my own using open source coding. The second round of coding was completed collaboratively with the YCRs. I conducted a third round of coding through the lens of Critical Race Theory. I offered initial suggestions regarding themes as they arose, and the YCRs offered their preliminary suggestions regarding themes as well. Once initial themes were selected, we collaboratively determined if the data fit into the theoretical codes and categories we developed. Additionally, we continuously returned to the interview participants to explore if we had missed anything and to ensure that we had captured the essence of the discussions. To conclude, we framed our data into a unified and coherent message that we hope will motivate our audience into action (Garcia et al., 2016).

Document Analysis

Merriam (2009) posits that documents, “uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem” (p. 163). Document collection and analysis occurred prior to, during, and after this research project. Moreover, in an effort to better

understand the context of the YCR's and YP's lived experiences and personal backgrounds, I analyzed the entries and reflections collected in their field logs (Bowen, 2009). Analysis began by skimming the documents multiple times while documenting emerging themes. Finally, using the same approach that we used with the interviews, the content was coded and categorized into themes.

Critical Ethnography

In an effort to maintain a critical ethnographic approach to the research project, I regularly conducted observations of the school climate and culture, the staff and students, and the YCRs and YPs. I used my field log to document emerging themes and interactions I observed in meetings, the school hallways, and in the Student Leadership Course. Following a participant observation (Wolcott, 1999) protocol, I continuously engaged in conversation with staff and students. Participant observation moves the role of the researcher from an armchair observation of culture toward understanding individual actions through thick description (Geertz, 1973) and experiencing the contradictions, stakes, and social expectations that those being studied experience (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014). As Merriam (2009) posits, observation is the best technique to employ when seeking a fresh perspective of a situation, activity, or event.

Taking Action

One of the guiding principles of YPAR is that it is both transformative and activist oriented and seeks to “intervene into and transform knowledge and practices in ways that improve the lives of marginalized youth” (Rodrigues & Brown, 2009, p. 30). YPAR eclipses student voice research by pushing beyond simply providing students space by positioning youth as agents of change (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Throughout the Student Leadership program, YCRs developed community organizing skills and homed in on their abilities to share their call

to action through social media and public speaking. Similar to the work of Mirra et al. (2016), and explored further in Chapter Four, the YCRs in this research project created demands for educational change and provided a single recommendation and concrete steps that everyone at the school can take.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Validity and trustworthiness in qualitative research are developed through long term involvement with the research subjects, as well as rich data that provides a revealing and detailed picture of processes, people, events, and situations (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, qualitative research rejects objectivity and recognizes the inherent biases and subjectivities that researchers bring to their work. Validity, therefore, is not measured by a researcher's ability to employ methods to remove their bias, since that is impossible. Instead, as Maxwell (2013) explains, "qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding how a particular researcher's values and expectations may have influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study...and avoiding the negative consequences of these" (p. 124). Therefore, validity of qualitative research stems from the researcher's ability to reflect on their inherent biases and to be transparent about any implications their biases may have had on their research. To summarize, qualitative methods seek a thick and revealing description of people, their experiences, and perceptions—bound within a specific time and place, while also naming and recognizing subjectivity and bias.

Pilot Program

In addition to amplifying the voices of students enrolled in an alternative school to improve programming at AECs through YPAR, the purpose of this project was to serve as a pilot program. Specifically, the scale of this implementation was small by design in order to first demonstrate the viability of including youth as co-researchers and educational leaders before

scaling out to additional schools and programs. By conducting this project as a pilot program, I was able to confirm that the project was ready for full-scale implementation, gauge the target population's reaction to the program, improve decision making processes in regard to allocating time and resources, and measure the success of the program. Although this research project occurred over a six-month period, the goal of the project was that it continues at the research site and at other schools in subsequent years. To accomplish this, a veteran teacher who expressed potential interest in taking over the Student Leadership Course was identified. I then reached out to the district's Student Voice and Leadership (SVL) department to build a relationship. In the winter of 2019, I organized and hosted a meeting between SVL, the school principal, the teacher, and myself. At the meeting we discussed developing a formal partnership between UMA and SVL. By connecting UMA and SVL, I was able to ensure that youth at UMA will continue to have access to an honors-level Student Leadership course as well as ensure that the voices of students enrolled at alternative schools have more access to district resources and are represented on the district's Student Board of Education (SBOE). Lastly, a dissemination plan was developed in order to scale out the program. This is explored further in Chapter Four and Five.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout each phase of this research project, it was imperative that both the quality and integrity of the research were maintained. All of the YCRs and YPs in the research project signed informed consent letters. Parental or guardian consent was obtained for all minors who participated in the research. Sensitive topics, such as oppression, racism, phobias, and gender equality, were explored in this research project, but no harm was intended and the YCRs and YPs were made fully aware that participation was voluntary, and that they could discontinue the study and involvement in the Student Leadership Program at any time for any reason. Both the

YCRs and YPs shared their personal experiences. If any of the sensitive topics explored triggered the students, they had access to me, mentors, the school psychologist, and the school social worker.

Chapter Conclusion

To conclude, this YPAR highlighted the counternarratives of the lives of students currently enrolled at an AEC. By providing space for the YCRs and YPs to lead and collectively engage in the research process, it was the aim of this research project to promote growth among all co-researchers and participants. Furthermore, YCRs enrolled at an AEC engaged in college-level research, which hopefully increased the power and value of their voice, academic achievement, agency, and helped redefine traditional definitions of leadership. Additionally, I utilized a critical ethnographic framework to explore the educational and lived experiences of the YCRs and participants. Ultimately, this collaborative and participatory action research project lead to personal and academic growth for all of us, and lead to the recommendation of concrete and actionable steps for educational stakeholders to consider in creating more equitable academic pathways for every student.

Chapter Four: Results

This project took place at Urban Mountain Academy (UMA), a small alternative education campus (AEC) in an urban community in the Rocky Mountain West. In an effort to authentically gather data and capture the voices of students currently enrolled at an AEC, this six-month youth participatory action research (YPAR) project engaged four youth co-researchers (YCRs) (see Table 3.2) through a pilot student leadership program. After researching other YPAR group names, the YCRs voted and selected the group name Social Justice Panthers, reporting that it best represented their commitment to the school. The Social Justice Panthers were tasked with developing a collective critical consciousness through exploring disparities in education, sharing their own stories and experiences with the education system, and designing a research project to explore their peers' experiences and perceptions of the education system.

The four YCRs selected their own participants (see Table 3.4), opting to ask friends and family out of ease of familiarity and ability to obtain informed consent, bringing the total number of youths involved to eight. At the beginning of the pilot Student Leadership Class I conducted a focus group with the youth to begin exploring their general education experiences. After we built relationships and grew our collective critical consciousness through an exploration of disparities in education and the criminal justice system, our research team developed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix). I used the interview protocol to interview each YCR. Each YCR also conducted an interview with a Youth Participant (YP) using the interview protocol. Additionally, the YCRs completed a photovoice project which was showcased as a slideshow in a music video. Throughout the course of the pilot project, both the YCRs and YPs went on field trips to multiple universities, a Greta Thunberg rally, a local news station, and attended a state assembly session. At the conclusion of the project, I conducted an additional focus group to learn

more about both the YCRs and YPs experience in participating in a YPAR project. In total, two focus groups, eight interviews, and a photovoice project were completed. The class met for an hour every day, Monday through Friday, from November 11th to March 13th 2020. At the conclusion of the pilot project, it was our intent to bring youth leaders from five schools together to share their recommendations for bridging the opportunity gap and increasing equity through programming at Pathway schools. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all in-person events at high schools and universities were canceled throughout the remainder of the school year. Instead, findings and recommendations were shared through online platforms with district leaders, school leaders, professors, and the youths' families.

In this chapter, I present the results from the analysis of the qualitative data collected for the study (journal reflections, focus groups, interviews, and photovoice). Review and analysis of these data sources provided insight into answering the following research question: What can educational stakeholders and policy actors learn from students enrolled in an alternative school about how to disrupt the STPP through the improvement of school policy and programming in an AEC? At the beginning of the pilot project, after spending two weeks building relationships with the YCRs, I conducted a focus group with the team to begin to narrow the focus of our YPAR project. During the focus group, I explored the team's general experiences in education, enrollment, curriculum, discipline, and any initial recommendations they had for improving programming in alternative schools (see Appendix X). The findings that emerged from the focus group informed the direction of our project and, subsequently, the semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix X) that we co-developed. The interview protocol was utilized for interviews that I conducted with the YCRs and for the interviews that the YCRs conducted with the YPs. Using an open coding approach, I manually conducted the first round of coding on my

own. The second round of coding also used an open coding approach but was conducted collaboratively with the YCRs. Each YCR manually coded every interview, member checking throughout the process. I then manually conducted a third round of coding through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado, 2001). Using an inductive approach, we coded for patterns to determine codes (Saldana, 2005). The codes were then discerned into categories and placed into themes.

Findings

Four categories emerged from the qualitative data gathered: (a) relationships, (b) culture and ethnicity, (c) discipline, and (d) labels and stereotypes. Table 4.1 displays the categories, theme-related components, themes and connections to CRT.

Table 4.1.

Categories, Theme-Related Components, Themes, and Connections to Critical Race Theory

Categories	Theme-Related Components	Themes	Connection to Critical Race Theory
Relationships	<p>Youth who transferred to UMA from a traditional school all reported that their relationships with staff at UMA are much stronger than they were at their previous school(s).</p> <p>Both youth who had attended another school and those who had not, reported that their favorite thing at UMA was how close they were with faculty and staff.</p> <p>YCRs reported that staff and faculty were involved in their lives both in and outside of school.</p>	Close relationships with school staff and faculty contributed to an increase in youth sense of belonging and increased youth engagement.	A 100 percent White teaching staff at a school that serves 97 percent Students of Color can be viewed as an interest convergence (Bell, 1987). An all-White teaching staff building close relationships with a nearly all-Students of Color student body may advance the post-secondary readiness of the students but converges with and advances White interests in maintaining current racial inequities in education.
Stereotypes and Labeling	None of the YCRs or YPs at UMA were aware that they were attending an alternative school or what that meant.	Youth are more than a label.	Ethnic and racial stereotypic traits are used to justify (Solorzano, 1997):

	<p>YCRs and YPs reported disdain and disgust with being labeled “high-risk” or “at-risk.”</p> <p>YCRs and YPs shared their lived experiences with negative stereotypes.</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Low career and academic expectations; b. Placing Students of color in separate schools or classes; c. Remediating curriculum; d. Maintaining school and community segregation.
Culture and Ethnicity	<p>No YCR or YP reported having more than one teacher throughout their entire educational experience who was a Person of Color. Some reported that they had never had a teacher who was a Person of Color.</p> <p>YCRs and YPs reported that they rarely felt that their culture was highlighted and/or uplifted in classroom curriculum and selected literature.</p> <p>No YCR or YP knew what ethnic studies is. None reported ever having access to an ethnic studies course.</p>	Students do not have access to teachers like them or courses and class materials that represent their ethnicity or uplift their culture.	<p>Racism is ordinary and in settings where Whites dominate, being White is not noteworthy (Dalton, 1995; Solorzano, 1997)</p> <p>Ethnic studies can serve as a tool for Students of Color to claim property ownership and inclusion in schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Orozco, 2011).</p>
Discipline	<p>Youth who had attended traditional schools shared experiences of ambiguous discipline protocols that they felt pushed students out of the classroom.</p> <p>Both YCRs and YPs reported positive experiences with UMA’s Restorative Justice protocol.</p> <p>All youth reported negative experiences with the current UMA Dean’s panoptic approach to school discipline.</p>	Participation in Restorative Justice conferences contributed to an increase in youth sense of belonging and increased youth engagement.	Microaggressions that occur within academic spaces have an adverse impact on the culture of the school and the academic and social life of students (Solorzano, 2000). However, Restorative Justice creates a platform for Students of Color to develop counter spaces and for the survivors of institutional racism to find their voice.

The following findings are presented by theme and answer the research question: What can educational stakeholders and policy actors learn from students enrolled in an alternative school about how to disrupt the STPP through the improvement of school policy and programming in an AEC?

Theme One: Close Relationships with School Staff and Faculty Contributed to an Increase in Youth Sense of Belonging and Increased Youth Engagement

Bascia and Maton (2016) explored how alternative education teachers are able to be innovative and maintain cultural responsiveness within the confines, bureaucracy, and prescriptions of public education in Toronto, Canada. In a similar way, this study found that teachers at UMA are able to maintain a loose coupling with traditional structures and less bureaucratic oversight, and are able to be more responsive to their students' needs. Additionally, UMA maintains a small student population and many of the classes have between five and twenty students. By offering small class sizes and personalized curriculum, both teachers and support staff at UMA are able to build stronger and more meaningful relationships with the students.

During the initial focus group and the semi-structured interviews, both YCRs and YPs were asked about student-teacher relationships and how those relationships may or may not have been different at UMA compared to previous schools they had attended. During the focus group Maximus highlighted his experience:

There's a great support system here. Everyone really supports you. People can say that about bigger high schools and stuff but you can see, like, the real impact that they're making on students. They're always checking in on you. They're always checking to

make sure you're doing your work. It doesn't matter where your grades are at, they just want to make sure you're good. (Focus Group, November 18th, 2019)

During an interview, Antonio asked Futoshi about his relationship with teachers at his previous school, Futoshi expressed, "I felt like they did not give—like they did not care as much about their students as teachers are supposed to. I just did not feel like they were trying to help us learn in the most beneficial ways" (YCR Interview, January 19th, 2020). In regard to teachers at UMA, during another interview, Jerry G. stated, "I have only known them [teachers] for one semester, and I already feel like I have a greater connection with them than many of the other teachers that I have had in my entire education. My entire twelve years of education" (YCR Interview, January 21, 2020). In a written reflection Zoe declared, "I was so lucky to have the amazing staff at UMA; they were there for me through everything. They even came to my grandpa's funeral for which I will be forever grateful" (YCR reflection, January 9th, 2020). Toward the end of the Student Leadership course I conducted a final member check session and Mr. Red elaborated on his position and belief that he had more one-on-one relationships with staff at UMA stating that, "the biggest difference between my experiences in Texas and here is, I just feel like I can talk to teachers more here. I'm more comfortable with the teachers here and we have more time to talk to them, like, one-on-one" (Class Dialogue, March 12th, 2020). During the same session Lizzy explained, "when the teachers take more time to share their personal stories and struggles, it makes you more comfortable. There's no judgement and you feel more open to express yourself because you know they're not judging you" (Class Dialogue, March 12th, 2020). Similar to the literature foregrounded in Chapter Two (Bascia & Maton, 2016; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), the findings in this study suggest that less oversight and small class sizes

have served as key overarching features that have allowed teachers to take the time to build more meaningful relationships with students and to increase youth engagement.

Indeed, research clearly demonstrates that positive student-teacher relationships contribute to students feeling more secure and engaged, resulting in greater academic growth (Sleeter, 2017). Conversely, conflicts between students and teachers often lead to students being unable to connect, setting them on a trajectory towards school failure and, ultimately, the STPP (Fine, 1991; Skiba et al., 2002; Sleeter, 2017). When coding the data through the lens of CRT (Delgado, 2001), an interest convergence (Bell, 1987) began to emerge. CRT provides a framework to challenge deficit models (Solorzano, 1997) and is, “pivotal in understanding the past and present inequities in education and the larger maintenance of privilege” (Milner, 2013, p. 343). Chapman (2007) explains, “listening to students gives the teacher and the researcher the ability to reconstruct assignments, build on strengths of the event, and replace mistakes with a more culturally relevant approach that creates opportunities for empowerment” (p. 160). Findings of this project suggest that a 100 percent White teaching staff building close relationships with a 97 percent Students of Color student body may advance the post-secondary readiness of the students but converges with and advances White interests, sustaining school segregation and an all-White teaching staff.

Theme Two: Youth are More Than a Label

Shortly after I conducted an initial focus group with the YCRs, as we continued to develop our collective critical consciousness, I introduced the YCRs to the notions of the school-to-prison-pipeline (STPP), the opportunity gap, and alternative schools. None of the YCRs knew that Pathway schools were alternative schools as defined and evaluated by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE, 2019) or that 90 percent of them had been formally labeled as

“high-risk” by the CDE and the school district. In their reaction, the YCRs did not mince their words. On November 18th, 2020, I noted a few of their reactions in my field log:

“what the fuck does that mean?!?”

“Bruh, they think I am going to dropout?”

“That makes me feel like shit.”

“That’s fucked up.”

Gillborn (2015) posited that, “the majority of racism remains hidden beneath a veneer of normality and it is only the more crude and obvious forms of racism that are seen as problematic by most people” (p. 278). Furthermore, ethnic and racial stereotypic traits are used to justify (Solorzano, 1997):

- a. low career and academic expectations;
- b. placing Students of Color in separate schools or classes;
- c. remediating curriculum, and;
- d. maintaining school and community segregation.

According to U.S. Census (2019) estimates, the city this study was conducted in is 76 percent White while UMA is 97 percent Students of Color (CDE, 2019). In fact, every Pathway school throughout the district has a student composition that is majority Students of Color (2019). Further exacerbating school segregation is the normalcy in which it occurs. Thus, as it exists today, the Pathway program has allowed for a thin veneer of normalcy to drape over entire Communities of Color, labeling them as “high risk.” Although school segregation is not the focus of this study, it is important to note in relation to the YCRs racial identities how their racialized experiences have impacted their identity and well-being.

As highlighted in chapter one, AECs that provide data demonstrating that 90 percent of their students are “high-risk” receive a modified school performance framework (SPF) or school grade (CDE, 2019). Specifically, AECs Academic Achievement is weighted 15 percent less than traditional schools, Growth is weighted 5 percent less, and they have an additional Student Engagement indicator which accounts for 20 percent of the school’s overall grade (see Figure 2.1). By amending the weighting for State accountability purposes, AECs are able to focus more on providing additional support services, differentiating curriculum, and spending more time building relationships with their students in order to develop rapport and increase engagement. However, stereotypes (i.e. high-risk) have long been utilized to justify institutional and systematic treatment of Communities of Color (Solorzano, 1997). Findings in this project suggest that labeling entire communities of African American, Latinx, and Indigenous students as “high-risk” has become a “professional” way of stating that they are socially and culturally inferior to Whites (1997). My initial conversation with the YCRs surrounding stereotypes and labeling became a mainstay of our focus throughout the remainder of the year. Despite exploring other educational disparities and gaps in opportunity for students enrolled in an AEC, the YCRs selected to keep our focus on stereotypes.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, YCRs were given the option to choose an additional qualitative research method. They were allowed to choose between focus groups, qualitative surveys, or photovoice. After taking a vote, the YCRs selected photovoice (Liedenberg, 2018). The goal of the photovoice project was twofold: the YCRs wanted to engage their peers in raising awareness about current stereotypes while at the same time amplify who they and their peers really are, as well as to inspire school and district leaders to rethink using “high-risk” as a way to identify their students. I did not participate in the vote or the design

of the photovoice project. Using a chalkboard, they first asked participants to write a stereotype that they had been labeled and then took a picture. They then asked the participants to erase the stereotype and write who they really are or who they aspire to be (see Figure 3.1). The photos were then used to create a slideshow and presented as a music video. For the background music, the YCRs selected “This Is Me” by Kesha. Throughout the first half of the song, the images with the stereotypes are displayed. Throughout the second half of the song the students are displayed again, but this time with messaging depicting who they really are or who they aspire to be. The video was shared with the school, district leaders, and was intended to be shared at a Student Voice Showcase event, further elaborated on later in this chapter.



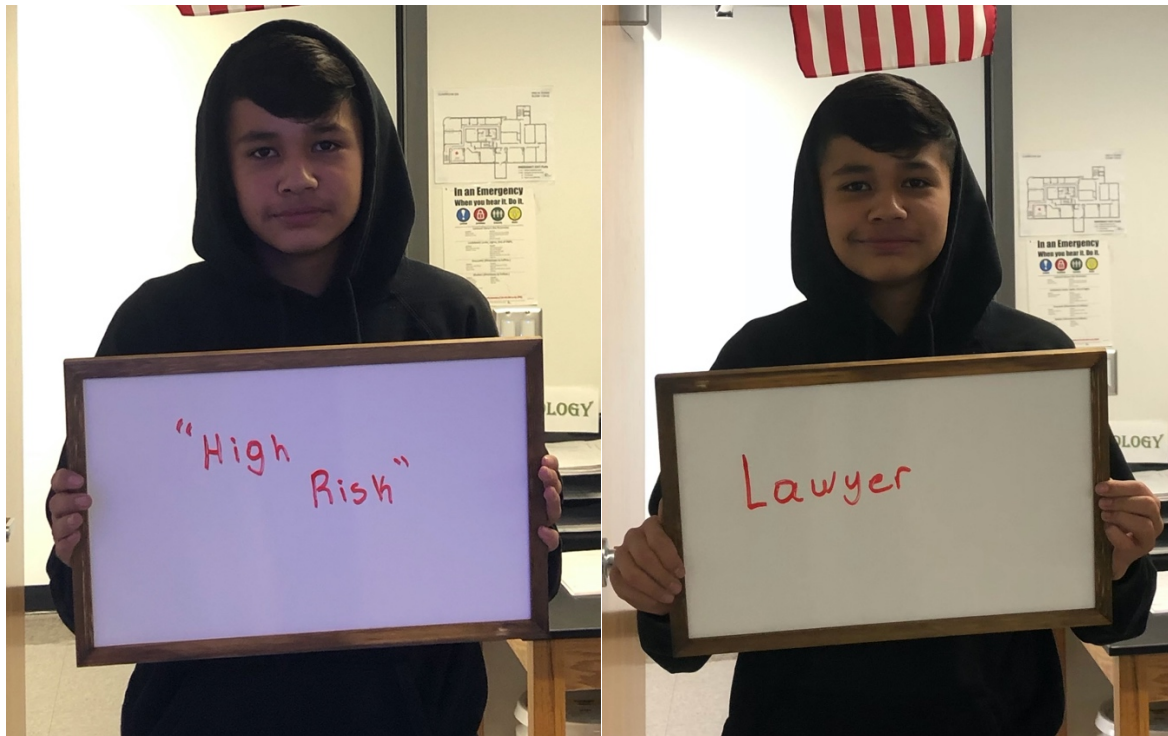


Figure 4.1. Photovoice Product. Youth Co-Researchers pose for their project. On the left, they are portrayed with a label or stereotype that that they have been called. On the right, they are portrayed with their dream or career aspiration.

Theme Three: Students Do Not Have Access to Teachers Who Like Them or Courses and Class Materials That Represent Their Ethnicity

Often, organizations have a gap between their espoused theory and theory in use (Argryis, 1995). The district this study occurred in holds an espoused theory that they are making a concentrated effort to increase the number of teachers of color, albeit with limited success thus far (Asmar, 2019). When the current Superintendent took the helm two years ago, in her Entry Plan she committed to providing every student an opportunity to take ethnic studies (Asmar & Park, 2019). However, findings from this project suggest that the school district's theory in use has fallen short in their commitment to recruit and retain teachers of color and ensuring that

students have access to ethnic studies. The following theme is discussed by teachers and curriculum.

Teachers

As schools across the U.S. continue to become more ethnically diverse, the demographics for teachers has largely remained the same (Boser, 2014). Compounding a racial gap between students and teachers, schools are also more segregated today than they have been at any point in the past forty years (Rothstein, 2019). Mirroring national trends, the findings in this study revealed that none of the YCRs or YPs have had more than one teacher of color throughout their educational experience. At UMA specifically, 97 percent of the students are Students of Color and 100 percent of the teaching staff is White. None of the YCRs or YPs found these statics abnormal. In fact, during a class session I was discussing school segregation and racial disparities among teaching staff at UMA and throughout the school district, and the YCRs seemed to sense my frustration and pushed back. Zoe explained, “Mister, this is just who goes to school here and we don’t really think about teachers like that.” Antonio added, “Yeah, we don’t think about that. It isn’t an issue to us.” The other two YCRs nodded in agreement (Field log, December 10th, 2019). However, when I was coding the project data through the lens of CRT, the first tenet of CRT emerged: racism is ordinary in society (Delgado, 2001). As Dalton posited, “in settings where Whites dominate, being White is not noteworthy. It is like the tick of a familiar clock, part of the easily tuned-out background noise” (p. 6). Thus, for the youth involved in this study, the fact that they had only had White teachers throughout their entire K-12 educational experience was unremarkable. It was simply the familiar tick of an institutionally racist clock, easily tuned out as background noise.

Curriculum

Both the focus groups and semi-structured interviews revealed that the youth felt that their education should be more culturally relevant. At the time of this study, UMA did not offer any ethnic studies courses. In fact, no student had heard of ethnic studies. Furthermore, outside of chattel slavery, no YCR or YP reported learning anything about their culture in any class. During a focus group, when asked if they felt the curriculum in their courses was culturally relevant, Maximus stated, “Honestly, in history class, I really only remember learning about slavery. Sometimes I feel like everyone just looks at me. I’ve always hated history. That’s why I always try to take history online” (Focus Group, November 18th, 2020). He added that, “Our history books don’t explain the full truth about our history, or anybody’s history, so it’s kind of hard for us to put ourselves in that position, if our books don’t tell us the full truth.” Through the semi-structured interviews, a common theme continued to emerge. When Antonio asked Futoshi if his culture was represented in class materials, Mr. Purple stated, “No. I never did—no. Nothing. I don’t know if—let the record show—I mean, I know I’m supposed to take this serious, but in all of my years of education I have not learned one thing about my culture at all” (YCR Interview, January 17th, 2020). When I was interviewing Jasmine, I asked if she could change one thing at UMA, she responded, “The curriculum. I would say like in English class, we could be reading a book about a Mexican writer and their past, or what their life was like, what they have been through. Or in history class, we could learn about the history of Mexico” (Interview with YCR January 20th, 2020). During the final member check session, Antonio reiterated his position about culturally irrelevant education. When comparing his previous experiences with experiences in Colorado, he stated “In Texas, it was the same thing. The same White story. Like, White people kicking out the Natives. Especially at a school that’s 95 percent

Hispanic, we should be learning about our own history.” Jasmine added, “Yeah, we should learn the other side of the story.” Zoe concluded, “Those who win the war write the story, man” (Class Dialogue, March 12th, 2020).

When analyzing the YCRs inequitable experiences with class curriculum through the lens of CRT, another key tenet of CRT began to emerge: Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993). Harris (1993) posited that, “Whiteness and property share a common premise—a conceptual nucleus—of a right to exclude” (p. 1714). Building on the notion of whiteness as property, Ladson-Billing and Tate (1995) suggest that access to high quality curriculum that reflects the student population has almost exclusively been held by Whites. The lack of access to high quality curriculum that reflects and uplifts the history and culture of Students of Color reifies the notion of property as whiteness. The data that emerged from the focus group and interviews surrounding ethnic studies and culturally relevant curriculum exposed the gap between the district’s espoused theory and the theory in use, thus leading the research team to select ethnic studies as the focal point for our policy recommendation. Explored further in Chapter Five, ethnic studies can serve as a tool for Students of Color to claim property ownership and inclusion in schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Orozco, 2011).

Theme Four: Participation in Restorative Justice Contributed to an Increase in Youth Sense of Belonging and Increased Youth Engagement

For the past decade, the school district this study took place in has employed Restorative Practice Coordinators (RPC). By focusing on rehabilitation and therapy rather than zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline practices, the district has drastically lowered the amount of suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to police (CDE, 2019). At UMA, the RPC relies heavily on building relationships with staff and students and tends to focus his practice on Restorative

Justice Conferences (Daly, 2016; Personal Communication, December 7th, 2019). During the past two years, UMA has lowered their suspensions from 16 per year to four per year (CDE, 2019). Notwithstanding, the YCRs and I still chose to inquire about the YPs experiences with school discipline protocols in our semi-structured interviews. Although a few YPs reported negative experiences at previous schools, the data reflected that the discipline protocol at UMA is essentially a non-issue. For example, when Maximus interviewed Lizzy and asked what the discipline protocol was like at her last school, Lizzy explained that she felt that kids would just “get away with” incidents. When Maximus probed deeper to understand more about what she meant by “getting away with it,” Lizzy explained, “goofing off in class, fighting, drugs, all kinds of stuff like that. For the more minor stuff they [students] would get an in-school suspension. For the more serious stuff, they would get an out of school suspension” (YCR Interview, January 12th, 2020). Conversely, zero YCRs or YPs reported negative experiences with the discipline protocol at UMA. During a focus group Maximus elaborated,

with certain students it’s difficult to know what they might be going through. So, for some students they [school staff] just kind of like talk to them [students] to figure out what’s going on. It’s much better than them just being like ‘Oh, that’s not where you’re supposed to be or supposed to be doing,’ and then just getting into trouble. It’s much better than my old school.

Zoe immediately added, “and that goes back to us having great relationships with staff. We can talk to them about anything” (Focus Group, November 18th, 2020). By focusing on building strong relationships and identifying the root cause of negative behavior, as well as significantly lowering the suspension rate, UMA has increased the daily attendance rate and built a culture where students enjoy being at school. At a final member check session with the YCRs,

Jasmine elaborated that the discipline protocol at UMA is, “not negative. It is for improvement, not punishment” (Class Dialogue, March 12th, 2020).

Panoptic Approach

An outlier to the positive discipline protocol findings, however, was the specific approach employed by UMA’s current Dean of Culture. Throughout the course of the class, the YCRs had bemoaned the approach of the dean. On several occasions, Maximus would come to my office in need of a place to cool down. With the dean short on his heels, he would shout, “I am not fucking talking to her” (Personal Communication, 2019). On January 15th, Maximus and Lizzy were recording an interview in the school’s conference room. I was confronted by the dean. In my field log, I noted the experience:

When the course first began in November, there was one day that I almost lost control of the room. Like, they erupted. The cause: discipline protocol. Well, specifically, it was the dean’s punitive and condescending approach. They all erupted in agreeance. I was happy that we had discovered an issue they were passionate about, but I am admittedly glad that their particular personal issues with the dean seemed to subside. Today, however, I received a taste of the YCRs concerns. Two students were interviewing in an adult conference area and the dean cornered me in my office. At first, her line of questioning was inquisitive, but her tone quickly devolved into accusatory. She asked, “What are they doing?” I politely responded that they were conducting an interview for our research project. She then began questioning the specific questions they are asking, why they are asking them, etc. I was happy to explain the purpose, but her tone and intonation had grown aggressive. When she finally admitted that she “had an issue with those specific

students” and that they “shouldn’t be doing that ‘cause they’re failing...I honestly had no idea how to respond. Jaw. Dropped. (Field Log, January 15th, 2020)

I found that both the YCR’s description and my own experience with the dean’s need to keep students under surveillance at all times to maintain power and control, is directly aligned to and uplifted in Madrigal-Garcia and Acevedo-Gil’s (2016) concept of panopticon. In light of the overall discipline protocol at UMA, the panoptic approach of the Dean of Culture may not hinder the student’s academic trajectories and post-secondary pathways. However, the experience spoke volumes for the need to develop counter-spaces to foster students’ aspirations, resistance, and college-going identities (Madrigal-Garcia & Acevedo-Gil, 2016). During our final member check session, I asked the YCRs if they still felt the same way about the dean. Maximus remained committed to his stance and said, “she has too much authority.” However, Zoe stated that she felt the dean had been improving over the course of the year and she, “changed how she was coming at us” (Class Dialogue, March 12th, 2020).

When analyzing the data that emerged from class discussions, interviews, and focus groups surrounding discipline protocols through the lens of CRT, I began to view the Dean’s panoptic approach as a racial microaggression that exacerbated a “racialized hierarchy that privileges Whites and marginalizes non-Whites (Blaisdell, 2015, p. 2). Microaggressions can be defined as, “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 60). Although the Dean follows a panoptic approach, it is important to note that she never exhibited overtly racist attitudes or beliefs, nor would they have been condoned. However, as a White Woman exerting total control over Children of Color, her seemingly innocuous behavior can be viewed as a racial microaggression. Furthermore, microaggressions that occur within academic spaces have an

adverse impact on the culture of the school and the academic and social life of students (Solórzano, 2000). Lastly, similar to the interest convergence and ordinary racism that emerged in other findings, the racial microaggressions exhibited by the Dean “reproduce white privilege and [are] really an enactment of whiteness as policy to preserve whiteness as property” (Anyon et al., 2017, p. 394). However, Restorative Justice creates a platform for Students of Color to develop counter spaces and for the survivors of institutional racism to find their voice.

Taking Action

Solórzano (2000) states that, “Critical Race Theory names racist injuries and identifies their origins” (p. 63) and that “when the ideology of racism is examined and racist injuries are named, victims of racism can find their voice” (p. 64). Thus, in all forms of participatory action research (PAR), it is imperative that co-researchers are empowered through their collaboration in the design and implementation of the research project (Merriam, 2009). In YPAR, it is imperative that adult partners join forces with youth and take action (Mirra et al., 2016). By collaboratively engaging in an action research project, youth are able to better understand systemic oppression and inequities in education. Through collective action, the youth are able to obtain more control over their lives (Merriam, 2009). In addition to concluding our process by making specific, tangible recommendations to improve school programming at UMA, we coupled our action with civic duty and began mobilizing and disrupting beyond the four walls.

My role with the district was grant funded and not guaranteed beyond one year. Thus, beginning at day one of the pilot project, I sought to identify a potential teacher who would be willing to teach a formal student leadership course in subsequent years. Once a teacher had been identified, I organized a meeting for the teacher, the school principal, and representatives from the district’s Student Voice and Leadership (SVL) Department, which hosts the district’s Student

Board of Education (SBOE). At the meeting, SVL walked the school through their programming and the goals of SVL, and a relationship was born. By developing a relationship between UMA and SVL, I was able to facilitate the process for a veteran teacher to build upon our pilot project. Through the potential relationship between SVL and SBOE, students at UMA will receive ongoing support and guidance from district supports. Each year going forward, the next generation of youth leaders will identify a new issue in their school or community, design a research project to explore root causes, and then make specific policy proposals to school and district leaders.

Additionally, when the YPAR project was first being developed at UMA I shared our process, goals, and objectives with six other Pathway schools throughout the district. Four of those six schools decided to create their own YPAR groups; one as a formal honors-level class and three as a club. I began meeting with the adult leaders through the remainder of the year to assist with their scope and sequence, curriculum development, and formal course development. As a final action, we organized an end of year Student Voice Showcase, titled, “Do You Hear Us?” In an effort to amplify the counternarratives of the youth involved we hoped to create meaningful change in policies (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009) while also celebrating our hard work. Teachers, professors, school administrators, the district school board, the district superintendent, and families of participants were all invited. Several local social justice-orientated non-profits were invited and had planned on tabling at the event. Youth representatives from each of the five YPAR groups would have shared their recommendations for bridging the opportunity gap and improving school programming at alternative schools. Several of the schools had also planned on sharing hip hop and slam poetry, written and performed by the students. Unfortunately, during the final days of our planning, the world was struck with a pandemic: COVID-19. For the first

time in 100 years, due to a global pandemic, the world as we knew it came to a screeching halt and physical distancing became the new normal.

Limitations and Research Constraints

This study explored the perceptions of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students enrolled at an AEC. Specifically, this study explored student's routes of resilience and the decision-making process that led them on transformative trajectories. Although the study explored issues of access and educational opportunities, participation was limited to students currently enrolled at an AEC. Additionally, the YCRs were currently enrolled in a Student Leadership Program at an urban AEC in the Rocky Mountain West. Thus, the perceptions and practices of the students in this study may not be applicable to other geographic areas. In YPAR, it is imperative that the YCRs decide, "what was significant, how it was significant, and how it should be discussed" (Pizarrora, 1999, p. 56). Two constraints emerged that limited the depth of this study. The first limitation was time, which limited the ability to thoroughly build strong relationships and conduct follow-up semi-structured interviews. The second limitation was what some practitioners have termed "ruinous empathy" (Scott, 2019). In addition to these constraints, I will also discuss my involvement and the implications of my researcher positionality as both insider and outsider.

Time

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in that time is of the essence. Validity and trustworthiness in qualitative research are defined by long-term engagement and thick description (Glesne, 2016, Maxwell, 2013). However, time limited this study in two ways. First, I did not know the YCRs prior to the start of the research project. Since my position with the school district was a one-year grant-funded opportunity, and provided access to the research

site, my time to develop rapport with staff and students prior to the launch of the pilot project was limited. Second, the lack of time also restricted our ability to conduct follow-up interviews or to member check our findings more deeply and meaningfully. However, although long-term engagement was limited, the five months this study occurred was still ample enough time to develop relationships, co-create counter-spaces, and develop a thick description of the educational experiences of the YCRs and YPs. Lastly, due to COVID-19, schools were shut down throughout the remainder of the year and we did not have time to develop and host an alternative in-person Student Voice Showcase.

Ruinous Empathy

Through on-going observations of the school climate at UMA over the course of the year, ruinous empathy (Scott, 2019) began to emerge as a common occurrence. Scott (2019) explains Ruinous Empathy through a Russian anecdote

about a guy who has to amputate his dog's tail but loves him so much that he cuts it off an inch each day, rather than all at once. His desire to spare the dog pain and suffering only leads to more pain and suffering. (p. 32)

Ruinous Empathy occurs in schools when leaders (teachers, principals, and support staff) are “so fixated on not hurting a person's feelings in the moment that they do not tell them something they would be better off knowing in the long run” (Scott, 2019, p. xii). Findings in this study suggest that maintaining a hyper focus on the social-emotional well-being of youth has often come at the cost of academic rigor and expectations. I found this to be especially problematic for the YCRs and YPs who had attended UMA from 6th to 12th grade and who had never experienced school pushout, nor had been held to high academic expectations. Specifically, UMA employs top notch school psychologists, social workers, and counselors. However, until

this year, UMA did not offer any honors-level courses and still does not offer any Advanced Placement options. In School Leadership Team and Instructional Leadership Team meetings, the focus is quite often on the social-emotional well-being of the students, and rarely on pushing students academically or increasing academic expectations (Field Log, 2020). Although not insurmountable, the lack of academic rigor in the school's culture led to difficulty in maintaining co-researcher expectations. In fact, several students opted out of the student leadership course when they learned that there would be an academic component (Field Log, 2020). Additionally, the hyper-focus on social-emotional support at the cost of rigor calls into question the efficacy of AECs. By focusing solely on the social and emotional well-being of youth and being evaluated less on academics and more on engagement, AECs may also be inadvertently exacerbating opportunity gaps and inequities in education as students may be graduating high school ill prepared for the realities in college and career. Further explored in Chapter Five, Radical Candor may provide a path toward bridging empathy and high academic expectations.

Chapter Conclusion

Overall, the YCRs and I collaboratively identified four themes. Co-analysis of focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and observations were used to identify categories. We established themes from this data. To narrow our focus for the action component of the research project, youth selected Stereotypes for their photovoice project and Ethnic Studies for their policy proposal.

- Close relationships with school staff and faculty contributed to an increase in youth sense of belonging and increased youth engagement.
- Youth are more than a label.

- Students do not have access to teachers who like them or courses and class materials that represent their ethnicity or uplift their culture.
- Participation in Restorative Justice contributed to a decrease in school suspensions and an increase in youth engagement.

In Chapter Five, I will discuss how the findings will impact future research and policy making.

These findings will be used to make recommendations for improving programming at alternative schools and bridging the opportunity gap.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

“In Lak’Ech: You Are My Other Me”

Tú eres mi otro yo.
You are my other me.
Si te hago daño a ti,
If I do harm to you,
Me hago daño a mi mismo.
I do harm to myself.
Si te amo y respeto,
If I love and respect you,
Me amo y respeto yo.
I love and respect myself.

--Luis Valdez

The purpose of this Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project was to explore the lived experiences of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students within the school-to-prison-pipeline (STPP). Specifically, this YPAR project underscored the importance of including youth voice in the school policy decision-making process. Moreover, this project amplified the voices of students to change the education system, offered recommendations in bridging the opportunity gap, and in creating a more equitable and just educational system for every student through the improvement of programming at AECs. With that goal in mind, in this chapter I present a discussion of the findings aimed at answering the research question: *What can educational stakeholders and policy actors learn from students enrolled in an alternative school about how to disrupt the STPP through the improvement of school policy and programming in an Alternative Education Campus?*

Discussion

This YPAR project filled an important gap by adding to the research of Bertrand (2018), Cammarota and Fine (2010), De La Ossa (2005), Feldman, Smith, and Waxman (2017), Mansfield (2014), Mitra and Gloss (2009), Ozer (2016), and Quijada, Cahill, and Bradley (2013)

by uplifting the counter narratives and voices of students currently enrolled at an AEC. The STPP (Skiba, 2014; Wald & Losen, 2007), high school drop-out (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), and student voice (Mansfield, 2014; Mitra, 2006) have all been explored extensively. However, there is a current gap in the research that amplifies the counter narratives of students currently enrolled at an AEC, through their own words, using a YPAR methodology. YPAR studies conducted with students who have been labeled “high-risk” are especially lacking. Thus, the goal of this study was to add to a growing body of literature on the STPP by contributing findings, analysis, and recommendations co-designed and constructed *with* voices from within the STPP. Specifically, this study contributed to closing the research gap by involving those most affected by the research as co-constructors of knowledge, as well as challenging inequities in the education system as they are understood by the students subjected to them.

This study was grounded in an ethic of love for the survivors of the STPP, committed to social justice, and conducted with joy (Laura, 2016). As highlighted in Chapter One, my positionality in this work was as both an insider and an outsider. Rather than ignore any power dynamics that arose between the Youth Co-Researchers (YCRs) and myself, we named them and discussed how the dynamic may affect the study. To mitigate my role as an outsider and ensure that the voices of the YCRs remained at the center of the work, in addition to reflexivity (Davies, 2002; Glesne, 2016), I followed an intimate inquiry approach that was grounded in an ethnic of love (Laura, 2016) and reciprocity (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, & Wise, 2008). Laura (2016) argued that intimate inquiry is organized around three methods: “witnessing, engaging, and laboring with and for the individuals whose lives our educational work aims to shape” (p. 219).

Through my role at Urban Mountain Academy (UMA), I was able to get intimately close to the work, witness and engage with the YCRs daily, and labor with and for the UMA community.

Laura (2016) added that, “to witness is to validate the existence of stories and to protect their places in the world” (p. 217). In this study, I not only sought to validate the existence of the YCRs and their educational experiences, but through facilitating a YPAR project in which the YCRs served as co-leaders and thought partners throughout the design, implementation, and analysis process, the YCRs were able to amplify and validate the voices of their peers as well. The counter narratives of the YCRs and Youth Participants (YPs) revealed through this study demonstrate the importance and power of placing the voices of those most impacted by school practices and district policies at the center of the research process. Through the triangulation of class discussions, focus groups, field log entries, a photovoice project, observations, and semi-structured interviews, the following themes emerged: a) close relationships with school staff and faculty contributed to an increase in youth sense of belonging and increased youth engagement; b) youth are more than a label; c) youth do not have access to teachers who look like them or courses and class materials that represent their ethnicity and uplifts their culture; and d) participation in Restorative Justice conferences contributed to an increase in youth sense of belonging and increased youth engagement.

In this study, the YCRs and I demonstrated that African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students who have been labeled as “high risk” hold an innate ability to conduct educational research, critically analyze findings, and offer informed recommendations for bridging the opportunity gap and creating a more equitable education system through improving the programming at AECs. In this chapter, I will summarize the findings and analysis detailed in Chapter Four. The summary of the findings is organized by theme and answers the research

question: What can educational stakeholders and policy actors learn from students enrolled in an alternative school about how to disrupt the STPP through the improvement of school policy and programming in an AEC? I will also offer recommendations and explore implications and future research.

Summary of the Findings: What we can learn from students enrolled at an AEC

Relationships

Both the extant literature (Bascia & Maton, 2016; Morrissette, 2011) and findings of this study speak to the power of positive student-teacher relationships. Relationships are often cited as a key tenant of culturally relevant education (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2017) and as one of the primary indicators of whether or not a student feels like they are being pushed out of the classroom and into the STPP (Fine, 1991; Skiba, 2014; Sleeter, 2017). One method that UMA and other AECs utilize to develop more meaningful relationships with students is maintaining low student enrollment and small class sizes (Bascia & Maton, 2016, Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Furthermore, as highlighted in previous chapters, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) grants AECs a modified School Performance Framework (SPF—their school grade) (CDE, 2019). One reason the CDE provides AECs a modified SPF is to allow teachers to take extra time to build more meaningful relationships with students to increase youth engagement. By decreasing bureaucratic oversight while increasing a focus on student engagement—coupled with smaller class sizes—it is the goal of the CDE and AECs to raise academic outcomes and increase high school completion rates. Similar to findings from other studies surrounding AECs (Bascia & Maton, 2016; Feldman, Smith, & Waxman, 2017), the YCRs and YPs reported that strong relationships with the staff at UMA has led them to feel welcomed and cared for, as well as contributed to their academic success. Thus, the findings in this study support the existing

research literature on AECs in that the YCRs and YPs, by attending an AEC where they were able to build positive relationships with their teachers, averted the STPP (Bowers et al., 2012) and are more likely to complete high school (Morrissette, 2011).

Stereotypes and Labeling

Over three decades ago, Fine and Rosenberg (1983) highlighted that often times students who have left school without completing their diploma, or those who are perceived as being at-risk of leaving school without completing a diploma, are viewed as the “helpless, hopeless, and depressed” (p. 265). Unfortunately, not much has changed since Fine’s (1983; 1991) first publications. African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students leaving high school before completion or filling the hallways of AECs has become normalized (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009). The district personnel where this study occurred were cognizant of the adverse effect labels such as “dropout” and “alternative school” may have on youth and thus made a conscious decision to name their alternative schools “Pathway” schools (Personal Communication, October 4th, 2019). Although the district’s decision to re-label their AECs was birthed out of a noble effort, the findings in this study suggest that for some students, the benefits of sheltering youth from labels that have been thrust upon them falls short of the risk of telling them the truth. Specifically, both the YCRs and YPs who participated in this study reported that they had no idea that they were attending an AEC or what that meant. In particular, every youth who participated in this study reported a great disdain and disgust with being labeled “high risk” or “at-risk.” Furthermore, these findings support the literature that suggest AECs boasting a minority majority student population has become normalized (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009) and that these normalized ethnic and racialized ethnic stereotypic traits are often being utilized at AECs to justify low

academic expectations, placing Students of Color in separate schools or classes, remediating curriculum, and maintaining school and community segregation (Solorzano, 1997).

Culture and Ethnicity

As highlighted in Chapter Four, findings in this study suggest that in regard to providing an education that is culturally relevant there is a current gap between the school district's espoused theory and their theory in use. Specifically, the Superintendent and the District Board of Education have committed themselves to hiring more teachers of color and to implementing ethnic studies programs or classes throughout the district (Asmar, 2019; Asmar & Park, 2019). In this study, I found that the YCRs and YPs lack access to teachers with shared demographics, as well as curricula that represents their ethnicity and uplifts their culture. The following theme is summarized by teachers and ethnic studies.

Teachers

Although studies have outlined the benefits that teachers sharing lived experiences and racial attributes with students has on student engagement and academic achievement (Gist, 2019), both the YCRS and YPs reported that their experiences of having only White teachers was a non-issue. At first blush, it would have been easy to dismiss the youths' attitude as typical teenage apathy. However, it is important to note that this study viewed racism as something ordinary in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Thus, in settings where Whites dominate (such as teacher candidate pools), being White is not noteworthy (Dalton, 1995; Solorzano, 1997). The fact that UMA is an essentially segregated school, with 97 percent Latinx students and a 100 percent White teaching staff, is unremarkable. As communities throughout the U.S. become increasingly diverse (Boser, 2014) and schools become increasingly segregated (Rothstein, 2019), it is imperative that policy actors and educational stakeholders work to address the

demographic mismatch between our students and our teachers. This is important because studies have demonstrated that students benefit from having high-achieving teachers with similar cultural backgrounds to their own because they are provided first-hand and real-world models of career success and academic engagement (Ahmed & Boser, 2014).

Ethnic Studies

The literature on ethnic studies (Cabrera, 2019; de Novais & Spencer, 2019; Lopez, Pereira, & Rao, 2017; Sleeter, 2011) suggests that culturally relevant education often leads to students feeling a greater sense of belonging, improves academic achievement, literacy, engagement, and their socio-emotional well-being. Unfortunately, not only had YCRs or YPs never had access to ethnic studies curricula, but they all reported that they had never even heard of it. Furthermore, outside of chattel slavery, no YCR or YP reported learning anything about their culture in any class. It is important to note that as African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students rise academically through an institutionally racist system, they do so with the weight of an education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) on their shoulders. Ethnic studies can serve as a tool for Students of Color to claim property ownership and inclusion in schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Orozco, 2011). Recommendations for increasing access to ethnic studies is explored further in this chapter.

Discipline

The literature on school discipline has consistently linked exclusionary discipline practices and zero tolerance policies with the overrepresentation of historically marginalized student groups (Gregory & Skiba, 2019; Ritter, 2018; Skiba, 2014). Over the past decade, community-based advocacy and grassroots activism has led to schools and districts across the nation adopting significant discipline reform efforts (California Department of Education, 2015;

Restorative Justice Colorado, 2015; State of Illinois, 2014). Notwithstanding, the literature on school discipline continues to document disproportionality across student groups (Skiba, 2014) and links exclusionary discipline with negative outcomes, such as decreasing student achievement, increasing high school pushout, and involvement with the criminal justice system (Ritter, 2018). However, many schools and districts have found promise in disrupting the STPP through the implementation of Restorative Practices (Restorative Justice Colorado, 2015).

As highlighted in Chapter Four, the district this study occurred in adopted Restorative Practices (RP) in 2010 (Personal Communication, October 4th, 2019). Since the implementation of RP, there have been significant gains in reducing exclusionary discipline practices and increasing student engagement and academic achievement (CDE, 2019). Although the promise of RP has yet to be realized equitably throughout the district, UMA has experienced significant gains in reducing their suspensions and increasing student engagement (2019). Two years ago, UMA hired a social worker to oversee their RP programming and has since lowered their suspensions from 16 per year to four (2019). Despite school discipline emerging as a non-issue in this study, the YCRs and I still explored our own experiences with school discipline, as well as the YPs experiences with school discipline. The findings presented in this study support the literature that suggests that there is zero efficacy of zero tolerance (Gregory & Skiba, 2019; Ritter, 2018; Skiba, 2014). When schools and school districts divest from exclusionary discipline practices and instead focus on building strong relationships (Feldman, Smith, & Waxman, 2017) and identifying the root cause of negative behavior incidents, schools are able to significantly decrease suspension rates, increase daily attendance rates, and build a school culture where students enjoy being at school.

Recommendations: Decolonizing Alternative Education Campuses

As highlighted in Chapter One, my role in this study was as an insider and an outsider. Throughout each phase of the research process, from design to analysis, the YCRs and I engaged in the process as equals. As an adult leader at UMA, certain power imbalances were unavoidable. Rather than ignore power imbalances or any biases, we named them and discussed how they may affect the study. However, it is important to note that the following recommendations were not all identified and developed in collaboration with the YCRs. Instead, the following recommendations stem from my collaboration with the YCRs and YPs, document analysis, a review of the extant literature, observations, and critical reflections. Below I outline several recommendations that alternative schools, education stakeholders, and policy actors should consider when striving to improve programming at AECs and creating a more equitable and just education system for every student.

Radical Sanctuaries

The literature on AECs and the alternative education services that they provide students who have been silenced, punished, and pushed out (Bascia & Maton, 2016, Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), demonstrates that AECs are supporting and graduating students who may have otherwise been pushed out of school and into the STPP. Indeed, many students who have attended AECs cite their experiences at AECs as a primary reason they were able to complete high school and receive their high school diploma (Morrissette, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). However, there is a gap in the alternative education research and as the findings in this study suggest, a gap in the professional practice at AECs that accounts for, uplifts, and celebrates the ethnicity and cultural backgrounds of the students that AECs primarily serve. To fill this gap, AECs and future research on alternative education should focus on reimagining AECs as radical sanctuaries by

focusing on the following elements: a) robust and meaningful interpersonal relationships between students and staff, b) providing counter learning spaces where students are not subjected to panoptic and exclusionary discipline protocols, as well as psychological and/or physical harm from adults or other students, c) culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy that honors students' native languages and celebrates their culture, and d) critical care (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011).

Traditional, comprehensive high schools follow an epistemological assumption that they have and will continue to meet both the academic and social-emotional needs of every student. Unfortunately, however, comprehensive high schools often track and sort students based on the needs of capitalism and White supremacy (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011). Both the literature (Bradley & Ranzulli, 2011; Bowers, Spratt, & Taff, 2012) and findings uplifted in this study suggest that, for some students, it is the very nature of larger high schools that leads students to feeling silenced and pushed out. Conversely, smaller high schools that focus on providing resources as radical sanctuaries (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011) are better able to fulfill the affective and cultural needs of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students. By shifting our paradigms and embracing the role of AECs in public education as radical sanctuaries, AECs may be able to build upon the current work already occurring in supporting youth who were not successful in traditional high school settings, while also bridging the opportunity gap and providing a localized effort in upending the STPP by creating more inclusive counter-spaces where youth are able to engage more intimately with their own culture and push back against hegemonic literacies (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011; Morell, 2008; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

Ethnic Studies

Incorporating ethnic studies courses and curricula into existing programming at AECs would benefit student's social-emotional and cognitive development (Dee & Penner, 2017).

However, schools and districts must push beyond simply adding marginalized and stereotypic information about non-Whites to their curriculum. As Cabrera (2019) posits, “one cannot simply take out Shakespeare, insert Maya Angelou, and claim that the class is meaningful ethnic studies” (Cabrera, 2019, p. 155). Instead, ethnic studies pedagogy and curricula must disrupt historical and current trends in education that have demeaned Communities of Color, ignored their contributions to society, and often assumed that they are waiting for a White savior to arrive and deliver greater access to post-secondary opportunities (Cabrera, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2018). To accomplish this, ethnic studies must return control of learning to the community by centering the counter stories of the marginalized (Cabrera, 2019; Cuahtin, Zavala, Au, & Sleeter, 2019; Sleeter, 2011).

As school districts and individual schools chart a new path that begins to address the need for more and better ethnic studies programming, their approach should be twofold: they must continue to strive to bridge the opportunity gap through culturally relevant education and mindsets, as well as mandating and supporting robust ethnic studies programs at every school. I recommend that school districts adopt a Pedagogy for Change (Lopez, Pereira & Rao, 2017) framework and approach to implementing ethnic studies curricula. District leaders must support teachers through professional development that moves beyond content knowledge and pushes teachers toward, “conceptualizing how we: a) examine ourselves in relation to others, b) consider context for teaching and learning, c) incorporate the learners assets to make decisions about social issues appropriate for inquiry in local and global communities (Lopez, Pereira & Rao, 2017, p. 36).

School districts and individual schools must become and remain responsive to the needs of their students and their respective communities. District leaders must ensure that schools have

received the proper supports, professional development, and access to curricula to implement wide-spread ethnic studies programming. In turn, school leaders must ensure that their teachers are supported and have access to high quality curricula and professional development and are infusing issues of social justice (Sheppard & hooks, 2014) into their daily practice. Some critics argue that ethnic studies increases prejudice and sows division between ethnic groups (Orozco, 2011). However, decades of research literature (Brown, 1979; Orozco, 2011) have clearly demonstrated that robust and meaningful ethnic studies programs have led to more students being proud and accepting of their own culture while also becoming more accepting of others (Orozco, 2011). In many ways, “ethnic studies can help correct...sources of much social conflict” (Brown, 1979, p. 363).

Teaching Staff

The district this study occurred in currently serves a student population that is 74 percent African American, Indigenous, and Latinx (CDE, 2019). Moreover, UMA serves a student population that is 97 percent Latinx and the current teaching staff is 100 percent White (2019). To bridge the demographic mismatch between staff and students, the district must re-commit to recruiting and retaining high quality Teachers of Color and Administrators of Color. Findings in this study suggest that the school district’s current efforts have revealed a gap between their espoused theory and their theory in use. One potential reason there is a gap between the district’s espoused theory and theory in use may be a teacher-preparation pipeline issue that exists in urban communities throughout the U.S. (Ahmad & Boser, 2014). Waiting for the federal government—or the U.S. Department of Education—to address the leaky teacher candidate pipeline may prove futile. Therefore, I recommend that state policy actors and district leaders consider the following:

- Create a homegrown teacher corps similar to Colorado Teacher Cadet Program or Pathways2Teaching that is focused on recruiting, training, and retaining aspiring Teachers and Administrators of Color. Its goal would be to improve educational outcomes for historically marginalized communities and to provide paid opportunities and assistance for Students of Color to begin receiving high-quality teacher training while still in high school.
- Improve communication and articulation relationships between local community colleges and state universities.
- Provide scholarship support to future teachers of color that is tied to the effectiveness of the teacher preparation program.
- Support and encourage existing local and state efforts that are already working to address the demographic mismatch between teachers and students.

Radical Candor

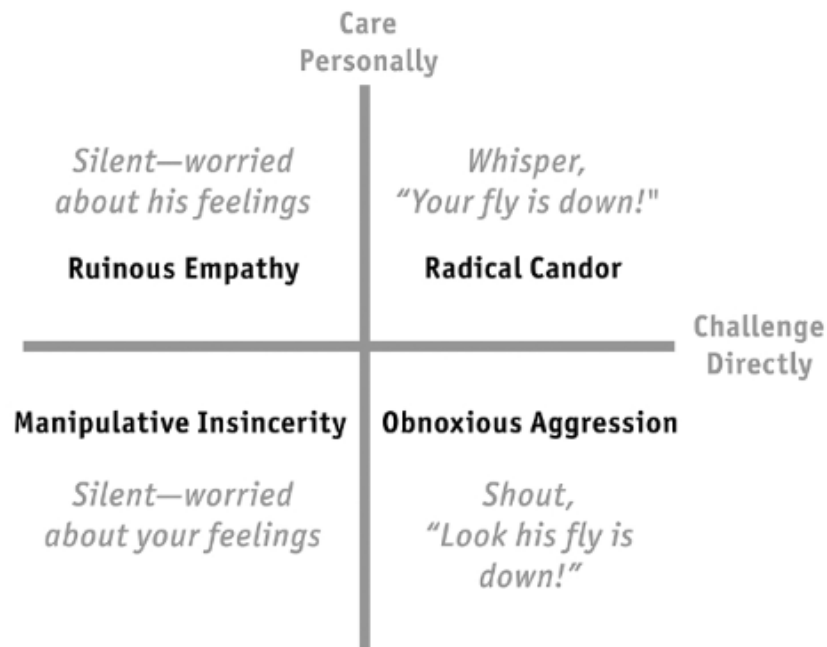


Figure 5.1. Radical Candor Framework. From *Radical Candor*, by Kim Scott (2019).

As highlighted in Chapter Four, ruinous empathy (Scott, 2019) emerged as a common occurrence at UMA. Specifically, school staff are often so fixated on supporting students' socio-emotional needs and not hurting their feelings, that such support comes at the cost of maintaining high expectations and academic rigor. Similarly, Antrop-Gonzalez (2011) has also noted conditions of ruinous empathy as the *ay bandito* syndrome, which is when teachers in urban areas patronizingly lament their students' socioeconomic realities. Combining Antrop-Gonzalez' (2011) notion of *ay bandito* with Scott's (2019) notion of ruinous empathy, radical candor (Scott, 2019) emerges as a potential solution to provide AEC teachers and students with the notion of critical care (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011). Radical candor can be defined as caring personally and challenging directly (Scott, 2019). As Figure 5.1 highlights, radical candor offers a hip framework for school leaders to care for their teachers while also offering critical support in their growth and improvement as culturally relevant educators. As an example, school leaders should substitute the example of someone having their fly down with culturally relevant pedagogies. Rather than ignoring a teacher's short-comings or shouting that they are a racist, leaders can offer radically candid support in identifying how to ensure an educator's practice is more culturally relevant. Furthermore, as an example for how teachers should employ radical candor when working with students, teachers and school staff should not discount the trauma students carry with them, but they should also be realistic with students about their post-secondary readiness and options. By using radical candor to transition from *ay bandito* to critical care, school staff will be able to maintain high expectations while providing socio-emotional supports, pushing students while also ensuring an equitable access to coursework that will prepare them for postsecondary options. In short, as Scott (2019) eloquently posits about our collective moral obligation, "Just say it!" and "Give a damn!" (p. 42).

Suggestions for Future Research

AEC Teachers

Through a review of the extant literature on alternative education it became clear that little to no research has been conducted explicitly on AEC teachers. This current gap leaves much to consider in regard to AEC teacher demographics, their mindsets, and their pedagogical preferences. Perhaps they represent a diverse mix of teachers with a growth mindset who deliver comprehensive and compelling culturally relevant education on a daily basis. Or, perhaps they do not. Until further qualitative and quantitative research is conducted, there is virtually no way for researchers, policy actors, or educational stakeholders to know who they are, where they are succeeding, or where they can improve. Thus, further research on AEC educators' demographics, mindsets, and pedagogical practices is necessary.

Voices of Color

In recent decades, student voice research has grown exponentially (Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Mansfield, 2014; Mitra & Gloss, 2009) as a rising promise in the field of education. However, in their comprehensive review of two decades of student voice research, Gonzalez, Hernandez-Saca, and Artiles (2017) unintentionally exposed a clear and present gap in the research. Although 70 percent of the studies they reviewed were conducted with Students of Color, seven percent were participatory and only five percent included the students as co-researchers. In order to move beyond lip service support of the voices of Students of Color, researchers must transition from the simple inclusion of student voice to recognizing the inherent power and potential of including students in the research process as co-researchers (Bertrand, 2018). Thus, further research is necessary that adds to the growing body of literature that amplifies the voices of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx by engaging them in a process

of inquiry and action and that allows them to share their experiences, develop counter narratives to dominant, deficit-based views, and share the new knowledge they created as educational leaders and decision makers.

Researcher Reflexivity

Maintaining reflexivity (Davies, 2002; Glesne, 2016) throughout this YPAR project was of the utmost importance. As highlighted in Chapter Three, I entered into this work as both an insider and outsider. As such, there were two goals that I remained committed to: exploring the lived experiences of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx youth within the school-to-prison pipeline while also cultivating a space for the YCRs to explore the experiences of their peers. Establishing boundaries and research parameters with the YCRs was integral to the development of a pilot leadership program. However, to remain committed to Critical Youth Studies and the YPAR methodology (Camarota & Fine, 2010), there were times that I had to remind myself to defer to the YCRs as we developed our interview protocol and analyzed the findings. By practicing reflexivities of discomfort (Pillow, 2009), I was able to accomplish both goals. Over the six-month period, I witnessed and analyzed the lived experiences of the YCRs within the current education system, while also ensuring that the YCRs had the liberty and autonomy to add to the current body of research in their own way.

Reciprocity

In traditional qualitative research the youth who participated in this study would have been relegated to key informants (Marshall, 1996). Although the key informant technique would have valued the voices of the youth as an “expert source of information” (Marshall, 1996, p. 93), their participation would have been limited to *expert respondents*, regardless of whether or not their voices had been included in the findings. In the past, qualitative methods have been utilized,

“to pathologize, exoticize, objectify, and name as deficient communities of color and other marginalized populations in the U.S. and beyond, and at best, to take and gain through research, but not give back” (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. xvi). However, by embracing a YPAR methodological approach to research, this study sought to decolonize and humanize research methodologies. Specifically, this study sought to practice a dynamic reciprocity (Diver & Higgins, 2014) by giving back to the community at the center of the research. My *key informants* became my Youth Co-researchers (YCRs); co-creating our research design, protocols, and outcomes. Our community-engaged scholarship was put into practice with the sole intent of exploring their lives and experiences within the educational system as a means of giving back, with specific recommendations intended to improve their lives and programming at AECs. As both an outsider and insider, it was through our collaborative approach that we sought to balance who benefited from the study, as well as address some of the inevitable power balances that existed between the YCRs and myself.

As a White, heterosexual male outsider in a relative position of power, it was imperative from the onset of this study that I avoid White saviorism (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2018) and reciprocity as a purist endeavor (Diver & Higgins, 2014). Instead, I aimed to break down traditional barriers of researcher and researched by utilizing reciprocity as an ethical basis to build relationships (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, & Wise, 2008) with the YCRs, YPs, and the entire UMA community. This was accomplished through engaging with the community utilizing participatory methodologies employed through the lens of critical race theoretical principles (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). All research was designed with the intent of improving programming at AECs to create an education system that is more equitable and just.

All findings and recommendations were shared with district and school leaders. Upon completion, this manuscript was returned to the UMA community.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that there is much that we can learn from youth about what is needed to create schools that are radical sanctuaries, where healing and learning are the primary goals and are accomplished simultaneously. Until policy actors and educational stakeholders begin to earnestly listen to the voices within the STPP, especially the voices of African American, Indigenous, and Latinx students who refuse to assimilate to White supremacist structures and White middle-class values, then schools will continue to reproduce traumatic experiences that push students out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system. We must disrupt dominant literacies and dismantle the STPP. We must strive for a love-based approach to research that places the hearts, minds, and voices of those most affected by policy at the vanguard of educational research. When we do, we must listen, we must hear, and we must act. We must ensure that schools are radical sanctuaries. In order to ensure that everyone in the radical sanctuaries grows emotionally, spiritually, and academically, we must practice radical candor with one another. Ultimately, we are all connected and we all part of the same universal vibration. As Robert F. Kennedy once shared:

A revolution is coming—a revolution which will be peaceful if we are wise enough; compassionate if we care enough; successful if we are fortunate enough—but a revolution which is coming whether we will it or not. We can affect its character; we cannot alter its inevitability. (Report to the United States Senate, May 9, 1966)

Do you hear us?

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Appendix A

IRB Determination



October 15, 2019

Rob Duren

Morgridge College of Education University of Denver

RE: Determination of Proposed Project

Project Title: **Do You Hear Us? Amplifying Alternative Pathways for Pushouts**

Dear Rob,

Thank you for submitting the IRB Determination Form, to the University of Denver Institutional Review Board for evaluation to determine if the above-referenced project qualifies as human subject research. Based on the information provided, it has been determined that the proposed project does not require IRB review. This determination is based on whether this proposed project is research with human subjects defined by the federal regulations.

The IRB Determination Form was evaluated, and it was assessed that the proposed project does not qualify as human subject research. This project will involve utilizing de-identified data collected by Summit Academy students as part of a youth participatory action research project. This proposed project does not meet the regulatory definition of research with human subjects. The Regulatory Definition of Research and Human Subject

Federal research regulations define **research** as “*a systematic investigation, including research development, testing, and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.*”

During the review of this proposed project, it was noted that the primary intent is to use de-identified data to understand how best to place student voice and agency in the vanguard of educational leadership. This project is intended to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge; therefore it does qualify as research.

Per the regulations, **Human subject** means a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains 1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or 2) identifiable private information. This project does not involve interactions with human subjects as it is only utilizing de-identified data provided to the research by Summit Academy, and therefore it does not qualify as “human subject” per the regulatory definition.

In order for a project to require IRB review, the proposed research must qualify under **both** definitions of being research and involving human subjects. This research project DOES fulfill the regulatory definition of research but does not involve human subjects per the federal regulation definition.

My evaluation, based only on the information provided, determined that the proposed project does not require IRB review.

If you have questions regarding this determination or believe that this proposed project does qualify as human subject research, please feel free to contact me directly at 303-871-4051 or via e-mail at: Ashleigh.Ruehrdanz@du.edu.

Sincerely,

Ashleigh Ruehrdanz

Research Compliance Monitor

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs University of Denver

Appendix B

Memorandum of Understanding

Between

Rob Duren, Doctoral Student, Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver

And

Juan Osorio, Principal, Summit Academy High School, Denver Public Schools

This Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) establishes a partnership between Rob Duren and Summit Academy High School.

I. MISSION

The mission of Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver is to be a force for positive change in the lives of individuals, organizations and communities through unleashing the power of learning.

The mission of Summit Academy is to embrace all students with diverse academic and social experiences and cultivate them to be 21st Century learners and positive community contributors by providing comprehensive support services and *individualized pathways* to post-secondary readiness in a safe, caring, and family-oriented environment.

Together, the parties enter into this Memorandum of Understanding to mutually promote student leadership development through a youth participatory action research project.

Accordingly, Rob Duren and Summit Academy, operating under this MOU agree as follows: w

II. PURPOSE AND SCOPE

Rob Duren and Summit Academy intend to develop a leadership development course that will include a youth participatory action research project (YPAR). The goal of the YPAR is to

further develop students' leadership capacity, increase college and career readiness, and to research ways to improve programming at the school. Through the research, the goal is to provide a more nuanced understanding of high school drop-out/push-out and the school to prison pipeline. The YPAR will include the following activities and benefits:

1. Youth co-researchers, their parent/guardians, and all participants will sign an informed consent form, and will be able to opt out of the research project at any time for any reason.
2. Unless otherwise requested, the school, youth co-researchers, and all participants will be given pseudonyms to protect their identity.
3. Both primary and secondary data will be gathered throughout the research project and may be used in future publications.
4. Benefits to youth co-researchers and youth participants include; leadership development, development as scholars/researchers, as well as being granted the opportunity to amplify their voices to inform school practices, policies, and strategic planning.
5. Benefits to the school include; the development of a student leadership course, future participation in Denver Public School's Student Board of Education (SBOE), as well as improved programming to ensure equitable and individualized education pathways for students who have been identified as "at-risk".

Each Party of this MOU is responsible for its own expenses related to this MOU. Rob Duren will receive a salary and coaching stipend as an employee of the school district, but there will not be an exchange of funds for tasks associated with this MOU.

III. RESPONSIBILITIES

Each party will appoint a person to serve as the official contact and coordinate the activities of each organization in carrying out this MOU.

Rob Duren will:

- Facilitate leadership development course and conduct a YPAR project.
- Lead students on trips to local colleges and universities, news outlets, the Colorado State capitol, and facilitate various service-learning opportunities.
- Receive informed consent from all participants and allow any participant to opt out at any time for any reason.
- Ensure compliance with FERPA as well as all other applicable local, state, and federal statutes.
- Collect primary and secondary data that will be used in a dissertation research project (DRP) and may be used in other publications.
- Host a community night to share findings and to provide recommendations for improving school programming.

Summit Academy will:

- Allow students, after consent form has been signed by both participants and/or parent/guardians, to participate in all course activities.
- Agree to the collection of both primary and secondary data (with pseudonyms being given).
- Understand that the collected data will be used in a DRP and may be used in future publications.
- Participate in Denver Public School's SBOE.
- Attend community night.

IV. TERMS OF UNDERSTANDING

The term of this MOU is for a period of one year from the effective date of this agreement and may be extended upon written mutual agreement. It shall be reviewed six months from the effective date to ensure that it is fulfilling its purpose and to make any necessary revisions.

Either organization may terminate this MOU upon a thirty-day written notice without penalties or liabilities.

Authorization

The signing of this MOU is not a formal undertaking. It implies that the signatories will strive to reach, to the best of their ability, the objectives stated in the MOU.

On behalf of the organization I represent, I wish to sign this MOU and contribute to its further development.

University of Denver

Name

Title

Summit Academy

Name

Title

Date

Date

Appendix C

Youth Co-Researcher Informed Consent

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) Project Consent Form

TO: Parents/Guardians

DATE: November 11th, 2019

RE: Permission to participate in youth-led student project

Your student has been asked to participate in an Honors level Student Leadership Course. As part of the course, students will be a part of a Youth Action Research Team. As a team, students will investigate their peer's perceptions of the education system and identify ways to improve the school. Research methods may include focus groups, semi structured interviews, photo voice, and surveys.

Throughout the project, your student will be involved in the research design, developing interview protocols, conducting interviews, analyzing findings, and sharing their findings at a community night in the spring of 2020. Ultimately, it is the goal of the YPAR project to improve the culture and programming of the school.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Findings will be shared at a community night and through a Doctoral Research Project (DRP) being conducted through the University of Denver.

All youth co-researchers, youth participants, and the school will be given pseudonyms in order to protect the identify of all participants.

Participation is voluntary and anyone may end participation in the project at any time for any reason. If you agree to your student’s participation, please sign and have your student return this form to school.

If you have any questions, please contact Rob Duren at 720-334-7738 or rob_duren@dpsk12.org.

Parent/guardian

Date

Youth Co-Researcher/Participant Signature

Date

Appendix D

Youth Co-Researcher Informed Consent in Spanish

Formulario de Consentimiento del Proyecto de Investigación de Acción Participativa Juvenil (YPAR)

To: Padres/Tutores

Fecha: noviembre 11, 2019

RE: Permiso para participar en proyectos estudiantiles dirigidos por jóvenes

Se le ha pedido a su estudiante que participe en un curso de liderazgo estudiantil a nivel de honores. Como parte del curso, los estudiantes serán parte de un Equipo de Investigación de Acción Juvenil. Como equipo, los estudiantes investigarán las percepciones de sus compañeros sobre el sistema educativo e identificarán formas de mejorar la escuela. Los métodos de investigación pueden incluir grupos focales, entrevistas semiestructuradas, voz de foto y encuestas.

A lo largo del proyecto, su estudiante estará involucrado en el diseño de la investigación, desarrollando protocolos de entrevistas, realizando entrevistas, analizando hallazgos y compartiendo sus hallazgos en una noche comunitaria en la primavera de 2020. En última instancia, el objetivo del proyecto YPAR es mejorar La cultura y la programación de la escuela.

Las entrevistas serán grabadas y transcritas. Los hallazgos se compartirán en una noche comunitaria y a través de un Proyecto de Investigación Doctoral (DRP) que se llevará a cabo a

través de la Universidad de Denver. Todos los co-investigadores juveniles, los participantes jóvenes y la escuela recibirán seudónimos para proteger la identidad de todos los participantes.

La participación es voluntaria y cualquier persona puede finalizar su participación en el proyecto en cualquier momento y por cualquier motivo. Si está de acuerdo con la participación de su estudiante, firme y haga que su estudiante devuelva este formulario a la escuela.

Si tiene alguna pregunta, comuníquese con Rob Duren al 720-334-7738 o

Rob_Duren@dpsk12.org.

_____	_____
Parent/guardian	Date
_____	_____
Youth Co-Researcher/Participant Signature	Date

Appendix E

Informed Consent Letter for Student Participants

Study title: Do You Hear Us?: Amplifying Alternative Pathways for High School Pushouts through Youth Participatory Action Research

Introduction to the study: You are being asked to participate in a research study with Rob Duren from the University of Denver in Denver, CO. This study seeks to explore the educational experiences of students of color, specifically African American, Indigenous, and Latinx, who are currently enrolled in a pathway school. Your peers will lead the interviews and discussions about your educational experiences. Your voice matters in improving policy and programming at pathway schools.

What will happen during this study? You will take part in a semi-structured interview. With the support of Mr. Duren, your peers will lead the interview. The interview will last for approximately one hour. The interview will ask about your experiences in mainstream and alternative education, and your recommendations for improving pathway schools.

Benefits: There will be no monetary benefit from this study. However, by opting to participate in the study your voice will help inform and influence the recommendations for improving the education system.

Risks: There are no known risks in this study but speaking about past experiences can trigger certain emotions and may not be comfortable. If it is necessary, please seek further support from the school, counselors, dean, or psychologist. All data/material will be kept for two years on an encrypted flash drive and/or a locked file and then destroyed.

How is the participants' (your) privacy protected? All data/material obtained by participants will be kept confidential. Each participant will be given a pseudonym to protect their privacy.

Voluntary Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. You may opt out of this research study at any time for any reason without penalty. If you would like to withdrawal, please let me know in writing.

Cost and Compensation: There is no cost or compensation for this study.

Please read the following statement and sign below if you agree. If you are under 18 years of age, your parent/guardian must also sign.

I, _____, have had the chance to ask questions or raise concerns about this project and my questions/concerns have been addressed. I have read this consent form and I agree to participate.

Signature of the participant

Date

Signature of parent/guardian (if under 18)

Date

Appendix F

Focus Group Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate today. I want you to know that everything you have to say is important and I am here to learn from you. Our discussion should take about 1 hour. I appreciate your willingness to share your thoughts and experiences. There are no right or wrong answers—I am interested in knowing more about your perspectives and ideas. I am recording the conversation so that we can be absolutely certain that I am capturing all of your ideas, exactly as you present them.

What are some of the reasons you chose to enroll in a pathway/alternative school?

What are some of the key differences between school at Summit and other schools you have attended? *Probing: sports, activities, clubs, classes, electives, social emotional supports.*

How are the classes at Summit the same/different?

Probing:

Type: Honors, AP, electives, other extra-curriculars

Structure: class size, types of activities

Teachers: knowledgeable, did they look like you

What do you know about Restorative Practices? Zero tolerance policies?

How can the discipline procedures be improved at Summit?

Do you participate in any academic programs after school, on weekends, school breaks, during the summer, etc?

Probing: what kinds of programs, if no- why not

What skills or qualities do you think you need to be successful in school or to get a job when you're older?

What are some ways that you could acquire or master those skills?

What type/kind of programs/activities would motivate you to try them?

Probing: Sports, Academic, Arts and culture (arts, music, dance, drumming, etc)

If you could improve/change one thing at Summit, what would it be?

Appendix G

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Research Question:

What can we do to make Pathway Schools more culturally relevant and engaging?

Opening Protocol:

1. Provide the Informed Consent Form to the participant and ask that the form be read.
2. After the participant has read the form, ask the participant if he/she has any questions about his/her consent, the research, or the process.
3. Answer any questions the participant may have, and ask the participant if he/she is willing to participate in the study and to sign the two copies of the Informed Consent Form.
4. If willing to participate, give the participant one copy of the informed consent form and retain a signed copy for yourself.

Preamble:

Good [morning, afternoon, evening]. My name is [name here]. Today is [fill in date] and we are at Summit Academy talking with [fill in name]. Thanks so much for agreeing to this interview! The purpose of this research study is to better understand your personal educational experiences as well as explore students' perceptions of the education system. The reason why you were asked to participate in this interview is because we believe that you can offer valuable insight into the beliefs and practices surrounding equity and social justice in Pathway schools.

Your opinions, experiences, ideas, and participation are very important in this study and may lead to a growing body of youth participatory action research that centers student voice in the fight to address inequities in the education system. Please know that I am not here to promote a

particular way of thinking about Pathway Schools. I want you to feel comfortable about good things as well as critical things. There are no right or wrong answers.

We are going to spend the next 45 minutes to an hour having a conversation. I received consent to audio record our discussion today so that I can ensure the best accuracy in note taking for this study. For your information, please know that no one but my adult co-researcher, Rob Duren, myself and my research team will hear the tape or read the transcript of this interview.

Additionally, I will destroy the audio recording after the notes have been transcribed and the research project is completed. Because of these efforts to provide protections, the informed consent form signed by you meets the requirements for human subject research for class projects. The form explains that: 1) All information shared during our conversation will be kept confidential; 2) Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may stop at any time without penalty if you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed; and 3) there is no harm intended through this study.

We intend to share our findings with everyone at the school and at a community event with other Pathway schools. We will not put your name or any other identifiable information that can be traced back to you on the final report.

During this time, I have several questions that I would like to ask you. To respect our time together, I may need to interrupt our conversation if we are running short on time. As a follow-up to this interview, I may request additional comments and feedback during the writing of the report to ensure that your opinion, experiences, and ideas are accurately reflected.

Now I will ask some questions regarding the study. You may ask me questions at any time during this process. If you would like to follow along, here is a copy of the questions I plan to ask.

Before we continue, do you have any questions? Great! Let's begin.

Interview Questions:

- 1. How did you hear about Summit?**
- 2. Have you attended a different high school?**
 - a. What was your experience like? What was the curriculum like?**
 - b. What was the discipline protocol like?**
- 3. In any of your classes, is your ethnic background represented in the class materials equally?**
- 4. How do teachers affect the way students act and vice versa?**
- 5. What do you think of when you hear “high risk” or “at risk”?**
- 6. How does it make you feel to know that students at pathway schools are labeled as high risk?**
- 7. What are your thoughts on the term dropout? Have you heard of the term pushout (pathway and alternative? High risk and high opportunity?)**
- 8. If you could change one thing about the curriculum, discipline, etc., at Summit, what would it be?**

Closing Script

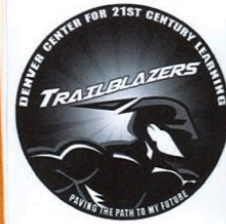
As a reminder, I want to assure you of the confidentiality of your responses. They will not be shared beyond our team, and all participants will be given pseudonyms in our report. Again, I may request additional comments and feedback during the writing of the report to ensure that

your opinion, experiences, and ideas are accurately reflected. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at school. Thank you so much for participating in this interview. Have a wonderful [day, afternoon, evening].

DO YOU HEAR US?

A STUDENT VOICE SHOWCASE

Youth Leaders share their recommendations for bridging the opportunity gap and creating more just and equitable learning spaces for every student.



Hear students from
Summit Academy
DC 21
Contemporary Learning Academy
North Engagement Center
Emily Griffith High School

Where:
Katherine Ruffato Hall

In the Commons
1999 E. Evans
Denver, CO

When:
May 1st, 2020
11:00am-1:00pm

Light Refreshments will be provided